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KORNELIA LASOTA

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Ph.D THESIS

MYTHS, GODS AND SAGA STRUCTURE. ON HEROISM AND TRADITION IN THE OLD-NORSE SAGAS.

SUPERVISOR: prof. dr hab. Agnieszka Pośpiech

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KORNELIA LASOTA

NR ALBUMU: 8579

PRACA DOKTORSKA

MITY, BOGOWIE I STRUKTURA SAG. O HEROIZMIE I TRADYCJI W SAGACH STARONORDYCKICH.

PROMOTOR: prof. dr hab. Agnieszka Pośpiech

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CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

INTRODUCTION

This thesis aims to introduce a new, refreshed image of heroism in the Old-Norse sagas and heroic poems, through a thorough analysis of the source material, as well as other texts similar to it. The core material, which will be referenced in detail and deconstructed into smaller, yet crucial events in the saga, oftentimes drastically influences the hero and his actions.

The supposedly oldest preserved Old-Norse saga: *The Völsungasaga* or *The Saga of the Völsungs* will be deeply analyzed in search of its depiction of the definition of true heroism, and what is a fundamental part of the stories from the North - the hero's fate, as well as fate in the more general meaning. Crucial elements of the creation of the story, such as family history will be explored. Moreover, the work will also investigate elements such as important artifacts, divine intervention and supernatural occurrences. Moreover, the Old-Norse heroic tradition will be discussed. It is known for its use of genealogy, in order to establish if and how this tradition surfaces in the texts of the far North, and what impact it makes/made on the readers and receivers of myths. Furthermore, the work will supply a brief comparison between the "heroic cycle" of the Old-Norse sagas and the stages mentioned in John Campbell's *The Hero's Journey*, from which specific conclusions will be drawn, and, hopefully, established as a norm for Old-Norse heroic texts. Women and their important roles in the source text will be researched in order to establish whether or not gender roles have played an important role back in the Medieval times, especially considering the differences in Old-Norse societal structures

The same will be done to the German epic The *Nibelungenlied*, which will be examined thoroughly in the same aspects, in order to show possible differences and

their origins. Since both texts are vastly celebrated all around the world, they will be juxtaposed. The thesis will also not stray from any mentions of links to other heroic stories, for example Arthurian literary works. However, tales set in Ancient Greece or the Roman Empire will not play any pivotal role in the discoveries and stereotypes presented in this thesis, mostly due to their considerable impact on an exceeding number of works already researched.

Nonetheless, if any parallels to the aforementioned stories will need to be drawn, the thesis will not hesitate to do so to an extent needed to provide context. Both texts will receive a designated chapter in the thesis, the *Völsungasaga* being the leading text to which the *Nibelungenlied* will be compared to, as noted previously. More context will be added to the research through the introduction of other works of art, such as a close analysis of Wagner's Ring Cycle, in which the story is told in yet another version. It will be established which source was the inspiration behind the opera cycle. Moreover, the Arthurian Myth and the works of J.R.R. Tolkien will be explored, to establish if and how the works have been inspired by the source texts.

Importantly, the depiction and realization of the motifs of Gold and the Ring will be closely examined and cross-referenced in all the texts, ultimately showing the plethora of small, yet important behaviors and overlapping sequences allow the stories to remain interesting and give a feeling of familiarity to the individual works.

The thesis will conclude in a summary of all of the points mentioned above in order to prove (or disprove) that the Old-Norse literary hero varies from what most readers expect from true heroism, thus earning his rightful place in a "pantheon" of hero (arche)types. Moreover, it will be pointed out how Norse tradition and literature have

influenced and still influences literary works and elements of popular culture till this day.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims to introduce the ideas of the Icelandic saga, as well as, concepts crucial to understanding the later parts of the thesis. They will be further elaborated on in chapter two. This part of the work also investigates the topic of saga studies, which is central to establishing a point of view on the research already done in the field as well as the fundamentals of the studies.

Furthermore, this chapter introduces the central elements, which will serve as research tools, namely the notions of *lof* and *wyrd*, as well as examples of their use. Those examples will then be contextualized in the light of the interpretations of the *Völsungasaga* and the *Nibelungenlied*, which are the main focus of the thesis. The viewpoints of Michele de Montaigne will be explored, as well as a discussion whether or not his ideas are applicable in the interpretation of the saga genre. Additionally, this part of the work will elaborate on Joseph Campbell's idea of the hero's journey, mentioning the entire "cycle" of the heroic journey, alongside some Old-Norse scholar's ideas on interpreting sagas. What is more, another standpoint on Campbell's work will be introduced, allowing to broaden the notions discussed in the sections above.

THE ICELANDIC SAGA

First and foremost, the origin of the Old-Norse saga is crucial to understanding the topic at hand. The word *saga* derives from the Old-Icelandic verb *segja*, which means *to say* or *to speak*.[1] This alone provides essential information about the nature of part of the texts that will be analyzed in this thesis. The partial inaccessibility, as well as the fact that they stem from oral tradition, pose an issue when it comes to the research of topics related to the Old-Norse sagas. However, this does not undermine the significance of the texts and the motifs expressed in them. Arguably, it reveals the importance of the accounts described, which have survived in an oral form, waiting to be written down. Nowadays, scholars in the field are experiencing a rise in the attainability of translations and there is a growing interest in the area of Medieval research focused strictly on the Old-Norse texts that have contributed to the popularization of such exploration all around the world. Publishing houses, such as Penguin or Oxford University Press, offer a wide variety of translations, not avoiding to put out newer, improved and annotated versions of such classics like the *Poetic Edda* and the *Prose Edda*. This essential work of Old-Norse literature is available in several translations, from old to new, which helps provide a broader context for the saga genre. The sagas are separate entities from the aforementioned Eddic text, but still are connected by multiple overlapping themes and characters. Henceforth, the variety in translations of the Eddic writings, along with the growing accessibility of Old-Norse dictionaries is helpful whilst studying the sagas. The saga genre, however, is in itself "burdened" by the fact that the sagas have undergone many, perhaps drastic, changes. The sagas have long been present in oral tradition and have been written down much later, some around the 12th century, others long after that. The *Völsungasaga* is one of

[1] Astrid Jungmann. *Monstrous transformations in Old Icelandic Sagas*. Haskoli Islands: Reykjavik (2011). pp. 4.

the latest sagas to have been written down as late as probably around 1250[2], and is known to be one of the texts preserved best, if not fully; other sagas often miss fragments that can later only be completed through assumptions. This thesis will take into consideration not only the close-to-impeccable manuscript of the original saga and its translations, but will also account for any changes imposed by the christianization of Iceland, and the changes in the text that might have occurred due to it. More information about sagas and their structure will be provided in the second chapter of this work; they will serve further exploration of the genre, as well as provide more facts crucial to understanding the *Völsungasaga*.

SAGA STUDIES

The Old-Norse sagas have been often overlooked since the 19th century, due to their questionable literary nature. They have, however, reemerged as a legitimate field of research, and gained prominence especially over the last decade. A number of studies have been conducted around the Old-Norse myth and saga, but there are many more topics that need research. This is reflected in the increasing amount of critical work within the last years, especially with the escalation of interest in what Margaret Clunies Ross defines as the Old-Norse-Icelandic saga.[3] The separation between what is just Old-Norse, and what is Old-Norse-Icelandic has put many texts in a very intriguing position, as most of them have prevailed in Iceland, therefore can potentially carry more, as well as, different information about both the culture and literature of the times. As indicated

[2] Carolyne Larrington. *The Norse Myths: A Guide to the Gods and Heroes*. Thames and Hudson: London (2017). pp.127.
[3] Margaret Clunies Ross. *The Cambridge Introduction to Old-Norse-Icelandic Saga*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (2010). pp. 13.

above, those changes will be accounted for and relevant information about studies in the field will be provided. Modern scholars, such as Clunies Ross and Jackson Crawford, target their works around this division, creating a group of sub-researchers, who not only try to understand the texts of the sagas, but also the contexts and sub-contexts, which have appeared over the ages. Crawford in particular concentrates on providing new translations to older texts, in order to put them into a fresher perspective, focusing more on the current state of the art. He does not only fulfill the function of a researcher and translator, but also uses other means to educate Old-Norse enthusiasts to pay more attention to applying today's views onto the older texts, i.e. through his YouTube channel.[4] It is noteworthy, that - as implied in the title - the thesis will not try to better explore the entirety of the *Völsunga Saga*, but will primarily dwell on the concepts of heroism and fate, as well as motifs often mentioned in the Sagas of the Icelanders. The *Islendingasögur* are the largest group within the different types of Icelandic Sagas and they are estimated to have been written down around 1220 - 1400 A.D. As with most works coming from an oral background, the exact dating proves to be a difficult task, as the sagas' creation and their first appearances in the written form were centuries apart. Most *Islendingasögur* speak of famous personalities within Icelandic society, for example members of important families (*Egils Saga)* or groups of regional locals (*Vatnsdoela Saga)*. In his work on the Sagas of the Icelanders, Remigiusz Gogosz proposes a distinction of the sagas according to their general topic:

- sagas of Scalds, discussing the icelandic poets, such as *Egils saga, Hallfredar saga*, and *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*

[4] Jackson Crawford. YouTube channel. https://www.youtube.com/@JacksonCrawford. retrieved: 28.05.2023.

- sagas of outcasts, people legally banned from the island for murder; they combine various elements, like law, magic, adventure, and humor. For example *Gisla saga* and *Grettis saga*
- regional sagas, telling the tales of locals, f.x. mentioned *Vatnsdoela saga*
- strictly ancestral sagas about conflicts within given family members, like the *Eyrbyggja saga*.[5]

Gogosz, however, stresses that his way of classification is not agreed on by all scholars in the field, as it can be heavily affected by regional identity and the need of grouping the sagas with regard to the place where they take place. Before the 13th century land was not mapped out or marked by any sort of wood or clear division. There were no steady points to make borders, so they used forests of landmarks to distinguish between the lands of the owner (lands were called the "Owner's name" land).[6]

The *Islendingasögur* stand out from the other saga types for their retrospective composition and the frequent use of motifs, present also in the *Fornaldarsögur* (The Legendary Sagas), such as magic and the supernatural. The Sagas of the Icelanders offer a strong juxtaposition between the monstrous and the human, mixing pagan and Christian views, as well as showing ordinary problems of the island's inhabitants.[7]

According to Anna Kaiper, aside of the fantastical elements, the following characteristics apply to the *Fornaldarsögur*:

[5]Remigiusz Gogosz. "*Islengingasögur.*" [In:] Jakub Morawiec, Łukasz Neubauer (eds.) *Sagi Islandzkie*. Wydawnicwo Naukowe PWN: Warszawa. (2015). pp. 25. All translations are provided by the Author of the thesis, unless stated otherwise.
[6]Julius Dieffenbacher. Deutsches *Leben im 12. Jahrhundert: kulturhistorische Erlauterungen zum Nibelungenlied und zur Kudrun.* G. J. Goschen'sche Verlagshandlung: Leipzig. (1899). pp.15-16.
[7] Kornelia Lasota. *The Grettis Saga through Time and Space: An Exploration of Topics in Old-Norse Sagas*. [In:] Academic Journal of Modern Philology. Vol. 10, Piotr P. Chruszczewski (ed.). Uniwersytet Wrocławski: Wrocław. (2020). pp. 158.

- sometimes the sagas take action in ancient times, under the rules of legendary kings;
- they take place in a place far away from the center of Scandinavia;
- the characters are given a characteristic context (i.e. the ruler, the trickster, the berserker, the thief), very often the heroes are known from other Scandinavian folklore;
- the likeness to folk tales: no signs of the passage of time, geography based on folk imagery;
- multiple mentions of motifs taken from folklore;
- the narration functioning only under the suspense of disbelief [8]

The *Völsunga Saga* in its themes, however, remains slightly off-chart when it comes to a clear categorization, as it covers a vast amount of themes and concerns an entire clan of the Völsung family. Albeit, most scholars have agreed that the saga is to be categorized into the *Fornaldarsögur* due to the declared descent of the Völsung family from the god Odin himself, thus taking place in ancient times.

Many new researchers have shown their interest in analyzing the concept of fate. Studies have increased in recent years, however, publications on fate in the Old-Norse sagas in particular have only surfaced within the last two decades of literary studies. Otfrid Ehrismann points out the scarcity of knowledge in this area and how little has been noted down.[9] Somewhere, deep below the rough, historical stories of the far North the issue of destiny has resurfaced, with astonishingly little results amongst the Old-Norse researchers. Carolyne Larrington still notices the lack of studies concluded on the topic of fate in the sagas.[10] Younger academics have undertaken the task of

[8] Anna Kaiper. "*Fornaldaasögur.*" [In:] Jakub Morawiec, Łukasz Neubauer (eds.). *Sagi Islandzkie*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN: Warszawa. (2015). pp. 155.
[9] Otfried Ehrismann. *Nibelungenlied. Epoche-Werk-Wirkung.* C.H.Beck, München. (1987). pp.17-18.
[10] Carolyne Larrington. *The Norse Myths*. pp. 28

investigating fate, basing their knowledge on studies from the eighteen hundreds, as well as later time periods, such as World War II. Many of the latter sources, however, are no longer found relevant in the discussions on saga research, the reason being their problematic nature - especially with pagan symbolism being misused and misunderstood during that time period. Primarily, works on the Old-Norse concept of fate were handled by German researchers, who proved to be far more interested in the topic than others.

Research conducted on the *Völsunga Saga* is, in the vast majority, focused around the translation of William Morris, that will also be mentioned in more detail later in this work and the opera *Der Ring des Nibelungen* composed by Richard Wagner, the story portrayed all characters based on the saga and its German counterpart. However, very rarely do papers on this topic mention this famous work, which inspired multiple stories and retellings: the *Nibelungenlied*. This rendition, however, is a very valuable scholarly topic among German speaking countries, no doubt because of it primarily being written in Old-German, carrying a long tradition of retellings and adaptations within the German cultural realm. Previously, the *Völsunga Saga* also, to an extent, has been linked to the Arthurian myth. This thesis will further explore the connection between those works, as well as discuss the translations of Arthurian tales into Old-Icelandic. More similarities and differences will be traced, especially looking for connections between myth and fate portrayed in the works mentioned.

METHODOLOGY

Due to the lack of a strictly "mythological" methodology, various approaches towards the interpretation of myths and folktales have been applied over time. Most theories used for the analysis of myth lay a primary focus on the myths of classical antiquity. Scholars heavily base their studies on the mythologies of Ancient Greece or Rome, rarely venturing into other areas, such as Persian or Mayan myths. Norse myth often seems to be shied away from, despite its considerable influence on various cultures, not only in Scandinavia, but also Great Britain, other parts of Europe and even areas outside of the Old Continent, where historical evidence on the ventures of the Norsemen could be found. This thesis establishes a strong bond on the terms of *lof* (wanting to be heroic) and *wyrd* (fate), which apply well, not only to the reading of mythological stories in general, but prove to be especially valid when using them to interpret the main source material. The concepts will be explained further in the text.

Often used forms of methodology often include the comparison of two types of source material, in order to show differences in varying sub-categories of sagas. For example *The Sagas of the Icelanders* are put in opposition to the *Fornaldarsögur* in order to show the key differences between the two, oftentimes also pointing out that the first group is more historically accurate and concerns a larger amount of people and stories.

Another example would be the comparison through a previously established and explained lens. Researchers compare the same leading topic in different sagas, trying to elucidate on the worldview of the Old-Norse towards certain notions. Examples include gender roles, observations on daily life, research on the supernatural etc.

Lastly, sagas are also used to prove or disprove historical context. Certain sub-categories of sagas, such as the *Riddasögur* present valuable historical details,

previously unmentioned in strictly historical texts or provide researchers with clues, which can later lead to substantial scientific breakthroughs. A prime example is the reconstruction of the rules to an Old-Norse game named *Hnefatafl*.[11] This chess-like game was found at many burial sites, as well as occured in noteworthy historical connections. Through a close reading of the sagas, researchers were able to distinguish early signs of Roman impressions onto the culture of the Old-Norse. Historian Willard Fiske was dedicated to the research on the board game, however, he did not publish his findings. However, H. J. R. Murray decided to continue the studies on *Hnefatafl*[12] elaborating on what was written by Carl Linnaeus[13], who took down a grat deal of information about the game while traveling in Lapland. The game and its rules were described in detail as a saami game under the name Tablut, but after further investigation Murray has found overlap between Linnaeus' notes and the frequent mentions of the game in saga materials, for example in the *Saga of Ref the Sly*[14] where the board and pieces are described in detail and said to be made out of fine materials. Multiple *Hnefatafl* boars have been found on archeological sites, including the ones in York, England. Moreover, they are offered on display in the Jorvik Viking Centre, which also has another game named "9 Mens Morris" on the backside of the board, proving that the *Hnefatafl* boards were popular among travelers, merchants and common folk. What is more, through the addition of other games that were possible to play on a 9x9 board.

