

The Legend of the Pied Piper

It was the year 1284 when a strange and wondrous figure arrived in Hameln. He was attired in a coat of many colours and was taken to be a rat catcher, as he promised to free the town of a plague of rats and mice for a fixed sum of money.

The citizens pledged to pay him his fee, so the visitor produced a pipe and began to play. Soon all the rats and mice came running out of the houses and gathered around the Pied Piper in a teeming mass. Once convinced that each and every one followed, he went out of the town straight into the River Weser where the vermin plunged after him and drowned.

The townspeople, however, now freed of the plague, regretted their promise and refused to pay the Piper, who left Hameln in a bitter mood.

On the 26th of June in that year he returned, this time dressed as a huntsman, wearing a grim countenance and a wondrous red hat. While the townsfolk were assembled in the church, he again sounded his pipe in the streets.

But it was not rats and mice who came out this time, but children! A great many boys and girls older than four came running and were led through the Ostertor gate into the very heart of a hill where they all disappeared. Only two children returned because they could not keep up: one was blind and could not show where the others had gone, the other dumb and not able to tell the secret. A last little boy had come back to fetch his coat and so escaped the calamity. Some tell that the children were led into a great cavern and reappeared in Transylvania. A total of 130 children were lost.

(From the Brothers Grimm in the book "German Legends")

Even today, the historical background of the Pied Piper's legend can not be proved. Among the various interpretations, reference to the colonization of East Europe starting from Low Germany is the most plausible one: The "Children of Hameln" would have been in those days citizens willing to emigrate being recruited by landowners to settle in Moravia, East Prussia, Pomerania or in the Teutonic Land. It is assumed that in past times all people of a town were referred to as "children of the town" or "town children" as is frequently done today.

The "Legend of the children's Exodus" was later connected to the "Legend of expelling the rats". This most certainly refers to the rat plagues being a great threat in the medieval milling town and the more or less successful professional "rat catchers".

