The Sea in the German Heroic Epic: Notes on Das Nibelungenlied

John Greenfield

The sea plays an important role in much heroic literature and exploits at sea are common in the literary traditions of those cultures in which sea voyages are a part of everyday life: thus sea adventures are a central element of epic texts in literatures from the cultures of many of the sea-faring peoples of Europe. The poet of the most important medieval German heroic poem, Das Nibelungenlied, who probably came from the border region between today’s Austria and Bavaria, was not, by all accounts, familiar with travel at sea, and yet adventures which include sea-crossings are also of central important in his narrative. This paper intends to examine the way in which he envisaged sea travel, discussing the role the sea plays in his poem, considering the extent to which maritime space is given a symbolic meaning in Das Nibelungenlied, and finally also analysing the way in which crossing the sea is related to traversing other stretches of (inland) water (i.e. the rivers Rhine and Danube).