[11] Willard Fiske. Chess in Iceland. Florence: The Florentine Typographical Society. (1905). (Google Books, retrieved 19.09.2022).
[12] H.J.R. Murray. *History of Board-Games other than Chess*. Oxford University Press: Oxford. (1952). pp. 58.
[13] Carl Linne, J.E. Smith. *Lachesis Lapponica, or, A tour in Lapland*. London. (1811). https://archive.org/details/b29327635_0002/page/42/mode/2up (retrieved: 22.06.2024).
[14] George Clark. *Islendinga Sogur III.* "Saga of Ref the Sly". Reykjavik. (1987). pp. 613.

Fig. 1. A modern reproduction of the *Hnefatafl* board and pieces.

Source: https://www.jorvikshop.com/products/hnefatafl

The analysis through the concepts of *lof* and *wyrd* is a form only rarely taken in myth-related research. Both terms can be and are applied to reading literature, but are not yet widely popular, which is probably because of their fairly recent emergence. While *wyrd* can be noted in a variety of all studies connected to the Old-Norse, the term *lof* seems to be a very fresh perspective, not often encountered in scholarly use. Therefore, the thesis will present the term through slightly older interpretations, which together with their new counterparts, should provide a fairly comprehensive understanding of the notion.

The concept of *lof* is mostly used in relation to Anglo-Saxon literary works, often recognized and praised for their heroic tales. It can be defined as "fame of the mouth, [which] will be identified as the joyful verbal pronouncement by an individual or group that another's deeds are worthy of praise, and thus worthy of imitation"[15] or as Matt Garman puts it "the combination of boasting and actions of the hero to make his

[15] Jack R. Baker. *Desiring to be known: The diction of glory and fame in Old English literature*. Purdue University. Indiana. (2010).

reputation more renown".[16] The term has not yet been used in the context of Old-Norse sagas, however, by definition it shows a strong connection to the themes of heroism, courage and the urge for fame, a crucial element in Norse literature. In the sagas, personal honor and fame are valued extremely highly - if not above anything else. This key motif will be elaborated further on in the later parts of this thesis.

Wyrd, on the other hand, is a phrase commonly found in translations of Old-Norse texts, sharing a common proto-germanic root with the word *urđr*. In the English language it is oftentimes interchangeable with its alternative spelling: "weird". In current times the mentioned alternative term has gained a different meaning altogether, however, for the purpose of this dissertation this will not be dwelled upon, unless absolutely necessary. All uses of the word "weird" will refer to the concept of *wyrd* if not strictly specified otherwise. The meaning of *wyrd* does not excessively differ from the concept of fate; a life led with a certain goal, that goal being choices made consciously or not. In some cases the heroes do not face the choices at all, they are simply presented with the consequences of other people's behavior.

LOF

As mentioned previously, *lof* is defined as "fame of the mouth", but in its essence it could also be referred to as glory; it is the glory of the subject - be it person or creature - that is passed along with the tales told about them. According to Matt Garman "[...] *lof* is used to build up the character's attributes, his courage, and himself."[17] Throughout the years seeking glory has had equally many advocates, as adversaries.

[16] Matt Garman. *Concepts of Lof and Weird in Beowulf and Song of Roland*. [In:] "Male Heroism in the Middle Ages". (2005). pp. 1
[17] Matt Garman. *Concepts of Lof and Weird*. pp. 4-5.

This is best illustrated in the writing of Michel de Montaigne. In his essay *Of Glory* he shows multiple points of view on the subject. One must, however, keep in mind that the essay has been produced in times certainly different to those depicted in the source material. In the case of de Montaigne religion, namely Christianity, influences his writing, whereas in the *Völsunga Saga* and the *Niebelungenlied* the reader is exposed to a society on the brink of conversion to Christianity, or one freshly converged. Due to the uncertain time period, which the thesis will elaborate on afterward, cultural diversions should be affirmed crucial. Therefore some anthropological views on the subject must be pondered upon. Before that a different approach was considered when interpreting the topic of *lof*, focusing more on a psychoanalytical viewpoint. Margaret Clunies Ross however, suggests that when dealing with Old-Norse-Icelandic myth most of the commonly used motifs are to be read through a very specific cultural lens, because of the greatly hermetic society it [the myth] is rooted in.[18]

Nevertheless, when discussing *lof,* de Montaigne's essay remains one of the vital sources in the depiction of what glory truly is. De Montaigne presents opposing opinions on the subject matter; he mentions Chrysippus and Diogenes, who are one of "the earliest and firmest advocates of the contempt of glory,"[19] implying said glory to be a danger to avoid, since to seek praise amongst others carries the danger of corrupting a man. The philosopher also mentions, quoting after Homer, false pretenses of glory. He suggests that it is God alone, who is worthy of glory and honor, whereas man is left out when it comes to eternal fame. Despite the profoundly strong opinion given, the author points out that "these discourses are [...] very true and rational; but we are, I know not how, double in ourselves,"[20] and with this supports the human search for glory. He finds

[18] Margaret Clunies Ross. *The Old-Norse-Icelandic Saga*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge. (2014). pp. 69.
[19] Michel de Montaigne. *Essays* vol. 11, tr. Charles Cotton. Project Gutenberg – online access. (1877).
[20] Michel de Montaigne. *Essays* vol. 11.

that it renders one less vulnerable to the insults of others, thus contributing more internal peace to mankind. De Montaigne also provides the reader with some counter arguments, bringing up Carneades - a strong advocate of the seeking and maintenance of glory. In spite of the fact that de Montaigne does not speak of the mentioned philosopher highly, it is still clearly visible that there was not one unanimous opinion when it comes to *lof*. The essay *On Glory* poses a very important question about the essence of glory and fame. It is suggested that the pursuit of those attributes can lead a person to become foul, or as de Montaigne puts it: "men need not be virtuous but in public [...]."[21]

A very similar opinion is provided by Garman during his analysis of *The Song of Roland*. Both writers suggest pure selfishness as a driving force for heroes, whereas an infinite amount of courageous actions by the men fighting alongside the protagonists are lost, just to build up the reputation of the central character. De Montaigne ascribes glory - or in this case reputation - solely to fortune. This, however, seems to be his personal belief, since he does not provide any strong arguments to prove this statement true. Unknowingly, the author tries to corelate *lof* and *wyrd* without showing a clear distinction between the two. The arguments provided by de Montaigne will be rejected in this thesis, because what is fated is - according to the beliefs at the time of origin of the source material - a celestial chain of events, rather than the outcome of what the hero achieves or aims to achieve. The latter is a question of the individual's need to maintain themselves reputable and fit into a certain niche in societal hierarchy, where they could coexist with others and be seen as valuable members of the community.

Another disputable point in de Montaigne's work is the testimony of the fallen. The French philosopher represents this aspect as unimportant, underlining conscience as

[21] Michel de Montaigne. *Essays* vol. 11.

the most crucial element of death for a certain cause. This can, once again, be juxtaposed to what Garman says about *Beowulf*: "[his] actions are not selfish, in the sense that he willingly sacrifices himself, for the good of all. Pagan beliefs were to seek glory but at as little expense as possible,"[22] which not only shows the importance of death in glory, but also contradicts the previously mentioned foulness of the soul. Partially remarking on what will be discussed below, among pagans - especially Scandinavians - a glorious death was a crucial point of achieving a dignified afterlife. Only those, who had died in battle or with a sword in hand would be allowed to enter Valhalla [the hall of the slain], and spend their eternity at the side of their gods. Acts such as murder, adultery or treason were unforgivable; people guilty of them would find their soul in Hel, where they would be tortured for their mishaps.[23] The killing of an innocent person, who did not invade another person's property, steal from them or make false accusations was deemed a crime, whereas killing in self-defense or the defense of one's honor seemed to be socially acceptable, and moreover, leading to an increase of good reputation. Clunies Ross notes that "personal honor was above all the currency in which the esteem of an individual was measured"[24] and re-claiming of honor in the name of a deceased family member was a frequent practice, due to strong ancestral connections, which will be elaborated on later in the work. This viewpoint is supported in the *Poetic Edda*, the main source of information on Old-Norse mythology.

Written down around the 13th century, however, possessing a great deal longer oral tradition, one of the text contained in the work quotes:

> Deyr fé,
> deyja frændur,

[22] Matt Garman. *Concepts of Lof and Weird*. pp. 8.
[23] Snorri Sturluson. *The Prose Edda*. transl. Jesse L. Byock. Penguin Classic: London. (2005). pp. 23.
[24] Margaret Clunies Ross. *The Old-Norse-Icelandic Saga*. pp. 7.

deyr sjálfur ið sama;
en orðstír
deyr aldregi
hveim er sér góðan getur.[25]

Jackson Crawford translates this stanza as follows:

Cows die,
family die,
you will die the same way.
But a good reputation
never dies
for the one who earns it well.[26]

The quote only partly aligns with de Montaigne's point of view, which is - as indicated above - caused by the vast gap between the times and cultures the texts were produced. The resemblance to, what according to Garman is presented in *Beowulf*, is very close, just as the cultures and estimated times of the works that tell the stories of Beowulf and the family of the Völsungs. In the Old-Norse-Icelandic sagas the issues of honor and dignity are actively resolved by personal vendetta or acts of vengeance in the name of deceased family members. In contradiction to other Scandinavian[27] countries,

[25] Anonymous. *Havamal* in *The Poetic Edda*. www.anomy.net/havamal/
[26] Jackson Crawford. *The Poetic Edda: Stories of the Norse Gods and Heroes*. Hackett Publishing: Indianapolis, (2015). pp. 30.
[27] Or proto-Scandinavian, since Iceland is nowadays sometimes accounted for as a Scandinavian country, however officially Scandinavia consists of Norway, Sweden and Denmark, the rest i.e. Iceland and Finland fall under the category of Nordic countries.

medieval Iceland had a very strong and developed judicial system, however, lacked a unified executive power that would pass sentences.[28]

Nonetheless, certain laws were universal - hence creating a popular motif in the sagas. Justice was served by the hands of fellow members of the community. Instances of outlawry are so prevalent in the sagas that a specific sub-group of the saga-genre was created. The so-called "sagas of outcasts deal with topics such as people legally banned from the island for murder; they combine various elements like law, magic, adventure, humor. For example *Gisla saga* and *Grettis saga*,"[29] the latter containing a greatly popular motif of Grettir's fight with a *draugr*; an undead creature, said to either function as sort of a curse, possessing superhuman powers and often guarding and haunting treasures, homes, or people.

WYRD

Walter Baetke claims that fate is a much younger topic than belief in the gods.[30] With this statement undermining an idea principally posed together with the aspect of one's future already being decided - the belief in a higher power. Baetke's fellow researcher, Walter Gehl, goes even further, as he perceives destiny more as a philosophical worldview, rather than an issue corresponding directly to any religious beliefs. He imagines the conceptualization of the two aspects (fate and faith) as separate topics. He serves evidence towards this by pointing out that in Old-Norse texts *wyrd* is often shown in reference to someone or something, and expressed by impersonal

[28] Margaret Clunies Ross. *The Old-Norse-Icelandic Saga*. pp. 7-9.
[29] Remigiusz Gogosz. "*Islengingasögur*". pp.16.
[30] Stephanie Gropper after: Walter Baetke. *Fate*. [In:] *The Routledge Research Companion to The Medieval Icelandic Sagas*. Armann and Sverrir Jakobsson (eds). Routledge: New York. (2018). pp. 198.

phrases.[31] Destiny also seems to not be affected by any linear flow of time.[32] It is placed outside of the human world. Nowadays, the concept, however more prevalent, still is not one of the main targets of research in the field. Modern history and previous research allow us a closer look at the language, rites and beliefs of the Old-Norse people, nevertheless, fate has remained amongst the topics further away from the center of the researcher's interest. It has sparked some discussion, while being compared in context of specific sagas, but did not manage to qualify as an interdisciplinary field. Moreover, the concept of fate in Old-Norse can be named by multiple words, however, most of the ones encountered in Sagas are kennings.

In order to add to Gehl's definition of what *wyrd* in Old-Norse texts is, more insight into the notions behind fate will be investigated. Approached from a literary perspective, fate in literary stories may include a vast spectrum of events. The most important aspect is usually the fate of one person, including their life span and manner, as well as cause of death. Some literary texts will only use the concept of faith for the most interesting aspects of the hero's life; the one that is of most storytelling value. However, in others - including the Old-Norse sagas - the motif of fate includes the lives of entire families, places or even communities. The problem of fate and free-will has been a topic for discussion in recent studies. Chun Liu observes that "among classicists, the discussion mostly hinges upon the interaction of fate and free will: whether the *Oedipus Tyrannus* is a play in which the force of fate is so predominant that it excludes the protagonist's free will, or a play that emphasizes free will and gives full play of individual choices."[33] This dissertation investigates a similar issue, however, the

[31] Stephanie Gropper. *Fate*. p.199.
[32] Stephanie Gropper. *Fate*. p.199.
[33] Chun Liu. *The Motif of Fate in Homeric Epics and Oedipus Tyrannus.* Doctoral dissertation at University of California. Riverside: California. (2010). pp. 3.

outcome may vary due to the difference between the texts of antiquity and sagas, that have been passed on orally for centuries, before properly written down.

In Old-Norse lore fate is governed by what the English language calls Fates. Similarly to the Greek *Morai,* the Fates in Old-Norse are represented by three Norns, who spin the past, present and future. Another correlation of the personifications of Fate is the number 3, as well as being the descendants of the entity representing "night", or otherwise an unavoidable part of the day. The Norns might be a link to the past-present-future collective figure, but there are no implications of fate being part of any religious cult. None of the Old-Norse sources mention Norns to leave their places at their well, nor do they imply any sort of intermission of their work by the gods. On the contrary, they are said to not be subject to the gods nor influenced by any of their decrees.[34] The relation between faith and the gods remains unclear. Fate is described more as fortune and a positive outlook. Moreover, in his analysis Gehl states that "In the sagas of the Icelanders, it seems that fate and free will are not considered contradictions. Instead, there is a connection between fate and honor, that is what fate demands must become man's desire if he is to live (or die) with honor."[35] The statement also ties in with the idea of *lof* and *wyrd* being in close connection to each other, to a point where their basic assumptions seem to be entertaining and creating one collective idea. Primarily, works on the Old-Norse concept of fate were dealt with by Germans, more interested in the topic.

The sagas present a strange relationship between what a man does and what he owes to his fate. Their most striking feature is the human attempt to "conquer" fate by choosing to actively pursue it, giving the saga characters an impressive humanistic touch. Like his predecessors, Anthony Winterbourne also analyzes the many words in

[34] Helen A. Guerber. *Tales of Norse Mythology*. Barnes and Noble: New York. (2017). pp.175.
[35] Stephanie Gropper. Quoted in Gehl. *Fate*. pp. 199.

