Historical Legend or Fairytale?

The story of *The Pied Piper* recalls an unfortunate event that took place in the factual town of Hamelin, Germany (Hameln in German) in the Middle Ages. The town of Hamelin was suffering from a horrible rat infestation. One day a stranger appears and proclaims that he can rid the town of the rodents if he is paid one thousand guilders. The mayor and townspeople reluctantly agree to his price. The Piper lures the rats to the river Weser by playing a song on his flute. The rats jump into the river and are drowned. Despite the Pied Piper’s triumph, the mayor does not keep his promise and refuses to pay the agreed upon fee. One morning, when the townspeople are in church, the Piper returns and plays his flute. This time all of Hamelin’s children follow him. He leads them out of the city and into a cave where they are never to be seen again.

Historical Origins

The earliest known mention of the legend of the Pied Piper is a stained glass window placed in a church in Hamelin, Germany c.1300. The window was described in several different accounts between the 14th and 17th centuries. It is believed to have been created in memory of the tragic event that occurred in Hamelin. The picture has been missing since the window was replaced in 1660. (A reconstruction of the window by Hans Dobbertin is shown on the right.) Although there are various accounts of the event, the oldest surviving one appears to be in the Lueneburg Manuscript (c. 1440-50) which gives a date when the children are lured away of June 26, 1284. Surprisingly, the rats are absent from early accounts and do not make their way into the story until the late 16th century. When the Piper became “pied” is also unknown. (The term “pied” refers to the Piper's clothing which could be referencing that he wore a jester's, multi-colored clothing)

The earliest English account of the story of *The Pied Piper* is Richard Rowland Verstegan’s *Restitution of Decayed Intelligence* written in 1605. He provides an entirely different day for the tragedy in Hamelin: July 22, 1376. Verstegan’s version of the Pied Piper was copied in Nathaniel Wanley’s *Wonders of the Visible World* in 1687 and it is this version that serves as the source for Robert Browning’s poem, *The Pied Piper*.

Although there has been quite a bit of research, no clear explanation can be given these days of what historical event is behind the reports. Some speculate that the piper was hired by some sovereign to recruit settlers for new colonies in Eastern Europe (a popular version of the tale has the children walk through a tunnel all the way to Transylvania; serious research accounts see evidence that the "children" went to Moravia -- the Eastern part of the modern Czech Republic). Other theories believe in a "dance epidemic", the plague, a children's crusade or some battle etc.
Other Versions of *The Pied Piper*

The legend of the Pied Piper of Hamelin has been recounted in a number of literary works by authors including the Brothers Grimm and poet, Robert Browning. The Browning poem is included in this guide (page 6-9) and was the inspiration for Seymour Barab’s libretto.

*Poetry*

A poem by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe set to music by Franz Schubert, among others.
A poem by Bertold Brecht.

*Films*

A short film by Walt Disney, *Alice the Piper* (1924 in black and white)
A cartoon short from the Walt Disney *Silly Symphony* series (1933/34?)

**Fairy Tales**

Fairy Tales are fictional stories that often involve magical creatures (like witches, elves, and fairies) and events. They began as an oral tradition, meaning that they were told aloud and handed down from generation to generation without being written down. The oldest known written fairy tales come from Egypt c. 1300 B.C. However, since fairy tales began as an oral tradition, they probably existed long before that.

Fairy tales often begin with “Once upon a time...” Today we consider a “fairy tale ending” to mean a happy ending. However, many fairy tales do not have a happy ending. The reason for this is that many fairy tales teach us a lesson or help us to deal with problems we face while we are growing up. For example, *Little Red Riding Hood* teaches us the danger of talking to strangers. *The Boy Who Cried Wolf* teaches the lesson of the importance of telling the truth while *The Pied Piper* demonstrates the importance of keeping promises or agreements.