



# THE LOST CHILDREN OF HAMELIN



Looking for the truth behind the story of the  
Pied Piper of Hamelin

by *Maria J. Pérez Cuervo*

Every June, the town of Hamelin in Germany celebrates the anniversary of a macabre event still familiar through children's fairytales more than seven centuries later. But beyond the musical *Rats* and the colourful souvenirs and tourist attractions, the town of the Pied Piper is full of references to a real tragedy – one recorded on the walls of the so-called *Rattenfängerhaus*, or House of the Piper: “In the year of 1284, on the day of Saints John and Paul, the 26<sup>th</sup> of June, 130 children born in Hamelin were seduced by a piper, dressed in all kinds of colours, and lost at the calvary near the *koppen*.”

The town of Hamelin hasn't forgotten this loss. The street where, supposedly, the children were last seen is called *Bungelosenstrasse*:

“street without drums”. Even so many years after the event, no one is allowed to play music or dance there. Oral tradition preserved and enriched the story until the Brothers Grimm included it in their compilation of German legends, *Deutsche Sagen* (1816–18). In the Grimms’ version, mediæval Hamelin is hit by a plague of rats. A seemingly hero-like figure appears, in the shape of a mysterious stranger dressed in red and yellow clothes. He promises to rid the town of the vermin, and the townsmen promise him money in exchange. The rat-catcher has a strange, almost supernatural gift: he plays a tune on his pipe that lures the rats into the river Weser, where they all drown. But, blinded by their greed, the townsmen refuse to honour their promise and pay the Piper his fee. The Piper leaves the town, plotting his revenge. When he returns to Hamelin, he wears the attire of a hunter. He plays a melody that hypnotises the children, who follow him to the mountains, never to be seen again.

The cruelty of the *denouement* strikes us doubly, because it surpasses our expectations. What initially looks like a classic “Overcoming the Monster” plot turns into a nightmarish tale of disproportionate revenge. The Piper’s retribution oversteps the boundaries, suggesting society’s ultimate taboo: child murder. This twist is so shocking that many versions have been tempered, with the Piper orchestrating the disappearance of the children only to get the money he is owed; the children go back to Hamelin and the townsfolk learn their lesson. Far from simplifying the story, this presents the Piper as a more interesting hero, a complex, modern one – someone who has to challenge the establishment in order to survive in difficult times. And yet the tale’s elements of greed, revenge and infanticide send us back to the Middle Ages, a violent period of deep contrasts. The legend contains enough material to have inspired the popular and the poetic imagination for centuries – but what really happened on that fateful day in 1284, and who was the mysterious Pied Piper?

## TRACES OF THE TRAGEDY

The main difficulty when trying to trace the roots of the legend is the lack of primary sources. The earliest surviving reference to the tragedy of Hamelin is a note in a manuscript copy of the *Catena Aurea* of Heinrich von Herford (c.1370), generally referred to as the Lüneburg Manuscript. According to both this manuscript and the inscription found in the *Rattenfängerhaus*, the events took place on 26 June 1284. There are, however, reports of scholars who accessed earlier documents that are now lost. Dutch physician and demonologist Johann Weyer mentioned in the fourth edition of his *Delusions of the Devil* (1577) some of the historical sources that contained multiple references to the tragedy of Hamelin: “These facts are thus written in the annals of Hammel and are religiously guarded in the archives. They are to be read also in the sacred books of the Church, and to be seen in the painted panes of the same; of which fact I am an eyewitness. Besides, as confirmation of the story, the older magistracy was accustomed to write together on its public documents: ‘in the year of Christ and in that of the going out of the children’, etc.”<sup>1</sup> Weyer was probably referring to the book of statutes





of Hamelin, *Der Donat*, (c.1351), or to a collection of local historical documents called the *Brade*.

The Market Church in Hamelin exhibited another piece of the puzzle, a glass window dating from the 1300s depicting the stranger dressed in multicoloured clothes taking away a crowd of children dressed in white. The window was destroyed in 1660, but it inspired a 1592 watercolour by Augustin Von Moersperg that preserves its essence and represents the main geographical elements of the legend – the town, the river Weser, and the mountain, with a dark entrance to a cave.