Old-Norse-Icelandic denominating fate or luck, and although he reaffirms most previous explanations, he adds that *hamingja* is very often associated with a person's name.[36] For example, a child is often named after his father or grandfather in the expectation that, along with the name, he will also inherit the *hamingja*. Moreover, in the sagas, a character's deeds often relate to an ancestor. Stephanie Gropper notes: "These two features are part of a process typical of sagas of the Icelanders in which the present is made contiguous with the past."[37] According to the researchers Dag Strömbäck[38] and Åke Ström[39] fate dominates over chance, because fate is thought of as a strong personal power, one person's luck can compete with that of another; even a person can be another's fate.[40] Later, the examples from sagas of Icelanders, there will be instances of characters who are largely depicted and developed through their actions, meaning that fate as a concept can be detected even if it is not mentioned explicitly.[41]

BASIC STAGES OF THE HERO'S JOURNEY

American mythologist – Joseph Campbell, is heavily influenced by the Jungian analysis of heroic beliefs, especially the theory of archetypes. However, Campbell has re-established the idea of archetypes distinctly in his "*A Hero with a Thousand Faces,*"[42] which is crucial in analyses of a considerable amount of heroic stories with

[36] Anthony Winterbourne. *When the Norns Have Spoken: Time and Fate in Germanic Paganism.* Fairleigh Dickinson Univ Press. (2004). Access through Google Books.
[37] Stephanie Gropper. *Fat*e. pp. 200.
[38] Dag Strömbäck. "Til Ynglingatal 10 nordisk ödestro". [In:] *Septentrionalia et Orientalia*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell. (1959). pp. 386-92
[39] Åke Ström. "Scandinavian Belief in Fate". [In:] *Fantastic Beliefs in Religion, Folklore, and Literature: Papers read at the Symposium of Fantastic Beliefs, held at* Åbo on the 7th-9th of September, 1964. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell. (1967). pp. 7-18.
[40] Stephanie Gropper. *Fate*. pp. 200.
[41] Stephanie Gropper. *Fate*. pp. 201.
[42] Joseph Campbell. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton University Press: Princeton. (2004).

regard to their similarities. Campbell discusses the journey of an archetypical hero, noticing a recurring series of events in all of the mythologies mentioned in his research, which he calls the monomyth. In the monomyth Campbell focuses on both aspects of *lof* and *wyrd* while presenting his analysis. His Jungian influences lean more toward an interpretation of a journey strictly governed by *lof*. The concept of *lof* is the cornerstone of Campbells theory, since Jung considered that as one of the main factors in a hero's journey. Campbell notices how some unchanged elements are dependent on fate alone and cannot be influenced by external factors.

The Monomyth can be presented through three basic stages, which the hero passes during his journey: Separation, Initiation and the Return. Each of these stages consists of a number of crucial events, which help shape the story into one universal experience of the heroic journey.

The journey is best represented in a graphic form:

Fig 2: Campbell's Hero's Journey, from The Heroine's Journey Project, https://heroinejourneys.com/joseph-campbells-heros-journey-arc/, retrieved: 28.05.2023.

The Separation stage is introduced very briefly in Campbell's work, as it is only mentioned in the foreword to the rest of the text, which in turn focuses on the later stages of the struggles the hero has to encounter. Campbell introduces the first stage in the following way:

> "(1) 'The Call to Adventure,' or the signs of the vocation of the hero; (2) 'Refusal of the Call,' or the folly of the flight from the god; (3) 'Supernatural Aid,' the unsuspected assistance that comes to one who has undertaken his proper adventure; (4) 'The

> Crossing of the first Threshold'; and (5) 'The Belly of the Whale,'or the passage into the realm of night."[43]

The aim of the Separation stage is the introduction of the hero figure and placing them in a situation which causes confusion or struggle, all in the way to ready them for the upcoming changes in their life. At the beginning of his journey the hero may struggle with risking to undertake the adventure; they are, however, eventually influenced to commit to their task by a mentor figure. Christopher Vogler in his work "A Writer's Journey", creates yet another first stage of the journey, giving it the name of "The Ordinary World", where there proceeds an exposition of the hero from a normal, mundane world into a New World. As a modern example Vogler provides Luke Skywalker, from George Lucas' "Star Wars"[44] franchise, who goes from being a regular farmboy to exploring the universe while out on a heroic mission. Another example proposed is *The Wizard of Oz*,[45] written by L. Frank Baum, where the main character, Dorothy is blown out of her hometown Kansas into a wonderful world of Oz. In order to accentuate this drastic change even more, the author mentions the Kansas scenes from the movie adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz*[46] – directed by Victor Fleming in 1939 – are shot in black and white, whereas on the other hand all of Oz is shown in a complete opposite: technicolor.[47]

Only then does the cycle proceed to "The Call to Adventure", which in examples can vary from anything like dying land in the case of the stories about King Arthur, to first encounters of alienation or the need to put things back in their proper order. The

[43] Joseph Campbell. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton University Press: Princeton. (2004). pp. 49.
[44] Star Wars. Dir. George Lucas. (1977). Produced by: Gary Kurtz. Starring: Mark Hamill, Carrie Fisher.
[45] L. Frank Baum. *The Wizard of Ozz*. Oxford University Press: Oxford. (2010).
[46] The Wizard of Oz. Victor Fleming (dir.), 1939. Written by Noel Langley et. al. Starring: Judy Garland, Frank Morgan.
[47] Christopher Vogler. *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*. Michael Wiese Productions: California. (2007). pp. 10.

author once again gives the example of "Star Wars", but also compares it to the rescue of Greek goddess Persephone, who must be reclaimed from the underworld in order for springtime to arrive. The aim of this particular stage is to cause the hero to step out of their everyday reality, through an indefinite need for change; stepping out of a comfort zone that is no longer comfortable once certain realizations are made".[48] Vogel states that "The Call to Adventure establishes the stakes of the game, and makes clear the hero's goal: to win the treasure or the lover, to get revenge or right a wrong, to achieve a dream, confront a challenge, or change a life."[49]

The Initiation is the middle stage of the hero's journey. At this stage it is very often decided whether the hero makes it or not. This phase can be called a key phase in the heroic journey, and the action must follow a certain pattern in order for the character to be able to finish the heroic cycle successfully. According to Campbell "[o]ne of the most important facets of this step is the necessity for the hero to change. The hero must meet both allies and enemies, striving to obtain the object of the quest. To achieve the goal they must overcome fears, often something holding big power in their life.[50] The author represents the next stage in the following way:

> (1) 'The Road of Trials,' or the dangerous aspect of the gods; (2) 'The Meeting with the Goddess' [...] or the bliss of infancy regained; (3) 'Woman as the Temptress,' the realization and agony of Oedipus; (4) 'Atonement with the Father'; (5) 'Apotheosis'; and (6) 'The Ultimate Boon'.[51]

Vogler perceives those stages slightly differently than Campbell does. He describes the Initiation phase as "Crossing a Threshold", where the hero has no option to return. It is

[48] Christopher Vogler. *The Writer's Journey*. pp. 10-11.
[49] Christopher Vogler. *The Writer's Journey*. pp. 11.
[50]Christopher Vogler. *The Writer's Journey*. pp. 13.
[51] Joseph Campbell. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. pp. 49.

the moment when the hero overcomes all their fears, thus agreeing to face the consequences presented in the first part of the journey. Vogler notices: "Once across the First Threshold, the hero naturally encounters new challenges and Tests, makes Allies and Enemies, and begins to learn the rules of the Special World."[52] After that, the hero must approach the most dangerous, but at the same time unavoidable part of their journey - the great trial, or according to Vogler "The Inmost Cave". Interestingly enough, as an example of the major challenge the author uses Sigurđ Völsungs's approach to the great dragon Fafnir. This choice is seemingly a good example, as Sigurđ achieves his heroic status through the encounter with the dragon; the full story of which will be addressed in the later part of this dissertation. At this point in time, however, the saga is not even close to its end, and presents Sigurđ with many more challenges to meet in the future. As another example Vogler uses the obtaining of the Holy Grail in Arthurian stories.

Vogler also accounts for the climax of the story, calling it "The Black Moment". This is a key element in rites of passage or rituals of initiation into fraternities and secret societies. The initiate is forced to taste death in some terrible experience. To quote Vogler: "The hero of every story is an initiate being introduced to the mysteries of life and death. Every story needs such a life-or-death moment in which the hero or his goals are in mortal jeopardy."[53] Once the hero gets a taste of death comes the moment of "Apostheosis" or "Resurrection". The hero faces death, in some cases even dies, and is later revived in order to finish their quest. Vogler comments that "Our emotions are temporarily depressed so that they can be revived by the hero's return from death. The result of this revival is a feeling of elation and exhilaration."[54] Thus claiming that the reward can only be seized once the hero faces their (im)mortal encounter with the Black

[52] Christopher Vogler. *The Writer's Journey*. pp. 13.
[53] Christopher Vogler. *The Writer's Journey*. pp. 15-16.
[54] Christopher Vogler. *The Writer's Journey*. pp. 15.

Moment, so their own beast in whatever shape or form it may come. The Boon is said to often come in the form of a sword, this is, however, open to interpretation, as some heroes do not seek weapons, but knowledge or solutions to the problems that plague them. Vogler notes that "The hero may also become more attractive as a result of having survived the Ordeal. He has earned the title of "hero" by having taken the supreme risk on behalf of the community."[55]

The Return is the part of the cycle where the hero, transformed through the experiences of their journey, must return to the Ordinary World. With them they bring benefits of their journey. This also causes the return of the status quo in the hero's life, ending their adventure.[56] The final stages of Campbell's monomyth are presented as follows:

> 1) "Refusal of the Return," or the world denied; (2) "The Magic Flight," or the escape of Prometheus; (3) "Rescue from Without"; (4) "The Crossing of the Return Threshold," or the return to the world of common day; (5) "Master of the Two Worlds"; and (6) "Freedom to Live," the nature and function of the ultimate boon.[57]

The Freedom to Live and the function of the ultimate Boon can be interpreted in many ways. As Vogler notices "Sometimes the Elixir (the Boon) is treasure won on the quest, but it may be love, freedom, wisdom, or the knowledge that the Special World exists and can be survived. Sometimes it's just coming home with a good story to tell".[58] To sum up, the Monomyth can have various interpretations of its different sub-points, however, it is the overarching story that is supposed to create a character arc for the hero.

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[55] Christopher Vogler. *The Writer's Journey*. pp.16.
[56]Christopher Vogler. *The Writer's Journey*. pp. 18.
[57] Joseph Campbell. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. pp. 49.
[58] Christopher Vogler. *The Writer's Journey*. pp.18.

CRITICIZM OF THE HERO'S JOURNEY

"The Refusal of the Call" can be seen as quite controversial when read through the concepts of *lof* and *wyrd*. In all technicality, the hero requires encouragement to commit to their task fully, which is usually done by the mentor figure. However, not in all cases is this point necessary when describing a heroic journey. In the case of Old-Norse Sagas this may apply to the so-called "coalbiter hero". According to the definition given by Ásdís Egilsdóttir during her 2015 lecture at the University of Silesia, a "coalbiter hero", originally called a *kolbitr*, is a specific type of hero, who is "unpromising as a child, spends his time lying idly in the kitchen, does not take part in games for boys, other men at the farm mock him, his father rejects him, the mother loves and protects him, and he eventually proves himself and becomes a paragon of masculinity."[59] For short, the hero of the *kolbitr* sagas is fated to become a hero, for example in the *Saga of Ketil the Trout,*[60] the main character Ketil, a typical "coalbiter", does not seek greatness, so his calling is not actively present in the cycle of his heroic story. The hero is far from what Campbell expects: no change in Ketil's character occurs, he stays exactly the same man he was before. He is, however bestowed greatness after the deeds he has done. This example shows that it is truly *wyrd*, so fate leads the hero to become one - the ultimate outcome may, nonetheless, vary.

On the other hand, in the *Grettis Saga*,[61] the titular Gretir wants to become a hero in order to be able to return to his homeland and be perceived as a great figure worth following. His journey is less up to his fate, but rather is an accumulation of

[59] Ásdís Egilsdóttir. University of Silesia. "*Cinder(f)ellas. Transition from Boyhood to Manhood in Medieval Icelandic Entertaining Literature*". 14 October, 2015.
[60] Ben Waggoner. *The Hrafnista Sagas*. (2012). https://sagas.landsbokasafn.is/sagasDetail?id=273&ui-lang=en (retrieved: 24.06.2024).
[61] Eirikr Magnusson. *Grettis Saga: The Story of Grettir the Strong*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (2013).

choices Grettir makes in order to prove himself as a true, powerful man. Every choice the character makes serves his future reputation. In the case of the *Grettis Saga* it is entirely *lof* that drives Grettir. He has a need to become a hero and will not stop his adventures until he achieves his heroic status. Even though, in the end both Ketil and Grettir are perceived as heroes, they have taken entirely different paths leading to said heroism. Campbell and his followers did little to seek out stories such as Old-Norse sagas and have yet to discover the imperfections in Campbell's monomyth. As surprising as it is to find Vogler giving an example of the Old-Norse sagas in one of his stages of the heroic journey, it must be noticed that the full story is not presented and it remains unknown whether the author is familiar with the entire text of the *Völsungasaga*.

Campbell has also met with criticism from one of his students - Maureen Murdock. Murdock argues that Campbell's monomyth is not fully applicable to journeys made by female heroes. Thus, Murdock is believed to be the first to chart an alternative option to Campbell's Hero's Journey, the outcome of which she believes to be "more appropriate for women's life journeys."[62] In Murdock's opinion, her version of the graph represents the psycho-spiritual changes a heroine would go through, while on a journey. Those claims have earned Murdoch a following, which later led to the emergence of "The Heroine's Journey Project."[63] where more authors present their views, which adhere to Murdoch's initial idea and present an extensive record of possible character journeys. According to the authors working together with Maureen Murdoch: "Perhaps Campbell viewed the hero's journey as a journey toward wholeness, and in a patriarchal society in which men subordinate qualities traditionally associated

[62] Maureen Murdock. https://heroinejourneys.com/heroines-journey/
[63] https://heroinejourneys.com (retrieved: 30.05.2023)

with the feminine, the search for wholeness would lead to their reclaiming so-called feminine qualities and values."[64]

Murdock's modified graph presents as follows:

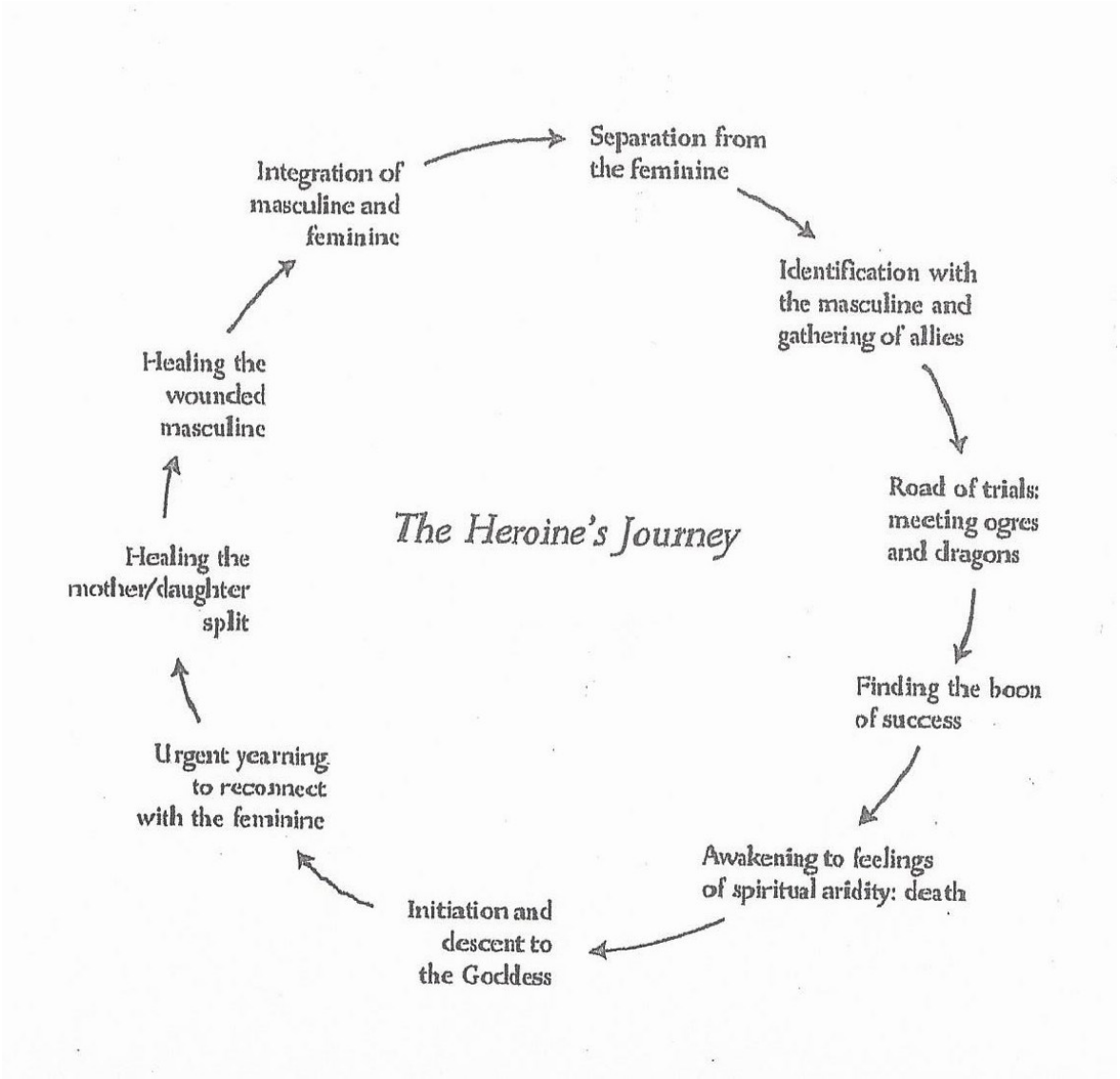

Fig 3: Murdock's Heroine's Journey, https://heroinejourneys.com/heroines-journey/, retrieved: 29.05.2023

Murdock notices that Campbell was either uninterested in women re-claiming their values and qualities, or was simply too focused on the male-lead stories he

[64] https://heroinejourneys.com (retrieved: 30.05.2023)

analyzed during his studies. The analysis of the female characters represented in the Saga of the Völsungs in the light of Murdock's studies would require further research; it is, however, a very interesting concept.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has established the key ideas behind understanding the Old-Norse Sagas through the lens of *lof* and *wyrd*, elaborating closely on both of these concepts. In addition, the method of Joseph Campbell was presented in necessary detail for easier maneuvering through saga interpretation and the expected heroic tales. Various other proposals, such as Maureen Murdoch's Heroine's Journey, have been presented to point out ideas relevant to the fundamental concept of the Norse hero, which will be explored in the following chapter through specific examples. The thesis will now use the concepts of *lof* and *wyrd* for further analysis. In the following chapters a more contextual view on the works will be introduced, accompanied with analyses of various key elements presented in the texts.

