

Medieval Riedenburg – Where Courtly Love Songs Live

In our minds, we often see the High Middle Ages as the era of brave knights and defiant castles, of bloody battles and righteous kings. But Riedenburg in particular shows that this period also produced poets and singers. One of the first known Bavarian minnesingers – which is the term for medieval German minstrels of courtly love – worked and ruled here.

Today's Riedenburg is a picturesque town nestled between steep hills and the Main-Danube Canal. It was first mentioned as early as the 12th century, along with its first lord from the noble Bavarian Babonen dynasty, which had ruled in Riedenburg from early on. The three roses from the Babonen family coat of arms still adorn the Riedenburg city crest today.

The minnesinger called “Burgrave of Ritenburg” in the Codex Manesse – a richly illustrated manuscript of song – was also a descendant of this family. Some of the songs in the codex are attributed to him.

Minnesong was an art form in the High Middle Ages cultivated primarily by aristocratic men. Most minnesongs are about love. An honorable, chivalrous man sings of the grace, charm, and virtue of his beloved one. A juicy detail, however, was that these ladies were mostly of high nobility and, above all, married.

Although these songs were performed in public at court, they in no way established a real relationship between the minstrel and his adored one. The ideal was the pure yearning for the unattainable woman.

The Codex Manesse, which dates back to around 1300, does not reveal the exact identity of the songwriter. Until this day, it has therefore not been assessed with certainty who the title “Burgrave of Ritenburg” refers to, in particular since the same source also mentions a “Burgrave of Regensburg” as a minnesinger. Both titles were held by members of the House of the Babonen at the time.

It may have been Heinrich the Third, Count of Ritenburg, who, in line with his times, wrote songs and poems as a minnesinger. Or perhaps it was one of his three sons. Especially his son Heinrich the Fourth seems a likely candidate for a writer of love poems.

We will probably never find out who the unknown Burgrave of Riedenburg really was. His songs of reverence and chivalry, however, have survived to this day.