## THE BLACK DEATH

Although neither the Lüneburg Manuscript nor the glass window suggest that rats played an important part in the Hamelin events, folklore has assimilated the figure of the Pied Piper with that of a rat-catcher. The first surviving reference to rodents appears in the 16<sup>th</sup>-century *Zimmern Chronicle* (c.1559–65), followed by Weyer's aforementioned *Delusions of the Devil*, both written almost three centuries after the tragedy. If the rats were most likely a later addition

rather than an original element of the Hamelin episode, they gave depth to the tale and resonated in the popular imagination thanks to a play of macabre symbolic associations. The image of a rat-infested mediæval town instantly brings to mind thoughts of the plague. Plagues and epidemics have had a continuous impact on the collective imagination, taking us back to the Ten Plagues of Egypt in Exodus: biblical plagues were a punishment from God. The Piper, able to defy the curse with the power of his music, is thus invested with supernatural abilities.

In mediæval representations, Death presented himself as a skeleton wearing a colourful pied attire, a jester who always laughs last (perhaps the reportedly widespread fear of clowns might even derive from this image). The Pied Piper thus becomes the lord of the rats, the Black Death (known at the time as the Great Death or simply the Pestilence) personified, and the one responsible for taking the lives of the 130 children of Hamelin.

Associations of the Piper with the Black Death aren't limited to the subtext of the tale. The plague has also been used to contextualise the story; Jacques Demy's 1972 film, featuring singer/songwriter Donovan as the Piper, is a good example. However, the peak of Black Death in Europe was between 1348 and 1350, that is, more than 64 years after the date of the children's disappearance if we follow the Lüneburg Manuscript's chronology. The possibilities of an outbreak of bubonic plague in the Hamelin of 1284 are certainly limited. In addition, the plague would have swept away the lives of many people – not just of one town, and not just of its children. Perhaps oral tradition gave the Piper the identity of a rat-catcher after the plague had struck and Von Zimmern preserved this new variation in his 1559 *Chronicle*. Ever since then, the Pied Piper has become the most iconic of rat-catchers. Throughout the mediæval period, it was a well-respected and well-paid occupation, an essential service for towns infested with vermin. But it was a risky business – rat catchers' proximity to rodents made them prone to deadly diseases – and

perhaps one that deserved a hero: Rat Catchers' Day is still celebrated on 26 June to commemorate the events in Hamelin.

### CITY OF LOST CHILDREN

In the earliest accounts of the Hamelin events, we are told that the children were “lost”, but not necessarily dead. The Brothers Grimm, at the end of their version, add that “some say that the children were led into a cave, and that they came out again in Transylvania,” a conclusion retained by Robert Browning in his 1842 poem *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*. The terms from the Lüneburg Manuscript used to describe the place of the children’s disappearance (Calvary, Koppen), have been interpreted in different ways. Historian Hans Dobbertin assimilated the word Calvary, place of the skull, to the word Koppen, meaning head. In the Bible, Calvary or Golgotha was the place of the execution of Jesus – a mountain or a hill. This might suggest that the children of Hamelin were executed, or perhaps the word Calvary is merely used to describe the skull-like shape of a hill, like the biblical Golgotha.

Scholars such as Heinrich Spanuth, Jürgen Udolph and Dobbertin have suggested that the Piper could have been an emissary sent by the ruling nobility to promote a campaign for the colonisation of Moravia, East Prussia, Pomerania or the Teutonic Lands to the East. The expression “children of Hamelin” could have been a general term for all the inhabitants of the town who listened to this brightly dressed “recruiting sergeant”, and their exodus a response to politico-economical factors.

In this light, the story of the Pied Piper might be seen to bear certain similarities to that of the Children’s Crusade, an extraordinary series of events that purportedly took place in 1212. In both episodes, the border between history and myth is a porous one. The Children’s Crusade appears in mediæval sources, but



historians now question its authenticity. The crusade was said to have been led by a child shepherd named Nicholas, from Cologne, Germany, who preached that the purity of children would allow them to conquer the Holy Land; the legend says that they starved and died along the way.

### DEAD CAN DANCE

Another episode that shares features with the Pied Piper events took place in 1237 in the town of Erfurt, 271km south-east of Hamelin. A group of children marched in a dancing procession towards Arnstadt, 15km to the south, where they were said to have collapsed with exhaustion. Unlike the children of Hamelin, the Erfurt youngsters were rescued by their parents, who took them back to their homes. Still, some of them were said either to have died or remained afflicted with a permanent tremor. The events at Erfurt are considered to be one of the first manifestations of the mediæval phenomenon known as the Dancing Mania, usually interpreted as a form of mass hysteria related to religious fervour. Dancing Mania was reportedly spread by “the sight of sufferers, like a demoniacal epidemic, over the whole of Germany and the neighbouring countries to the northwest”.<sup>2</sup> Those affected were described as unable to control their movements, or to stop their endless dance, and many were said to have died of exhaustion. As with Hamelin, we have an image of a crowd of children led away by music, perhaps to their deaths.