CHAPTER 2

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this chapter is to introduce the *Völsungasaga*, shedding light on existent issues with saga reconstruction as well as saga translation. Furthermore, the circumstances of fluctuating interest in the work will be explored. The chapter will provide a brief summary not only of the *Völsungasaga*, but also its "sister saga" *The Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*, which can be found in one of the manuscripts which are technically still the same family tale. The *Völsungasaga* will be closely analyzed through the concepts of *lof* and *wyrd*, in order to represent what heroism was according to the Old-Norse world view. Moreover, a close look into multiple translations will be provided, showing differences in the world creation, along with a direct analysis of supernatural episodes and the importance of animals in the Saga.

THE *VÖLSUNGASAGA* IN TRANSLATION

The first part of the Elder Edda, also called the Poetic Edda, is composed of poems concerning Old-Norse gods and heroes, which have been compiled in manuscripts such as the *Codex Regius*[1] (ca. 13th century) and the *Hauksbók* (ca. 14th century) – now compiled into one book *The Elder Edda*. The latter part of the Poetic Edda is concerned with heroic stories, including a version of the *Völsungasaga*. The

[1]Anonymous. *The Elder Edda: A Book of Viking Lore.* tr. Andy Orchard. London: Penguin. (2011). pp. xvii.

accurate dating of the poems from the Elder Edda has been made part of scholarly debate for a long time, since parts of the poems are often discovered in separate places all over Iceland, yet there are no information about the exact locations of the finds - as an example serve the aforementioned *Codex Regius* and *Hauksbók*, as well as *AM 748 I 4to*, and *Flateyjarbók*. All of the manuscripts are dated differently, and even though they show partial to great overlap none of the poems would be found in a singular manuscript. In case of some poems with missing parts, context or an alternative version will be provided on the basis of other existing manuscripts.[2] The original manuscripts are held at the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies in Reykjavík, Iceland.

The first part of the analysis will focus on the translations of William Morris and Jackson Crawford, the later parts of the thesis will feature other translations as well. When attempting to analyze Old-Norse sagas, and their influence on the English language one cannot leave out the major role of William Morris, a British artist and poet, who not only revolutionized the taste in arts and crafts in his time,[3] but also made a tremendous impact on the popularization of Icelandic literature and culture during the Victorian era. During his career the author contributed to the publishing of many Old Icelandic works in English; this, however, does not go without controversy. The Icelandic scholar Ármann Jakobsson notices that "Morris was, with every bone in his body, a creative person whose interpretation of medieval texts would inevitably become a part of his own artistic imagination,"[4] and in this statement he is not alone. Gala N. Lee[5] shares this opinion, also putting great emphasis on Morris' early interests in

[2] Kornelia Lasota, *Początek (i koniec świata) w mitologii skandynawskiej.* [In:] Classica Catoviciensia: Scripta Minora (2020) fasc. 23, pp. 1.
[3] Encyclopaedia Britannica. keyword: William Morris. https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Morris-British-artist-and-author (retrieved: 10.07.2023).
[4] Ármann Jakobsson. *"19.06.07 Felce, William Morris and the Icelandic Sagas."* [In:] *The Medieval Review* 19.06.07. pp. 1.
[5] Gala N. Lee. *Impressionable: Arthurian Influences of William Morris' Sigurd the Völsung*. Undergraduate dissertation. Queen Mary. University of London: London. (2014).

Arthurian Romances. One of the author's early poems *The Defence of Guenevere*,[6] inspired by Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*[7] had met a lot of criticism at the time of its publishing. Despite it being a coherent and vivid re-imagining of the Arthurian legend, it is fashioned in a more tender, romantic way, and strays away from the chivalric tournaments and castle imagery.[8] Lee, based on Alfred Noyes' biography of the poet, states that Morris was "one whose knowledge of all things seemed to have been born in him; and who never, at any time needed books of reference for anything."[9] Morris has, however, together with his friend Eirikr Magnusson, produced translations of the Norse *Grettis Saga*, *The Saga of Gunnlaug the Worm-tongue* and *Rafn the Skald*, and - most notably - *The Völsunga Saga*, which was additionally supplemented with stories from the *Elder Edda* in order to make the work accessible to the English readership, who - in most cases - were not acquainted with the Scandinavian stories. Commonly the original versions of the sagas do not provide much contextual background, most probably because the target audience was already familiar with the mythological tales, and could easily recognize the nuances in the source texts. Magnusson's role was to guide Morris through the "saga-world", as well as take care of the grammatical part of the translations. The translations can undoubtedly be considered successful, since they are still in print nowadays, and seem to convey the narratives of the original sagas quite closely. Morris' fascination with Icelandic literature has undoubtedly grown at that point, as he has - with good effect - undertaken to incorporate it into the literary range of the Victorian era. Minjie Su claims that Old-Norse literature offered Morris a solution to his mid-life crisis, and helped him to relocate his focus from the romantic Arthurian knight to a courageous northerner

[6] William Morris. *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems.* (2007). Available through Project Guthenberg. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/22650/22650-h/22650-h.htm
[7] Thomas Mallory. *Le Morte Darthur*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (1998).
[8] Gala N. Lee. *Impressionable: Arthurian Influences of William Morris' Sigurd the Völsung*. pp. 4-5.
[9] Gala N. Lee. *Impressionable: Arthurian Influences of William Morris' Sigurd the Völsung*. pp. 4.

dealing with the hardships of life[10] - a trope he had already encaptured in his *Earthly Paradise*.[11] Despite the fact that many scholars share Su's opinion, it is an extremely controversial one, and it could be argued that it does not have much value in the study of Morris' works. Moreover, it seems to deemphasize the author's influence on literature, overshadowing it with his unconfirmed personal circumstances. Conrad Hjalmar Nordby, on the other hand, praises the three-volume work highly. He lays special focus on one of the last poems, titled *The Lovers of Gudrun*.[12] Nordby notices that:

> [t]o the unenlightened reader this poem reveals no traits that are un-English. What there is of Old-Norse flavor here is purely spiritual. The original story being in prose, no attempt could be made to keep original characteristics in verse form. So "The Lovers of Gudrun" can stand on its own merits as an English poem; no excuses need be made for it on the plea that it is translation.[13]

He also points out a strong Chaucerian influence on the style of the poem. Nordby believes this impact made the poem universal in terms of literary values, rather than being confined to the Norse standards of storytelling. Some critics strongly oppose the lack of what Alan T. Gaylord calls "Viking values," [14] claiming Morris' poems to be predominantly Victorian and dismissive towards their original Norse form.

Gala N. Lee argues, that even after Morris' time in Iceland his impressions still seem to be "built on his pre-existing image of medieval Iceland from his [...] years of

[10] Minjie Su. "Light, Dark and Grey: Representation of Hero in William Morris's *The Story of Sigurd the Völsung and the Fall of the Niblungs"* in *Neophilologus*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11061-018-9575-7/
[11] William Morris. *The Earthly Paradise*. *William Morris Archive*. (retrieved: 25.06.2024). https://morrisarchive.lib.uiowa.edu/items/show/1866.
[12] William Morris. ""The Lovers of Gudrún"." *William Morris Archive*. (retrieved: 24.06.20204). https://morrisarchive.lib.uiowa.edu/items/show/2765.
[13] Conrad Hjalmar Nordby. *The Influence of Old-Norse Literature upon English Literature*. Columbia: University Press. (1901). p. 41.
[14] Alan T. Gaylord. Re-reading William Morris re-writing the Vølsunga Saga: The peculiar ardors of Sigurd the Vølsung. [In:] *Sagas and Societies. International Conference at Borgarnes*. Tönno Jonkus, Stefanie Würth (eds.) Tübingen. (2004). pp. 3.

reading Norse [...] in England,"[15] which the writer supposedly expresses in his epic poem *Sigurđ the Völsung and the Fall of the Niblungs*.[16] The poem is "Morris' creative reworking of the *Völsunga Saga* as translated with Magnusson."[17] The main differences are the approaches towards the work that were taken while translating. In the epic poem Morris translates well, but does so in meter, which does not entirely put the focus on the story, but rather on its artistic values. The saga thus seems beautified and almost completely losing the original tone of a typical saga, which tends to be straightforward and might even seem bland to some. Many times the most epic of moments captured in the sagas are explained in a brief manner. Morris' translation chooses to ignore this and, as mentioned previously, intends for a more epic tone.

Another one of Morris' translations of the *Saga of the Völsungs*[18] follows a different, yet distinctive approach. In this edition the epic tone is not used, however the story is only partly told in prose. The translator chose to include poetic elements that seem to parallel songs inserted from the translators' works on the Eddic poems. The saga is filled with the accompanying Eddic poems, the idea of which is an outstanding one, but can easily cause mistakes or inconclusive elements in the translation, since the poems do not always coincide with the saga in every aspect.

The Saga of the Völsungs, as previously noted, was first written in Iceland around the year 1250 by an author who was very familiar with the traditional legends of Scandinavia, including these about heroes. However, the earliest surviving manuscript containing the saga was not written until 1400. In the manuscript "NKS 1824 b 4to" the

[15] Gala N. Lee. *Impressionable: Arthurian Influences of William Morris' Sigurd the Völsung*. pp. 8.
[16] William Morris. *Völsunga Saga. The Story of Sigurd the Völsung*. Turner and Scott (eds.). Aziloth Books: Rookhope. (2015)
[17]William Morris, *Völsunga Saga. The Story of Sigurd the Völsung*. pp. 11.
[18] Eiríkr Magnússon and William Morris (tr.). *The Saga of the Völsungs.* Digireads.com Publishing: Stilwell. (2005).

Völsungasaga is directly followed by the *Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*,[19] a legendary Viking chieftain from Denmark. Whoever put the two sagas together has formed a cohesive epic about a heroic family.[20] The translation used for the following part is one directly rendered after the NKS 1824 b 4to manuscript, while it is also one of the most modern translations available. It is also complete, so it does not use William Morris's translation as a basis, therefore not only lowering the chance to incorporate additional poetic content which might interfere with the structure of the saga, but also allowing a new perspective on the text, where additional substance can, but does not have to be added. Jackson Crawford's translation appears to be the first one ever to also feature the *Saga about Ragnar Lothbrok*, thus composing – as indicated above – a full overview of the Völsung family history. The author is a scholar in the field of Old-Norse studies, and has translated the sagas based on his knowledge of the language, as well as the cultural and geographical aspects. Crawford's translation is the newest translation of the *Völsungasaga* and compared to its predecessors provides a full text in modern English.

THE *VÖLSUNGASAGA* AND ITS ANALYSIS

Originally, the Saga is split up into multiple chapters, but in order to give a brief summary, the timeline will be kept only for the story of Sigurđ the Dragonslayer. The events previous to his birth compose a crucial background history to the family of the Völsungs, however, it is possible to understand the adventures of Sigurđ knowing only some basic facts.

[19] Jackson Crawford. *The Saga of the Völsungs and the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*.
[20] Jackson Crawford. *The Poetic Edda: Stories of the Norse Gods and Heroes*. Hackett Publishing: Indianapolis (2015). pp. ix.

According to the *Völsungasaga*, the earliest member of the family lineage, a man called Sigi was said to be Odin's son. As an offspring of the all-knowing god himself, Sigi made his fortune and ruled over Hunland. Treachery and kin-murder are prevalent themes in the Völsung lineage. Notably, also magic and "the godly" can be often encountered in the early history of the family, who are closely connected to the realm of anything godly and heroic. In particular, Valkyries - Odin's warrior-women, who collect the souls of the dead and bring them to Valhalla - can be frequently noticed as the "helping hand" from the gods. Not all events are included in the many versions of the *Völsungasaga.* Some versions of events preceding the story of Sigurđ Fafnirsbane are acknowledged by Carolyne Larington,[21] but completely left out by Jackson Crawford's translation of the *Völsungasaga*,[22] the author does, however, acknowledge them in his translation of the Poetic Edda.[23] The translational choices are not explained, it is possible that Crawford in his version of the *Saga of the Völsungs* treated this storyline as something on the sidelines, not actively contributing to the story of the Völsung family. Overall, many translational choices over the years have slightly modified the sagas, so the texts available to researchers and readers oftentimes differ or lack certain parts, as mentioned previously in this chapter. In the later parts of the saga of the Völsung family, another key feature is ascribed to their name. Some of the strongest family members seem to be impervious to poison or immune to it up to a very strong degree of tolerance.

It is important to mention the last moments of Sigmund, father to Sigurđ. He remarried in the Kingdom of France, where his new wife Hjordis, gave birth to their son Sigurđ; the baby, however, grew up knowing a different father, because Sigmund fell in battle. Sigurđ (or Sigurth, depending on translation), according to the old sagas and

[21] Carolyne Larrington. *The Norse Myths: A Guide to the Gods and Heroes*. pp. 133-135.
[22] Jackson Crawford. *The Saga of the Völsungs and the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*. pp. 14.
[23] Jackson Crawford. *The Poetic Edda: Stories of the Norse Gods and Heroes*. pp. 215-217.

people's sayings, was to be a greater man than his father and brothers.[24] After Sigmund's death, Hjordis took care of her son, but remarried a king. Her son was sent into foster care, his foster-father being a man called Regin.[25]

Now the story is moving into the most well-known and beloved parts, which are generally widespread and often told when it comes to heroic tradition in the Völsungasaga.

Regin taught young Sigurđ many skills like sports, games, runes and languages, fit for a future king. Young Sigurđ explains to Regin that King Álf grants the young boy many wishes, and that they discuss important questions together. Soon after Sigurđ, provoked by Regin asked for a horse. The next day Sigurđ was picking out his new companion, when he met an old man with a beard. The old man helped the young Sigurđ to choose a stallion, by observing the horses' reactions to deep water. The choice was quick, a young gray horse, big and handsome was the chosen one. The old man informed Sigurđ that this horse is a straight descendant from Sleipnir, Odin's eight-legged horse, and that it would be a better horse than any other.[26] The horse was named Grani, and has indeed proven itself to be a horse superior to others. The old man disappeared without a word, Sigurđ still not knowing who it was. However, the old man was Odin himself, guiding young Sigurđ, his own kin.[27]

Soon Regin implied that Sigurđ was not in possession of enough money, so the foster-father told the youngster about a dragon named Fafnir, who lived nearby. Regin also implied that the encounter with Fafnir might bring Sigurđ honor and acknowledgement. The young hero claimed he had heard about this dragon before, but

[24] Jackson Crawford. *The Poetic Edda: Stories of the Norse Gods and Heroes*. pp. 219.
[25] Carolyne Larrington. *The Norse Myths: A Guide to the Gods and Heroes*. pp. 137.
[26] Kornelia Lasota. *Koń i jego bóg - o wierzchowcach w micie staroskandynawskim.* [In:] Szkice o Antyku VII. Rozważania o naturze. Wydawnictwo Diecezji Tarnowskiej Biblios: Tarnów. (2021). pp. 102-103.
[27] Jackson Crawford. *The Saga of the Völsungs and the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*. pp. 24.

also knew it was feared for its size. Regin told the hero: "His [Fafnir's] size is within the normal range for snakes, and only rumor has made him out to be larger,"[28] at the same time teasing the young boy about his ancestors, who surely would not be afraid to take on such a challenge, since the Völsungs were all known for their courage. Sigurđ asked not to be mocked, but was at the same time curious why Regin wanted the dragon dead so quickly, so he took the time to listen to the whole story of the dragon on the hoard of gold.

Regin turned out to be one of three sons of a wealthy man named Hreiđmar. The other sons were named Fafnir and Otter. Otter was like a real otter, where he would catch fish with ease and loved consuming them with his eyes closed. It seems that Otter did have shapeshifting abilities, which is not rare, as mentioned previously with the werewolf episode in the saga. Fafnir was said to be the biggest and cruelest of the brothers, who always wanted to claim everything for himself. Regin also mentions a dwarf named Andvari, who was always in the waterfall, where Otter would catch his fish. "One day Odin, Loki and Hoenir were traveling and they came to Andvari's Falls. Otter had caught a salmon [...] Loki threw a stone and killed him. The Aesir felt very lucky about this and skinned the otter and made a bag out of the skin."[29] It was quickly discovered that the gods had made a mistake, and the upset Hreiđmar demanded Otter's body to be covered in gold up to every single whisper. The gods did so, and Loki predicted that this treasure would be the death of the family. Not much time had passed since, when Fafnir killed his father without remorse. He kept the treasure for himself and started sleeping outside, in front of a cave where he kept the gold. Soon he turned into a terrible serpent, who rested on the treasure.

[28] Jackson Crawford. *The Saga of the Völsungs and the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*. pp. 24.
[29] Jackson Crawford. *The Poetic Edda: Stories of the Norse Gods and Heroes*. pp. 25.

The young Völsung agreed that Regin had been wronged by his kinsmen and suffered a big loss. He then rushed his step-father to make him a sword that would have no equal, so Sigurđ could do great deeds with it. Regin followed the youngster's instruction, trusting that the sword would be the one to kill Fafnir.

Regin attempted to make a proper sword, but both times Sigurđ tested them the blades shattered. The young Völsung went to his mother to ask if it were true that Sigmund had left her the pieces of his legendary sword, Gram, he had pulled from the tree. The rumors turned out to be true, and soon Sigurđ returned to Regin with the pieces of his ancestor's sword. This time the sword came out perfect, when Sigurđ tested it against an anvil the blade cut right through the obstacle without even chipping. The happy young Völsung agreed that now that he has a sword fit for him, he would kill Fafnir, but first his wish was to avenge his father. The young Völsung did not, however, forget the promise he gave to Regin promising it would soon be realized. [30]

Sigurđ rode a long way, until he found himself on the mountain Hindarffall and turned to go south toward Frankish lands. He saw a great light on the mountain, as though a fire burned there, and it glowed against the sky. When he approached it, he saw a fortress with flags flying on the top. The curious Sigurđ went into the fortress and saw a person sleeping on the floor, fully armed. He took the helmet off first, and he saw that this person was a woman. Then Sigurđ told her she had been sleeping long enough.[31] The woman quickly inquires if it is indeed Sigurđ Singmundsson, who has come and woke her, still having the treasures of Fafnir and the sword that killed the dragon in his hands. Sigurđ admitted to being a member of the Völsung family, but quickly asked about the maiden as well. She was the daughter of a mighty king, known for her beauty and wisdom. The young woman hastily admitted to being a Valkyrie

[30] Jackson Crawford. *The Saga of the Völsungs and the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*. pp. 29-30.
[31] Jackson Crawford. *The Saga of the Völsungs and the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*. pp. 35.

named Brynhild, who was punished by Odin for killing a king during a battle. She also mentions an oath she swore: she would marry no man except one who knows no fear. Sigurđ asks Brynhild to teach him some important wisdoms, to which the Valkyrie does not oppose and tells Sigurđ about her knowledge in runes and advises him about his fate already being decided.[32]

The following two chapters of the Saga include Sigurđ seeking more advice from the Valkyrie, as well as a physical description of the hero, which will be left out for the purpose of describing only the young Völsung's heroic deeds, where a description of his looks does not serve any purpose.

Sigurđ rode on until he came across a large town ruled by a great chieftain named Heimir. The chieftain was married to Brynhild's sister – Bekkhild. The two were named like this according to their characters; Bekkhild would be the one to stay at home and Brynhild the one to fight.[33] Heimir and Bekkhild had a son named Alsviđ, who was a noble man. The young man invited Sigurđ to stay, since the news about slaying Fafnir has long reached every land. Sigurđ, now a hero, enjoyed himself well with Alsviđ.

In the meantime Brynhild returned home. With her skillful hands she composed a tapestry of Sigurđ's deeds. One day Sigurđ saw Brynhild and her tapestry and was suddenly struck by the beauty of both the work and its master. In one of his conversations with Alsviđ, Sigurđ mentioned how he would want the woman to be his, but was quickly discouraged by his host, being told that Brynhild only seeks to be a famous warrior. Sigurđ visits the maiden in her chamber, but is foretold the future by her: Brynhild claims that they are not fated to be with each other and insists Sigurđ marry a woman named Guđrún instead. Nonetheless, Sigurđ swore that he would only

[32] Jackson Crawford. *The Saga of the Völsungs and the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*. pp. 36-39.
[33] Jackson Crawford. *The Saga of the Völsungs and the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*. pp.42.

have Brynhild and no other woman. She said likewise, so Sigurđ gifted her a golden ring. Soon after, Völsung and his men left.

A short time after those events Brynhild and Guđrún meet. The latter being in a very bad mood due to a dream she had, read to her as a marriage offer. The two women start speaking about possible suitors for the beautiful and noble Guđrún. Then Brynhild proposes Sigurđ Sigmundsson and continues to praise the hero highly. Guđrún notices that the words spoken by the woman are ones spoken with love, but the topic swiftly switches back to dreams. Brynhild once again speaks prophecy to Guđrún: Sigurđ would come to the noblewoman, but happiness would be short, because Guđrún's mother would curse the Dragonslayer causing a lot of conflict between the women's families. Guđrún would be married to Sigurđ, but only for a short while, after which she would remarry to King Atli and end up killing her husband. The troubled Guđrún returns home, sad to know such a fate would await her.

Meanwhile, Sigurđ rode until he came to the lands of King Gjúki, father of Guđrún. Sigurđ was quickly recognized, but introduced himself nevertheless. The King welcomed Sigurđ and offered him food, drink and a place to stay. Sigurđ happily accepted the invitation. Soon, the Queen – Grímhild – noticed that the hero's heart was taken by Brynhild, but the Grímhild did not care for such an outcome. She would much rather Sigurđ marry Guđrún. Seeing how the King had already treated the Völsung as a family member, the Queen decided to raise a toast in the name of Sigurđ, but made sure to hand him a special horn. Sigurđ accepted and drank from the horn, right after that he forgot Brynhild. Grímhild's plan had worked. After the feast she started suggesting to her husband that they should marry their daughter to the fine hero, and that this would all bring them joy.

Sigurđ stayed at Gjúki's court for over two years, the two forging a strong bond. After that time Sigurđ was offered Brynhild's hand in marriage, which he happily accepted, not remembering the vows he made to Brynhild. Sigurđ was soon married and an impressive wedding was held; it lasted for many days, every one being better than the one before. All kinds of joys and entertainment were provided, so the feast was unforgettable.

Sigurđ, now a married man, ventured out with his brothers-in-law Gunnar and Hogni. The three achieved many great things together, traveled many lands, killed sons of many kings and returned from their travels rich in honor and loot.[34]

With his wife Sigurđ shared a part of Fafnir's heart, making the woman both wiser and more cruel. Together they had a son named Sigmund. As prophesied by Brynhild, the happiness did not last long, for Queen Grímhild once again decided to tempt fate by suggesting to her son Gunnar that he is in need of a wife, so he should go woo the beautiful Brynhild, who would be a noble match for a man of his liking. Grímhild quickly followed up with a suggestion that Sigurđ should accompany Gunnar on his journey for the maiden's hand.

Sigurđ and Gunnar embarked on the journey to Brynhild's hall, gilded and surrounded by fire, where she waited for a future husband to show up. Determined to be a woman of battle, the Valkyrie only agreed to marry a man, who would fearlessly ride through a ring of fire in order to come seek her out. In the meantime, Gunnar was facing some difficulties with his steed. His horse would not ride through the ring of fire. Gunnar asked his brother-in-law if he could borrow Sigurđ's horse, Grani. Sigurđ agreed, but with a rider, who was not his master, Grani would not leap through the fire either. As a last resort Gunnar and Sigurđ switched appearances; they were told how to

[34]Jackson Crawford. *The Saga of the Völsungs and the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*. pp. 48-50.

do it by Queen Grímhild herself. Sigurđ rode Grani with his sword Gram in hand, and Grani fearlessly leapt through the flames. In his translation Jackson Crawford quotes a poem about this very moment:

"Sigurđ drove Grani
with a drawn sword,
and the flames
withdrew before him;
the fire withered
for that man eager for honor.
Grani's harness, which once
had been Regin's, glowed."[35]

After entering the flames Sigurđ found a lovely room, where he met Brynhild. She asked who he was, so he introduced himself as Gunnar, son of Gjúki and stated the intention of marriage, since Brynhild's father and stepfather had previously agreed under the circumstance that so will she. The conversation between Sigurđ (still in the form of Gunnar) and Brynhild went on. She described herself as brave and battle-driven, hesitant to leave that lifestyle and start anew as a wife and mother. The man agreed with her, but reminded her about the oath she had given: that she would marry the man, who rode through the flames. She knew this was true and of utmost importance, since she had given her word. Sigurđ stayed there for three nights, slyly retrieving the ring he had given Brynhild as they first met. Once the days had passed, he and Brynhild rode out of the flames. After seeking out his companions, the hero quickly exchanged appearances with Gunnar again. Together they rode back to Brynhild's foster-father Heimir. That night, Brynhild and Heimir had a secret conversation, where the maiden recaptured the events that happened in the ring of fire, admitting that she

[35] Jackson Crawford. *The Saga of the Völsungs and the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*. pp. 50.

was honest with Gunnar, telling him about Sigurđ and their previous engagement. On that night she also entrusted Heimir with a treasure far more valuable than gold: her daughter with Sigurđ – Aslaug.

The next day Brynhild, her father, Sigurđ and Gunnar rode home, where Queen Grímhild greeted them well, thanking Sigurđ for the service he had done to the family. That evening at the great feast Sigurđ remembered the oaths he had sworn to Brynhild, but said nothing, seeing the woman entertained in the company of Gunnar.

The next chapter of the Saga contains a conversation between Guđrún and Brynhild. The women exchanged many hurtful words, one's true, others not. Brynhild recalled her prophecy about Sigurđ marrying Guđrún, sharing that she holds no good opinion about the woman's mother, whose witchcraft was the source of all the confusion between their families. As an answer, the cruel Guđrún bragged to Brynhild about the ring Sigurđ had retrieved from the Valkyrie and informed her that it was not in fact Gunnar, who rode through the flames. Brynhild recognized the ring and started grieving terribly.

The sadness and agony of Brynhild spread all over the king's court. Finally, Gunnar showed courage and went to speak with his wife. Brynhild was furious with the man, since he had tricked her - she knew it was Sigurđ, who once again was brave enough to ride through the ring of fire in order to propose the marriage. The Valkyrie insulted Gunnar, telling him that he was pale and afraid, when Sigurđ rode through the fire, and claimed this was no behavior fit for a king or champion. She reminded Gunnar about the oath she swore: to only marry the best man ever born, clearly stating that man was Sigurđ Sigmundsson. Not only did she claim to be an oathbreaker, she also uttered her hatred towards Grímhild, who called cowardly and exclaimed that there was no

woman worse than the Queen. Brynhild knew the Queen had tampered with Sigurđ's mind, because she had prophesied it to Guđrún.

Gunnar argued that his mother was not an evil woman, instead blaming Brynhild for resenting a woman, who is not only higher-ranked, but lives her life in praise. Giving only a brief answer in return Brynhild tried to kill King Gunnar, but was restrained in time. The King, trying to avoid cruelty towards his spouse did not want her to stay chained, but Brynhild quickly stopped him by promising to never smile in his presence again, never bringing cheer to the hall, not speaking happily nor creating tapestries and dispensing good advice to others. The Valkyrie confessed that her greatest grief was not marrying Sigurđ. Her wailing would soon be heard all over town.[36]

Guđrún grew impatient with the grieving hall. Brynhild would not talk to anyone for over a week, and Guđrún's handmaidens brought information that Gunnar's wife had been drunk all that time and nobody would dare to wake her, nor talk to her, since the Valkyrie had given strict orders that she does not wish to be disturbed. Guđrún wanted Gunnar to speak to the Valkyrie, but he told her Brynhild had forbidden him to do so. Hogni also received no answer after trying to engage his brother's wife into conversation. The next day, when Sigurđ returned from his hunting trip, he was the only one who dared to approach Brynhild and talk to her, knowing that the Valkyrie's silence meant only that she was preparing plots against the family. Guđrún proposed to give Brynhild gold to see if that would soothe her anger, but Sigurđ ignored that and went to talk to his former love. Observing Brynhild's suffering broke Sigurđ's heart. At first he tried to speak rationally, arguing that the sons of King Gjúki were in no way worse than himself, and that Gunnar was a fine, noble man, who would make a great chieftain.

[36] Jackson Crawford. *The Saga of the Völsungs and the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*. pp. 55-56.

Brynhild, however, disagreed with Völsung's words, claiming that it was always him, who deserved her and crossed all possible obstacles for her sake. Sigurđ admitted that he still loved Brynhild, from the moment he could remember who she was. They both had been tricked, and that he would rather leave Guđrún, than see the Valkyrie in agony or witness her death. He proposed that Brynhild marry and love both her husband and Sigurđ, but Brynhild, a woman with honor, refused Sigurđ's proposition. After that the woman openly proclaims that she would rather die than live on with the knowledge that Sigurđ had betrayed her as well as Guđrún, who he told everything, so the woman could ridicule Brynhild. The Valkyrie foretold that this would be the end of her, Sigurđ or Gunnar.[37]

After this Brynhild went outside, where Gunnar joined her for a conversation. The Valkyrie quickly persuaded her husband to kill Sigurđ, suggesting it was either the Völsung or Gunnar's own life that would be taken. The woman, threatening to return to her homeland, also made certain to include Sigurđ's little son in her murderous plan. Gunnar was not joyous hearing his wife's plan. He went on to consult his brother, but the problem could not be easily solved, as both Gunnar and Hogni pledged to Sigurđ and found breaking this oath to be shameful. Ultimately, they constructed a plan that would involve their youngest brother Guttorm, still a child, killing Sigurđ, as he was the only one not to have made any promises to the Völsung. Once again using Queen Grímhild's witchery, they prepared a meal that would drive Guttorm wild and aggressive, so he would swear to kill Sigurđ.