The Dancing Mania is also known as the Dance of St John, whose festival is celebrated on 24 June, or the Dance of St Vitus, whose day is celebrated on 15 or 28 June, depending on the calendar. It is no coincidence that these three dates are set around Midsummer and the Pagan celebration of the Summer Solstice. Early descriptions of Dancing Mania strongly suggest that its origin was related to

Midsummer celebrations, a vestigial hangover from Paganism, and, as such, condemned by Christians: “No Christian on the feast of St John [the Baptist] or the solemnity of any other saints performs *solestitia* [solstice rites] or dancing or leaping or diabolical chants.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, those affected by the Dancing Mania were thought to be possessed and therefore consigned to mass exorcisms. Traditionally, Midsummer was also considered to be a time of initiation for youngsters. It’s possible that the children of Hamelin, like their predecessors from Erfurt, could have been participating in a Pagan ritual, marching off to the mountains while dancing to the music of a colourfully attired piper jester. But, unlike the children of Erfurt, they never returned home.

### THE PIPER AS A TRICKSTER

The scarce and enigmatic reports of the loss of an entire generation in Hamelin reverberated down the centuries. Literal interpretations of the story present the Piper as a kidnapper or a psychopathic pederast. This vision has endured in popular culture (even the 2010 remake of *Nightmare on Elm Street* suggests that there are some similarities between the characters of Freddy Krueger and the Piper), but its underlying idea was first expressed five centuries ago, in the work of German physicist and Humanist Jobus Fincelius (*De miraculis sui Temporis*, 1556), who believed that the Piper was the Devil in disguise:

Of the Devil’s power and wickedness will I here tell a true history. About 180 years ago, on S. Mary Magdalene’s Day, it came to pass at Hammel on the Weser in Saxony, that the Devil went about the streets visibly in human form, piped and allured many children, boys and girls, and led them through the town-gate towards a mountain.<sup>4</sup>



This idea is repeated in Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), where the Piper turns up as an example in episode two, "A Digression of the nature of Spirits, bad Angels, or Devils, and how they cause Melancholy".

This characterisation of the Piper as a demoniacal archetype always represents him as possessing malevolent intentions and, crucially, supernatural abilities: he is able to lure animals and children with the music of his pipe. Such musical skills recall the Greek god Pan, whose melodies were said to inspire panic and other uncontrollable reactions, both positive and negative. We should remember that with the spread of Christianity, the horned and goat-legged Pagan god lent his attributes to Satan, replacing the fallen angel of the Bible with the image of the Devil.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century romanticised the figure of the Pied Piper, just as it did with other outsiders – the pirate, the gypsy, the bandit. Goethe's 1802 poem *Der Rattenfänger*, clearly inspired by the Hamelin legend, presents the rat-catcher of the title as...

the bard known far and wide,  
The travell'd rat-catcher beside;  
A man most needful to this town.

Along similar lines, the most popular retelling of all is Robert Browning's 1849 poem, where the children of Hamelin are happy to leave a town governed by greedy, dishonourable adults. The Piper, the "travell'd rat catcher" of Goethe's lines, arrives in Hamelin offering a fresh start for a new generation.

Appropriately setting the figure of the Piper to music, Goethe's poem would, in turn, be adapted by Romantic composer Schubert and, later, Hugo Wolf. The Romantic take on the Piper contains an idea that has proved unsurprisingly appealing to musicians: the transformation of youth by a mysterious outsider who has inherited the musical skills of Orpheus or Pan – a theme that's

been revisited by the likes of Led Zeppelin, Jethro Tull, Megadeth and even ABBA.

Over more than 700 years, the Pied-Piper of Hamelin has become an archetypal Trickster figure. The Trickster is known for challenging the establishment, breaking the rules and spreading anarchy. In his dual nature, he can be seen as malignant or mischievous, but he is also a messenger of the gods and an agent and symbol of transformation. The Pied Piper, like the Trickster, is a shape-shifter who wears a number of different masks – the psychopath, the hero, the rebel... even Death himself. Like Shakespeare's Puck or Barrie's Peter Pan, he spreads a net of enchantment, leading our children to the Otherworld. Whether this Otherworld was a new land to colonise, an altered state of consciousness or the realm of the dead remains a mystery.

**Maria J. Pérez Cuervo** is a UK-based writer who specialises in history, archaeology, art, myth, and mystery. Her writing appears regularly in *Fortean Times* and *Mental Floss*, and she was one of the contributors to Daily Grail Publishing's *Spirits of Place*. She can be found on Twitter as @mjpcuervo.