The next morning the boy went into Sigurđ's chambers to do his deed, but ran back frightened by the look of the hero's eyes, which according to Crawford's translation "had a serpent-like brightness that very few dared to look him [Sigurđ] in the

[37] Jackson Crawford. *The Saga of the Völsungs and the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*. pp. 56-59.

eye."[38] At his third attempt the young Guttorm found Sigurđ asleep, so the boy drew his sword and pierced his target so powerfully that the sword was visible on the other side of the mattress. Guttorm started for the door, but Sigurđ awoke once stabbed and sent his sword Gram flying after his wrongdoer. He struck the young prince in half. In the meanwhile Guđrún awoke and started weeping and screaming. Sigurđ comforted her that her brother's were alive and this moment was foretold to happen, he just refused to believe it. "No one can fight his fight," Crawford translates. In his final words Sigurđ assures his wife that Gunnar was safe, and that Brynhild was the cause of all this. After he let out his dying breath Guđrún screamed. Hearing that Brynhild started to laugh. After exchanging a few insults the Valkyrie stopped her hysterical laughter and started weeping, because she knew it had all been done, her prophecy became reality.

In the following chapter Brynhild, still betrothed to Gunnar has another prophetic vision, where she sees her brother Atli asked her if it was really Sigurđ she wanted to marry. She reminded her husband that he and the Niflung [Sigurđ] shared a blood-oath, which would only bring Gunnar bad luck, whether she was alive or dead. Then the Valkyrie continued to make requests about her burial ceremony. She wished to lie at Sigurđ's side, together with the men, who lost their lives for the Niflung King, his child murdered at her own request and Guttorm. She also asked for a reddened tent to be put up over them. As her final advice she told Gunnar that he once again must make use of his mother's powers and persuade Guđrún to give birth to Sigurđ's daughter, which will be called Svanhild. After that Guđrún was to marry Atli unwillingly. Gunnar was destined to marry Brynhild's sister Oddrun. Atli would disagree and throw Gunnar into a pit full of snakes, after which Guđrún would take her revenge on the Hunnish King and kill him. Consequently it would be Guđrún's destiny to go to another King's castle,

[38] Jackson Crawford. *The Saga of the Völsungs and the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*. pp. 61.

where she would deliver Atli's sons. Svanhild would marry a King named Jormunrekk, but the advice she would be given would drive the entire family to an end, which would cause Guđrún agony. After this Brynhild died and burned with Sigurđ, both of their lives coming to an end.[39]

The 10 chapters of the Völsungasaga that follow the one mentioned above can be summed up without going into detail. Everything Brynhild had foretold for her husband and her family became true. Guđrún tried to fight fate, urging her sons to take revenge in the name of Sigurđ, however, as it was proven numerous times in this Saga, tricking fate is impossible and even if you deny it it will come and reap its harvest when one would least expect it. Thus ends the Saga of the Völsungs, one situation forgotten, or perhaps ignored purposefully - Brynhild and Sigurđ's daughter, Aslaug, remained alive throughout the majority of the conflict, safely brought up in the protection of King Heimir.

SIGURÐ VÖLSUNG AS A NORSE HERO

Usually when speaking of heroic narratives some sort of courtly dilemma is involved, especially when said narrative presents characters from the upper classes, fit to rule. The heroic chivalrous epic usually contains a universal code of values, apparent in many courtly tales. According to Łukasz Neubauer this code is closely tied to the idea of ideal love, which often is the driving force to this sort of narratives, such

[39] Jackson Crawford. *The Saga of the Völsungs and the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*. pp. 62-64.

as for example the *Riddasögur* - a group of sagas, which present tales of knights.[40] The values of a courtly narrative are also found in the *Völsungasaga*, where they are marginalized. As an example the author gives the character of Guđrún, who is not only a beautiful, but also a vicious woman.[41] If the narrative of the saga were not purely focused on the Völsung family and the direct descendants of Odin, it could potentially serve as a saga depicting Norse women. Despite all of them being only side characters to help push the main character's narrative forward, they possess a lot of agency, given that they make many important decisions, are able to use basic illusory magic and, in the case of Brynhild, can even foretell the future through visions or dreams. Whereas the *Riddasögur* mostly show women only in a very schematic way: mother, sister, servant etc.

During the ages the elements ascribed to figures seen as heroes have changed. Some features, however, have prevailed. As one of the best examples, Artur Szrejter in a chapter of his book "*Herosi mitów germańskich: Sigurđ Pogromca Smoka i inni Wölsungowie"* gives the definition that a hero is a person - therefore also represents the heroic values - "who reaches a goal unreachable to a regular person. They also receive a reward for it - back in the day it was loot (in a valuable metal), honor and women; in today's world they achieve medals, money and women."[42] That stated the following assumption can be made: not much has changed. However, in the past those rewards were only symbolic, a material reflection of a whole religiously-mythic process of initiation, where the hero would prepare himself to become more than just the owner of valuables. This procedure has changed over the years, leaving only the material part

[40] Łukasz Neubauer. "*Riddasögur.*" [In:] Jakub Morawiec, Łukasz Neubauer (eds.) *Sagi islandzkie*. Wydawnicwo Naukowe PWN: Warszawa, (2015), pp. 138. All translations from Polish sources are provided by the Author of the thesis.
[41] Łukasz Neubauer. "*Riddasögur.*" pp.147.
[42] Artur Szrejter. *Herosi mitów germańskich: Sigurd Pogromca Smoka i inni Wölsungowie. Tom 1.* Instytut Wydawniczy Erica: Warszawa. (2015). pp. 104.

behind. When trying to truly define a hero it is crucial to be able to recognize how he differed from all of the others, achieving a status that was bordering on a cult.

In the case of the *Völsungasaga* this effect is achieved by characters, who vary between one another, each of them possessing distinct features, so each of them has the right to remain a hero in his own regard. One thing, however, that characterizes all of the heroic figures in the *Völsungasaga* is the change they underwent together with the social norms at their given times. The oldest hero type we can encounter in the saga is what Artur Szrejter describes as a "Shamanic hero". This concept is relevant in regard to the Völsung family being direct descendants of the Norse god Odin. This relation suggests the *Saga* to serve as a bonding point between faith and humanity, colliding those two aspects together and showing that there is a direct connection between the gods and the human realm. In the *Völsungasaga* it is possible to apply the idea of a Shamanic hero to Sigi, who is the immediate descendant of Odin and due to this he is granted supernatural powers; Christian Christiansen, goes as far as theorizing that Sigi is a demi-god,[43] the term, however, never appears in Norse mythology. Nonetheless, Sigi's mother's name is never mentioned in any of the texts in the *Völsungasaga* or any Eddic poems concerned with the events mentioned or cognate to the text. Szrejter once again points out that there are only three key stages to becoming a hero; they read as follows:

- the passing of initiation,
- fighting the enemy,
- collecting the loot.[44]

[43] https://scandinaviafacts.com/norse-mythology-demigods/ (retrieved: 31.05.2023)
[44] Artur Szrejter. *Herosi mitów germańskich*. pp. 113.

These elements are described to take on different forms. The initiation does not always have to involve travel or bloodshed, but can also be an illumination. The enemy does not have to be monstrous, alternatives such as humans or even a thing possessing feared characteristics is an appropriate form of fight. The same applies to loot, where it can be something else than just gold, for example knowledge or freedom to the hero's community. The author also acknowledges the changes that pertain to the hero. Szrejter mentions Sigurđ as the pinnacle of heroic tradition, claiming that the Norse hero is modeled after every Germanic hero, but also shows the image of a modern man from the early Middle Ages, thus cohering to multiple heroic images at the same time.

The Völsungs could be considered as the eponymous type of hero, which Szrejter describes as "a proto-hero, who is ancestral to an entire family line and can at the same time be an eponym, so a character whose name the group of people takes their name from."[45] This might not be the case with the first Völsung mentioned in the saga, but Sigi quickly has a grandchild named Völsung, who is arguably the first true hero of the saga.

What is noteworthy is the fact that every generation of the Völsung family in a way inherits the deeds of their ancestors. After Völsung each boy born into the family has a greater purpose and is driven not only by his need for glory, but also the need to honor his family name. This, together with the long time where the saga follows the generations of the Völsung ancestry uncovers certain features the depicted heroic characters can be associated with. These will be developed in the later sections of this chapter.

[45] Artur Szrejter. *Herosi mitów germańskich*. pp. 117.

ANIMALS IN THE SAGA – SIGURÐ'S QUIET HELPERS

A motif that stands out in the *Völsungasaga* is the influence of animals around our heroes, that oftentimes help them resolve conflicts or difficult situations, by seemingly not engaging in the situation. Nevertheless, the animals through their action or lack thereof frequently are able to slightly push the narrative in a different direction. The significance of having an animal companion, especially a trusted steed has always been portrayed in Old-Norse literature and culture. The most common and well known example is Odin's horse Sleipnir. The steed has been ascribed with supernatural abilities. Agnieszka Łukaszczyk[46] points out the unusual name Sleipnir, which could be translated into "the sliding one". As the author notes, this could refer to a horse sliding into a galloping motion, however, other scholars argue that Sleipnir's name was established no earlier than in the 13th century, when the Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus reiterates the Old-Norse story in his *Gesta Danorum*.[47] Saxo recalls the horse's ability to walk on water, as well as in the clouds. Both *Eddas* also provide clear references to Sleipnir being able to travel to the land of the dead without any harm. In stanza 44 of *Grimnismál* the reader is informed about the excellency of the steed:

"The ash of Yggdrasil is the finest of trees
and Skídbladnir of ships;
Odin of Æsir, Sleipnir of steeds…"[48]

[46]Agnieszka Łukaszczyk. *Wierzchowce Bogów. Motyw konia w wierzeniach Słowian i skandynawów.* Triglav: Szczecin. pp. 77–78.
[47] Saxo Grammaticus. *Gesta Danorum: The Danish History, Books I-IX*. trans. D. B. Killings. Project Gutenberg: e-book. 2006.
[48] Anonymous. *The Elder Edda: A Book of Viking Lore*. tr. Andy Orchard. pp. 57.

The comparison presented in the above stanza leads to the conclusion that Sleipnir was not only Odin's horse, but his equal; their relationship being one of companionship and trust, putting aside the initial assumptions of an ownership dynamic. As further proof to this theory the *Sigrdrífumál* recalls Odin giving up an eye in order to receive knowledge, which included the knowledge of powerful runic spells - a magic which could cause good, but might also be used for evil deeds. The *Sigrdrífumál* mentions that Sleipnir is a keeper of his companion's knowledge, because one of the sacred runes was carved into the horse's teeth. No further information about the rune is given, which Łukaszczyk finds to be another layer of protection[49], but it can also serve as emphasis to how intimate and strong the relationship between Odin and his steed is.

A notable example in the *Völsungasaga* is the horse, Grani. From the very moment Sigurđ chooses his companion, the horse - a descendant of Odin's steed, Sleipnir - proves that it is equally great and fearless as Sigurđ. This bond seems to deepen the more time Grani spends with his master.

When in the saga Sigurđ and Gunnar intend to ride through the ring of fire, both of the men realize that Grani is capable of such an action, because he has proven multiple times before that he is a fearless mount. However, Grani refuses to ride through the fire with Gunnar on his back, it looks as if the horse chooses by itself, who the worthy one is to cross the fire barrier. With Sigurđ on his back, the steed leaps right through the flames, as if they were just another regular obstacle to cross. Based on the fragments of Sigurđ and Grani's relationship, Agnieszka Łukaszyk proposes a theory that after Sigurđ's death Grani reacted with great sadness and possibly even died soon after that, being not only Sigurđ's loyal companion, but also a mirror image of the great hero.[50]

[49] Agnieszka Łukaszczyk. *Wierzchowce Bogów.* pp. 72.
[50] Agnieszka Łukaszczyk. *Wierzchowce Bogów.* pp. 77–78.

Grani's death would not be the first instance of a loyal steed following its companion even after death. Albína Hulda Pálsdottir in her studies provides estimated numbers of horse burials in Iceland. Out of the 350 examined graves, 115 of them contained horse remains, whereas only 17 graves included swords.[51] The scholar notes that horses being buried alongside their owners were a signifier of a high social and financial status. This tradition is prevalent throughout Norse culture to this day. The "Dalahorse" is a genuine work of Swedish folk art now made mostly in the district of Dalarna (hence the name) is a carved wooden figure of a horse, meant to be a symbol status these animals would bring. Moreover the Dalahorse is also representative of the qualities of working partnership and trusted friendship. "A horse could be the difference between life or death in a wild and fierce country without roads,"[52] is a statement that can be found in pamphlets accompanying the Swedish horse figurines. What is more, in 1939 the Dalahorse became world famous and established itself as one of the national symbols of Sweden. The horses were, and still are, manufactured with differences in style throughout the decades; those changes are mostly found in the general outline of the horse and mean to show the evolution of the animals from working horses common in traditional households, up to the elegant figures of the modern horse. The decorative style and purpose of the Dalahorse has not changed over the years and does not show any signs of decreasing interest in the figurines. The cult of the horse remains prevalent even in today's Norse culture, up to the point where it has become part of the cultural heritage of Sweden.

Notably, Grani also remains a highly recognizable figure within the Nordic communities until this day. In the year 2001 the Faroe Islands issued a special collection

[51] Albína Hulda Pálsdottir. *Sexing Viking Age horses from burial and non-burial sites in Iceland using ancient DNA*. [In:] *The Far Traveler: Voyages of a Viking Woman*. N.M. Brown. Boston. (2008).
[52] Pamphlet from the *Wooden Horse Museum Sweden*, located in the center of Stockholm's Old Town. Acquired in 2023. More information under: www.swedishhorsemuseum.se

of stamps[53] relating to historical events. One of those stamps – stamp no. FO 391 of the Faroe Islands[54] – is entirely dedicated to Grani and Gram (Sigurđ's sword). This shows how the two elements play an important role in the hero's story.

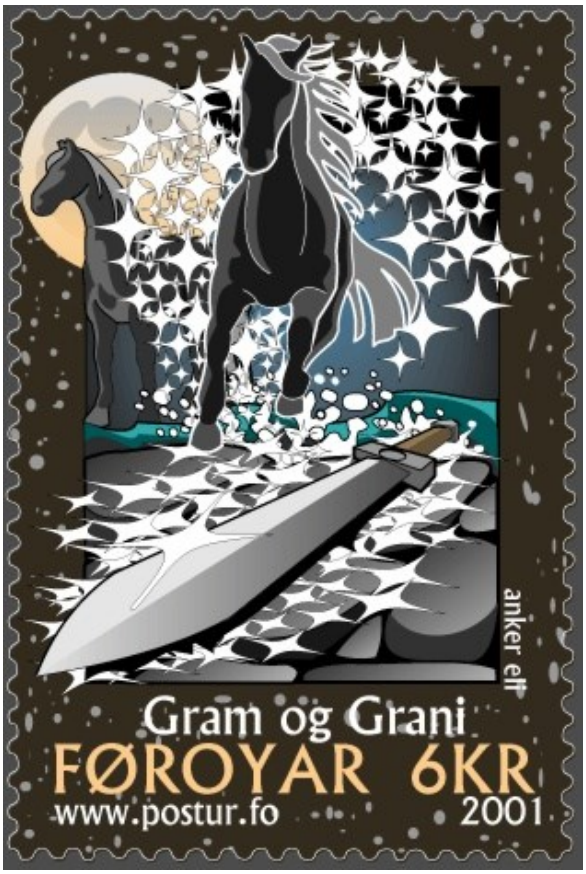

Fig. 4 Faroese stamp of Grani and Gram. Issued as a part of a collection on historical events. Source: Wikipedia, www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grani

While elaborating on the animals in the saga it is crucial to include the dragon – Fafnir. In order to properly understand the Old-Norse perception of dragons and serpents it is essential to understand the creatures name. Most snake-like creatures, including what we would nowadays consider dragons, were referred to as *ormr*. In the

[53] Kornelia Lasota. *Koń i jego bóg.* pp. 104.
[54] Previously issued by the Faroese Post Office site, the image is now available on Wikipedia. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Faroe_stamp_391_gram_and_grani.jpg (retrieved: 11.06.2023)

Icelandic-English Dictionary this term is defined as: "worm, snake."[55] Another edition of the very same dictionary provides the reader with the translations: "snake, serpent."[56] Therefore, it can be argued that *ormr* is not a specific term and serves to denote multiple types of creatures, such as worms, and even caterpillars. Despite the existence of the word *maðkr*, which stands for maggots, a clear distinction is impossible since dictionaries also use "worm" as one of the possible translations. Hence, there arises the argument that *ormr* was used as a defining term for many legless creatures.[57]

The word triggers ambiguous associations, for example worms infecting decaying meat, which would cause man to feel sick if consumed. On the other hand, it correlates to snakes shedding their skin, and caterpillars turning into butterflies, which was likely to be considered a wonder in the Viking Age. Hence, the *ormr* is not only a monster, but also personifies important creatures in the Old-Norse cosmology. According to the Norse our world has two oceans, one of which is placed around all land. In this ocean roams a humongous serpent called *Jörmungandr*, often referred to as the "*Midgard* Serpent". It is said to take the shape of the Uroboros, which is most likely meant to underline its size - the serpent is able to wrap around the entire human realm and still bite its own tail. *Jörmungandr* is one of the monstrous children of the trickster god Loki and the giantess Angrboða, it does, however, not pose any threat to humans. At the end of the world, the snake is supposed to fight and die at the hands of its mortal enemy, the god Thor.[58]

[55] Geir Tómasson Zoega. *Icelandic-English Dictionary.* Reykjavik: Sigurðrur Kristjansson. (1922). pp. 382.
[56] Geir Tómasson Zoega. *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (1910). pp. 399.
[57] Kornelia Lasota. *The Holy Serpent: Snakes in the Old-Norse Worldview*. [In:] „Zoophilologica. Polish Journal of Animal Studies" Nr 2 (8)/2021 Mity – stereotypy – uprzedzenia (III). pp. 1–10.
[58] Carolyne Larrington. *The Norse Myths. A Guide to the Gods and Heroes*. London: Thames and Hudson. (2017). pp. 105.

Another crucial *ormr* in Norse cosmology is *Niðhoggr*, a dragon that dwells far under the roots of the world tree and poisons it by gnawing on its roots. In contradiction to *Jörmungandr*, the dragon is extremely dangerous. He is mentioned to nibble on people, who have broken social and judicial norms, thus going to hell for crimes such as murder, adultery or oath breaking.

The Eddic poem *Völuspá* mentions:

Þar saug Niðhöggr
nái framgengna,
sleit vargr vera—
vituð ér enn, eða hvat?[59]

This passage loosely translates to: "And so sucks *Niðhöggr* on the blood of the dead, like a wolf he bites. Do you know enough already, or what?" The prefix Nid- was used to signify a social stigma, implying the loss of honor and a new, villainous status. Therefore *Niðhoggr* is a serpent/dragon generally feared in the Old-Norse mythology. It is, however, an inevitable part of all existence. There are no mentions of *Niðhoggr*'s fate after the end of the existing world. This implies the *ormr* is likely to be a timeless creature, which cannot be influenced by any event and does not fall under the jurisdiction of the gods.

To provide further context on the significance of Fafnir the dragon, the part of the saga concerning his killing needs to be outlined.

[59] Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson. *An Icelandic-English Dictionary.* Oxford University Press: Oxford. (1874).

Sigurđ and Regin went up on Gnitaheiđ, where they found the path to Fafnir's lair. Sigurđ swiftly noticed that his companion had lied to him about the size of the dragon, because the marks left behind were far larger than the one's a regular snake would leave. After a brief moment of discussion, Sigurđ went on to dig a pit, with multiple other pits surrounding it. The other pits were supposed to catch the dragon's blood, while Sigurđ would stab the serpent straight through the heart. When the beast appeared it was spitting poison all around, but Sigurđ was not afraid and continued to carry out his plan. He stabbed Fafnir right beneath his left armpit. Sigurđ quickly jumped out of the pit, freeing his sword, while the dragon felt that it was mortally wounded.[60] During this encounter Regin kept a safe distance[61] while the young Völsung slayed the monstrous creature.

Regin requested the cooked dragon's heart as compensation for the death of his brother. Sigurđ follows this request, but while checking if the heart is fully cooked he burns his finger.[62] "He then put his finger in his mouth, and when the blood of the dragon's heart touched his tongue, he could understand the language of birds."[63] The birds inform Sigurđ about the mischievous plots Regin had in store and how the dragon heart would make Sigurđ more wise, so the hero slayed his companion in order to save himself.[64] Sigurđ then rode to Fafnir's lair and emptied it from many useful artifacts and all the treasure he could find, and together with Grani rode on.

Further analysis on the topic of the dragon Fafnir shows notable results. When Sigurđ decides to bring an end to the dragon's life, he manages to slay Fafnir by stabbing him "beneath his left armpit, so deep that the sword sank up to the hilt."[65]

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[60] Jackson Crawford. *The Poetic Edda: Stories of the Norse Gods and Heroes*. pp. 31.
[61] Helen A. Guerber. *Tales of Norse Mythology*. pp.301.
[62] Kornelia Lasota. Holy Serpent. pp. 5.
[63] Jackson Crawford. *The Saga of the Völsungs and the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*. pp. 34.
[64] Helen A. Guerber. *Tales of Norse Mythology*. pp. 301.
[65] Jackson Crawford. *The Saga of the Völsungs and the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*. pp. 31.

Aside from the questionable snake/dragon anatomy, it is what happens next that is a defining point of the dragon's portrayal. Fafnir turns out to be a sentient creature, which possesses tremendous amounts of knowledge. The mortally wounded dragon quickly realized who convinced the young hero to this fearless deed and managed to warn Sigurđ of the dangers that lie ahead. The serpent also provided answers to questions concerning the world and cosmology, for example Fafnir and Sigurđ discuss the origin of the Norns, also known as the Fates. Knowledge on topic alike is very rare and only available to the wisest creatures and gods. Their conversation mirrors the one that would be held with a *völva* - an ancient and wise seeress able to predict and explain events of past, present and future. Even the mightiest and brightest of gods would turn to such women in search of the truth. The *völva* are said to use powerful magic in order to bring forth their visions. As proof of how wise *völva* can be, in one of the Eddic poems *Baldrsdraumar.* This particular poem is not included in the *Codex Regius*, but is added to most Eddic poem collections.[66] Odin, who gave one of his eyes up for wisdom, resurrects a *völva* only to use her abilities and ask questions which could help him gain more insight about his son Baldur, more precisely his death.

Copley puts emphasis on the fact that Morris in his works is not consistent in terms of the message given by the birds to the point where he omits it entirely. In the case of the author's poem on Sigurđ, the lack of advice from the birds may be excused by Moriss' intentions to create a work of Romantic poetry - parts of the story may be kept out for artistic reasons. However, after a close analysis of, what I will refer to as "the bird scene", it seems that this particular event in the Saga and all related mentions is a problematic one. After examining "the bird scene" in 8 different sources, varying in form or translation, no clear image of the events seems to exist.

[66] Jeramy Dodds. *The Poetic Edda.* Coach House Books: Toronto. (2014). pp. 246-247.

The table below represents the findings categorized by name of author/translator, work and type of bird:

Author	Title	Number and type of bird
Snorri Sturluson	Prose Edda	No number of birds provided
Andy Orchard	Poetic Edda	No number of birds provided
Jeramy Dodds	Poetic Edda	Seven nuthatches mentioned
Jackson Crawford	Saga of the Völsungs	Six birds
Jackson Crawford	Poetic Edda	Seven wagtails
William Morris	Sigurđ the Völsung	Seven eagles
William Morris	The Völsunga Saga	Six woodpeckers
Carolyne Larrington	Poetic Edda	No number of birds provided

Fig. 5 The numbers and types of birds mentioned in the *Saga*.

Generally the number of birds is not enumerated in the sources; the texts that mention the amount of creatures report there to be between six and seven birds in total. Based on these variables it is impossible to reach a conclusion about whether or not the original story was intended to grant a numerological meaning into its content. Notably, there is also no conclusive type of bird present in the scene. While most translations refer to the winged creatures as nuthatches, Morris' interpretations mention woodpeckers in the prose translation, as well as eagles in the poem *Sigurđ the Völsung*. Jackson Crawford in his translation from 2015 proposes the birds to be wagtails - an Old World type of long tailed bird.[67] The types of birds even vary in works translated or produced by the same author, i.e. Morris and Crawford. Thus, both the amount and type

[67] Jackson Crawford. *Fafnismal* in *The Poetic Edda*. pp. 241.

of birds remain unknown, therefore it is difficult to determine if they play an important role in the saga.

It is important that Sigurđ gains the ability to understand animals, the birds in particular, after he consumes a bit of the dragon heart by accident. This is strictly connected to the Old-Norse ritual of blood drinking. Another memorable incident of blood ingestion, which helps to provide more context to the hero's newly gained skill is the example of a man called Kvasir, a person gifted with great wisdom. His that story is briefly recalled by Snorri in Skaldskaparmal.[68] The Icelander describes Kvasir as "so wise no one could ask him a question that he could not answer,"[69] which the man famously shared with others. Despite that, no amount of wisdom could save Kvasir from being tricked by the dwarves Fjalar and Galar. Kvasir was killed and his blood was mixed with honey to make a fine mead, the consumption of which would cause anyone to become a scholar. The Æsir quickly figured out that the dwarves had lied to them about the circumstances of Kvasir's death - the man did not choke on his own knowledge, as Fjalar and Galar claimed. Odin rushed to retrieve the mead and shared it only with his brethren, as well as some poets, thus poetry is often referred to as Odin's gift. Drawing information from the story of Kvasir and applying it to the events described in the Völsungasaga, it is shown that one seems to be able to incorporate others' skills through drinking their blood. The fact that Sigurđ does this unknowingly contributes to his heroism, since he does not actively seek more than gold, yet fate guides him in a slightly different direction. The newly gained skill of the hero will play an issue in the later parts of this dissertation. Continuing forward, no other rituals will be mentioned, since this is the only mention of such behavior.

[68] Snorri Sturluson. *The Prose Edda,* pp. 84.
[69] Snorri Sturluson. *The Prose Edda,* pp. 84.

BERSERKIR AND *ÚLFHEÐNAR* – WARRIORS IN ANIMAL SKINS OR SHAPESHIFTERS?

This subchapter will aim to explore a motif, which is often ignored in Old-Norse studies – the *úlfheðnar*. A key feature in favor of the distinction between the two groups of warriors lie in the interpretation of the names: while *berserkir* means "bear shirts", *úlfheðnar* on the other hand can be translated into "wolven coats", it is possible that the names had no links to the way the warriors dressed, it is not impossible that the skins were considered as part of a ceremony, based on the mythical aspects of the fight, rather than just the physical.[70]

In the story, two characters - Sigmund and Sinfjotli - while wandering in the forest encountered a hut, where they found two men asleep, with thick golden rings on them. Nearby hung two wolf skins, suggesting that the strangers were cursed to be werewolves. The curious Sigmund and Sinfjotli donned the skins and were soon disguised as wolves, running through the forest and reaping havoc.[71] In the wolf form Sigmund and Sinfjotli were able to communicate, they made an arrangement that none of them would risk death, so if faced with seven or more men they were to let out a howl to call the other for help. After that each went their own way. One time they were apart Sinfjotli heard Sigmunds howl and immediately ran to help kill all the men, after which the two parted ways again. Soon after, Sinfjotli faced eleven men on his own. Badly injured, he went to rest under an oak tree. Sigmund's arrival was swift, after a brief talk Sinfjotli bragged about his achievement, that as a mere child he defeated so many enemies. The enraged Sigmund bit Sinfjotli in the throat, and carried him on his

[70] Łukasz Malinowski. *Berserkir i Úlfheðnar w historii, mitach i legendach.* Zakład Wydawniczy Nomos: Kraków. (2009). pp. 45.
[71] Helen A. Guerber. *Tales of Norse Mythology*. pp. 283.

back to the turf-house. There Sigmund cursed the wolf skins. One day he saw two weasels fight, one biting the other in the throat and putting a forest leaf onto the wound, after which the wounded weasel stood up unharmed. Then a raven flew over Sigmund with the exact same leaf, the bird gave the man the leaf. Without hesitation Sigmund put the leaf over Sinfjotli's wound and the boy jumped up unharmed. After both could take off the wolf skins, they buried them, once again cursing them to never bring harm to anyone again.[72]

Recalling the meaning behind the animal skins it cannot be ruled out that the ritual of turning into another creature might have been connected to the consumption of use of specific herbs or substances which could evoke physical reactions in the people partaking in said ritual. According to scholars, battle rage was common among the ranks of Indo-European armies. Łukasz Malinowski claims that: "amongst the Germanic tribes that rage was already known in antiquity and continued in the Middle Ages,"[73] it is impossible to establish an exact date of the beginnings of the berserkers' origins in Scandinavia. Due to the same reason a clear categorization between the *berserkir* and *úlfheđnar* is almost impossible, as not many written sources seem to distinguish between the both groups, even though their names point towards two independent – or at least semi-independent – groups of warriors. It is highly likely that the two groups have served by providing different strategic actions. According to Malinowski: "Even though it's only a theory, which is not supported by a satisfactory amount of source material a certain dose of likelihood cannot be denied. [...] The *úlfheđnar* might have served for provocative-guerilla warfare."[74] In the portrayal of this specific warrior group it is common to adorn them with a spear, which possibly alludes to the fact that this

[72] Jackson Crawford. *The Saga of the Völsungs and the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*. pp. 10-12.
[73] Łukasz Malinowski. *Berserkir i Úlfheđnar*. pp. 35.
[74] Łukasz Malinowski. *Berserkir i Úlfheđnar*.pp. 50.

weapon was used by the god Odin and might have been used not only as a weapon, but also to carry a mystical meaning.

The initiation ceremonies to both the *berserkir* and *úlfheđnar* were most likely also based on controversial principles. Scholars theorize that in the case of the *berserkir* it was forming a bond with the bear that constituted the immersion in the world of the "wild warriors", attention on bonds between multiple berserkers was most likely ignored, as the bear was seen as a solitary animal. The *úlfheđnar*, on the other hand, had to become part of a pack in order to complete the ritual, which had a high probability of risking all contact with other parts of the community and determining their new lifestyle.[75] An excellent example of this occurs when Sigmund and Sinfjotli change into wolves, which may also be read as an initiation into the ranks of the *úlfheđnar.* At the time of the happening both of the heroes live in the forest, isolating themselves and spending time on educating Sinfjotli how to become a strong warrior. Another support for this theory would be the previous trials Sinfjotli's brothers had attempted. As well as the fact that Sigmund was at the time an outcast of society, often described by the word *vargr*, which in the light of Malinowski's research, mean "an outcast-wolf", another example the author gives to support his claim is the use of the word "*varg-sröddu*" as in "wolven-toungue" or "banished-tongue,"[76] both of which are applicable to the saga.

The last mention of sub-groups of warriors falling under Odin's jurisdiction are the *einherjar*, or chosen ones. Helen A. Guerber simply explains it as "warriors fallen in battle, who were especially favored by Odin,"[77] Malinowski adds that the chosen warriors had godly characteristics, once again calling upon the word "demi-god."[78] While in the following part of the chapter in Malinowski's research the author is almost

[75] Łukasz Malinowski. *Berserkir i Úlfheđnar.* pp. 94.
[76] Łukasz Malinowski. *Berserkir i Úlfheđnar.* pp. 98.
[77] Helen A. Guerber. *Tales of Norse Mythology*. pp. 18.
[78] Łukasz Malinowski. *Berserkir i Úlfheđnar.* pp. 119.

certain that Sigurđ Völsung became one of the *einherjar*, as he was not only favored by Odin, as presented many times in the saga, for example Odin helping Sigurđ pick Grani as his horse, but also being directly related to the god by blood, there is no clear indication of this in the saga. However, as one of the greatest heroes in the Old-Norse sagas, Sigurđ – often given the nickname *Fafnisbani* (the slayer of Fafnir[79]) – in all of his heroic deeds and honorable fights, is highly likely to deserve to be included in Odin's army of the chosen.

LOF AND WYRD IN THE VÖLSUNGASAGA

Upon close reading, the text proves to govern itself by a select, however, at first unknown, set of rules. Usually, sagas tend to be noticeably straightforward, which often leads to outright statements about the characters' true intentions; this is, however, not the case in the *Völsungasaga*. The Saga being a very long text with multiple layers of family history it proves to be almost impossible to understand the dynamics of the heroes at first. This subchapter will delve into some specific examples of *lof* (heroic choices) and *wyrd* (fate) shown in the Saga of the Völsungs.

Concerning heroes and their behavior, the *Völsungasaga* presents multiple examples of behavior deemed as heroic, establishing its own rules. The first notable heroic characters are Sigi and his son Rerir, both of which are direct descendants of the god Odin. This statement on its own is enough to imply that both of them have been destined for greatness, instead of choosing it. The power that comes with being directly linked to a god of the Old-Norse pantheon in itself provides the entire family line with the destiny for greatness. Nevertheless, it is not always *wyrd* which governs the actions of all members of the bloodline. The analysis will start at the point when Rerir's heir,

[79] Often anglicized to: Sigurd the Dragonslayer.

brought into the world by the help of Odin himself – Völsung establishes a family of his own, giving them their name, thus truly starting the tale of a family of great warriors and brave women.

First we have Signy, King Völsung's daughter, who does not want to marry the man chosen for her, but is ultimately persuaded to do so. In the following part of the story Signy has many bad feelings about her husband's plans for her family. So once Siggeir invites the Völsungs to visit him, the young woman advises her father and brothers to return to their homeland in order to avoid conflict and potential loss. King Völsung, however, being the eponym of the family, refuses to choose violence as a precaution and courageously accepts whatever fate the Norns have written for him. While doing this he is both selfish and selfless – he believes in his sons and his daughter, knowing that they will find a way to resolve any conflict and to change the situation to their side. Völsung is confident that fate will not misguide him and his bravery might only bring glory onto his family, while keeping his daughter safe as long as she is married to Siggeir. *Wyrd* does in this case lead King Völsung to his death, but had he decided to choose differently the outcome might have been even worse.

The next truly heroic choice is ascribed to a female representative of the Völsung line, a young woman named Signy, who decides to let her brother be tortured instead of saving him from a possible doom. At first, it may seem as if the young woman has made the choice leading to failure, but her deep feelings toward her relatives, especially her brother Sigmund, push her towards laying her trust into the hands of fate and waiting for an occasion to save at least one of her family members. This opportunity does arrive. With the help of Signy, Sigmund is able to avoid death by biting on the wolf's tongue. The situation here is unclear, on one hand Sigmund puts all his trust into his sister's plan, but also decides to fend for himself and avoid death at all

costs. It could be assumed that Sigmund chooses the option that best fits him, in other words he selfishly goes with *lof* - he is confident in his skills to help him save himself, and does not leave his life up to fate only. However, when examining the situation in a broader light, Sigmund is the only one left to avenge his family, which as mentioned above is a frequent driving force for Old-Norse heroes, and is not rooted in the need to gain glory for themself, but rather restoring the good name of their family.

The same values and ideas accompany Sigmund when he lives in the woods as an outcast, doing his best to forge an alliance with Signy's sons, staying true to his mission of avenging the family name. It is Signy who chooses for Sigmund to produce a true Völsung heir, she deceives him, carefully planning out her steps, knowing her brother's plans.

Sigmund finds a true ally in Sinfjotli, one worthy of helping the Völsung complete his plan. When the two heroes don the wolf skins it is entirely his own interference and stubbornness that guides them. Especially Sinfjotli wanted to prove himself, which led him to become mortally wounded. If not *wyrd*, and the interference of Odin the Völsung family line could have come to an end at that very time. Once again divine intervention and Sigmund's fearlessness in avenging his family name proved to be the driving force of the story. Ultimately, the Völsungs manage to restore their family's good reputation and Sigmund ensures the continuation of the bloodline by choosing a new wife and advising her to take care of their son. The story and the bloodline continue, still driven by the same force of keeping the greatness achieved by their ancestors, and leaving everything else up to fate.

Sigurđ is given a choice many times during his travels, but often that choice is only illusionary - being given the drink by Queen Grímhild, the hero was forced to forget his love for Brynhild, and only married Gudrun because she was proposed to him

– given to him as a mere illusion of a choice. Fate very often binds Sigurđ to certain actions he must undertake, most often the man is governed by honor and family tradition, which he takes incredibly seriously and does not hesitate in his actions with his family's honor being at stake.

One of the two real choices Sigurđ undertakes during his long and adventure-filled story is the killing of Regin. Once the hero understands that his companion's intentions are not good, he decides to put an end to it, wanting to actively remove any more danger or treachery coming his way. Sigurđ chooses *lof* by only thinking about himself and his own future. This is probably the only time Sigurđ ever kills without having in mind a greater or more noble goal in mind. Whether Sigurđ cares about the gold he loots from Fafnir's cage is uncertain. Whilst he does not leave it there, he also does not kill the dragon for gold only. Only after he realizes that Fafnir has wronged his family members does the hero act.

The second time Sigurđ chooses to act without adhering to fate is when he remembers his oaths to Brynhild, but seeing her happy makes him hide his true feelings. This choice has fatal consequences for the hero, however, Sigurđ accepts the price without any hesitation, once again trusting in *wyrd* and dying without fear, knowing that he was partly the reason for his demise.

The Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok is deeply connected to the story of Sigurđ the Dragonslayer. In order to properly understand the parallels between the two it is crucial to remember Sigurđ had a daughter by the name of Aslaug. After the death of the rest of the Völsung family the girl is disguised as a farmer's daughter and continues her life under the name Kráka[80]. Under this name she meets Ragnar Lothbrok.

[80] The name translates loosely to "crow".

Ragnar is the son of Sigurđ Ring, the Danish king. In pursuit of his first wife Thora, Ragnar - just like Sigurđ Völsung - has slain a dragon, which has brought him fame all across Scandinavia. After Thora's passing the hero was eager to marry again, but instead of choosing a royal, he chose Kráka. Only after the hero was urged to wed another woman, the beautiful princess Ingibjorg of Sweden, Aslaug reveals her true ancestry to Ragnar. As proof she prophecies that she is pregnant, and her next son will have an unusual trait - a snake in his eye. This would be evidence and commemoration of the great deeds of both Sigurđ and Ragnar, as well as confirmation that Aslaug, just like her mother Brynhild has the gift of sight and can foretell the future. The woman also decides her child should bear the name Sigurđ, so there can be no more doubt about the bravery and honor that will run in the boy's blood. As a sign of his good will the king waits for Aslaug to give birth. She does indeed give birth to a boy, and when the midwives show the baby to king Ragnar is in awe.

Kráka's prophecy had turned out true. At the sight of his newborn son, he recites a poem:

I never saw
brown serpents
in the eyes of any boy,
except in Sigurđ's alone.
He is easy to recognize,
this ungreedy boy,
he's sharp in the eye—
he's got a snake there.[81]

[81] Jackson Crawford. *The Saga of the Völsungs and the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*. pp. 104.

Many modern sources link Ragnar to another woman - Hlaðgerðr (anglicized as Lagertha). Her tale is mentioned in Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum*.[82] However, *The Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok* does not acknowledge her existence.

The unsuccessful betrothal to Ingibjorg does, however, have its consequences. Eirek and Agnar venture out to battle the enraged Swedish army. Despite their best intentions they are defeated by another creature worth mentioning. Although not related to the snake in any way, the magical cow Sybilja defeats an entire army with her ferocious mooing.[83] I believe this deserves a special mention purely because of how unexpected of an event this is. A cow, which under different circumstances would be regarded merely as cattle, becomes a frightful enemy to an entire army.

Just as every heroic tale has a start, it also has an end. In the case of Ragnar Lothbrok the end could not have been more symbolic. After an attempt to conquer England, King Ella[84] sentences Ragnar to death by throwing him into a snakepit. At first the snakes do not bite the brave Dane, as if showing their respect towards the dragon-slayer. It is only after Ella orders to remove Ragnar's clothes that the creatures start to bite. Moments before his death the hero says "I never expected that worms would kill me,"[85] thus bringing us back to the extremely blurred Old-Norse nomenclature of the word *ormr* discussed above in this chapter. The hero's end can be interpreted in two ways. It could be perceived as a heroic death, however, Carolyne Larrington sees it as "ironically recalling his first mighty adventure."[86] Ragnar's sons, together with Aslaug go into battle to avenge him, showing the woman's ancestry through heroic acts and vengeance in the name of family.

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[82] Saxo Grammaticus. *The History of the Danes: Gesta Danorum*. ed. Karsten Friis Jensen, tr. Peter Fisher. Oxford University Press: Oxford. (2015).
[83] Jackson Crawford. *The Saga of the Völsungs and the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*. pp. 105.
[84] Historically best known as Aelle of Northumbria.
[85] Jackson Crawford. *The Saga of the Völsungs and the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*. pp. 120.
[86] Carolyne Larrington. *The Norse Myths. A Guide to the Gods and Heroes*. pp. 164.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has explored the *Völsungasaga*, analyzing its various translations, with special focus on William Morris and Jackson Crawford, however not failing to include other translations while establishing the context needed. The episodes provided show the family connections and deep blood ties that are represented in the *Völsungasaga*, especially the imagery of animals in the Saga. I have also explored rites and traditions represented in the saga, with special focus on the idea of shapeshifting and supernatural abilities. The saga was analyzed through the concepts of *lof* and *wyrd*, thus establishing an image of an Old-Norse hero and the perception of heroic deeds. Furthermore, in the chapter above, I have outlined crucial plot points, such as killing the dragon or the conflict between the key women characters in great detail. From now, moving forward, the thesis will rely on this knowledge.

CHAPTER 3

INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims to introduce and explore the German epic poem *Nibelungenlied*, which addresses similar themes to the ones discussed in the *Völsungasaga*. A distinctly noticeable overlap in characters and situations occurs in both stories, nonetheless the actions examined in the *Nibelungenlied* will be briefly summarized and then analyzed towards their meaning, as well as the (dis)similarities to the *Völsungasaga*. The story and heroic behavior of the main character will be investigated and compared with what was established in the previous chapter, thus contrasting the image of a hero depicted in the German epic. Moreover, an analysis of the story through the elements of *lof* and *wyrd* will be provided, further emphasizing the personality of the hero, as well as the choices and consequences of his actions. Additionally, the chapter will examine topics that scholars struggle with while discussing the German epic, due to some inconsistencies in the text etc. The most important issues will be addressed and an attempt will be made to provide answers to the questions posed.

THE *NIBELUNGENLIED* IN TRANSLATION

The Nibelungenlied, also translated into English with an alternative title *The Lay of the Nibelungs* is an Old-German epic poem written down by an anonymous poet around the year 1200. The "lay" or "revenge saga"[1] as Cyril Edwards calls the text, is said to originate back to the 5th century, but underwent great changes before the

[1] Cyril Edwards (tr.). *The Nibelungenlied: The Lay of the Nibelungs.* Oxford University Press: Oxford. (2010). pp. xvi.

original oral form was written down and displayed in script form. In the early 16th century the poem disappeared for around 200 years. It then reemerged in order to be presented in two parts, the culminatory event being the death of Sigfried Völsung.

The poet responsible for compiling the first text form of the *Nibelungenlied* is considered to be the last anonymous author, since for many years there was virtually nothing to indicate their identity. However, more recent research has abandoned the idea of an archetypal anonymous poet, so they are now referred to as anonymous strictly for convenience purposes. Some researchers claim that the poet's knowledge suggests they are of Austrian descent, while completely abandoning any notion of Bavarian origins. Other studies claim it highly likely that the poet came from the city of Passau, in Bavaria[2] – the people of Passau often identify with the *Nibelungenlied*, calling it their cultural heritage. In Passau annual celebrations of the heroes and the poem itself are held.

During the aforementioned "comeback" of the *Nibelungenlied*, two types of texts were flowering in the literary activity of Germany. The Middle High German classical period was fascinated with courtly love-lyrics, as well as the Arthurian romance. Many factors point towards the *Nibelungenlied* being known to the public in an oral version over 25 years prior to being written down. The works of the poets Dietrich of Bern and Wolfram von Eschenbach are to serve as proof for this theory. Von Eschenbach juxtaposed the characters from the *Nibelungenlied* with Dietrich's epic poems, especially *Parzival*[3] and its references to events in 1203 and 1204. This certainly implies a previous knowledge of the text, as well as a familiarity of the topic amongst

[2] Felix Genzmer (tr.). *Das Nibelungenlied*. Bernhard Sowinski (ed.). Reclam: Stuttgart. (2017). pp. 386. All translations from German are provided by the author of the thesis, unless stated otherwise.
[3] Auguste Lechner. *Die Nibelungen - Parzival - Dietrich von Bern: Die meistgelesenen Sagen des Mittelalters*. Matrix Verlag. (2007).

the public. The works, as mentioned above, were published prior to the discovery of any written form of the *Nibelungenlied*.

Another factor supporting the claim that the *Nibelungenlied* is strongly influenced by Arthurian romance is shown in the work by Hartmann von Aue. In his publication *The Knight with the Lion*[4] Hartman compiles a list of actions present in Arthurian romance. Cyril Edwards notes that "almost all of these activities are to be found in the *Nibelungenlied* and typify the way in which the lay, as written down in the late twelfth century, reflects the courtly world."[5]

Rediscovered in 1755, the *Nibelungenlied* became the central work of the Romantics, and was hailed as the "national epic" of Germany.[6] Edwards claims that "Swiss scholar and critic Johann Jakob Bodmer played a key role in the restoration of the *Nibelungenlied* to public attention."[7] It was Bodmer, who first drew the comparison between the *Lay of the Nibelungs* and Homer's *Iliad*. According to the information provided by Edwards: "In his [Alfred Schlegel[8]] Berlin lectures of 1802, held the *Nibelungenlied* to be superior to the *Iliad*, because of the magnitude of its passions, characters and plot."[9] Not everybody agreed with this view, calling the work a foolish fairytale or lacking imagination, however, those opinions were in minority.

Other ideas voiced draw an immediate link between the *Nibelungenlied* and older Norse sagas. Joahim Heinzle, for one, believes that the full story behind the German Epic, as well as its contextual clues are without doubt deeply rooted in the *Codex Regius*, which contains multiple poems from the *Poetic Edda*, as well as the *Þiðreks saga* - a heroic saga centered around Germanic heroes - especially Þiðrek [Dietrich von

[4] Frank Tobin. *Arthurian Romances, Tales, and Lyric Poetry: The Complete Works of Hartmann von Aue*. Penn State University Press. (2001). http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/j.ctt7v2jt. (retrieved: 24.06.2024).
[5] Cyril Edwards (tr.). *The Nibelungenlied: The Lay of the Nibelungs.* pp. xvi.
[6] Cyril Edwards (tr.). *The Nibelungenlied: The Lay of the Nibelungs*. pp. xi
[7] Cyril Edwards (tr.). *The Nibelungenlied: The Lay of the Nibelungs*. pp. xix.
[8] German Romantic author.
[9] Cyril Edwards (tr.). *The Nibelungenlied: The Lay of the Nibelungs*. pp. xxi.

Bern], compiled around the 13th century.[10] The later text does not feature the story of the Nibelungs, also called Niflungs primarily, however, it does provide more extensive context on the events presented in the *Völsungasaga* and works inspired by it.

Further controversies arose around the poem in the 19th century, when nationalists started overusing the term "*Nationalepos"* and ascribing character names of features to political movements etc. It is not the first case of overuse and misinterpretation of myths and symbols throughout German history. An example of gross depreciation is the usage of Eurasian religious symbols such as the Swastika, as well as borrowings of runes, such as the double Sowulo rune to form the "SS" insignia by the Nazi regime.[11]

THE *NIBELUNGENLIED* AND ITS ANALYSIS

In the first two chapters of the *Nibelungenlied* the reader is introduced to the characters of Kriemhild, a beautiful maiden from Burgundy, where she lives with her three brothers Gunther, Gernot und Giselher. One night she has a dream of a falcon torn apart by two eagles. According to Kriemhild's mother Ute, this dream is prophetic and tells that her daughter will lose someone in a tragic death. The second character is Sigfried, son of Sigmund and Sieglinde. The young man is said to be known for his greatness and strength. Sigfried is said to not want the crow of his kingdom as long as his parents are both alive. Soon after, the young Sigfried decides he will marry Kriemhild without ever having seen her. King Sigmund and Queen Sigelinde try to reason with their son, explaining that the rulers of Burgundy are not good allies. Sigfried urges his parents to trust him and not worry about him getting hurt. The young

[10] Joachim Heinzle. *Die Nibelungen: Lied und Sage*. Primus Verlag: Stuttgart (2012). pp, 22.
[11] Lena Nighswander. „No Nazis in Valhalla: Understanding the Use (and Misuse) of Nordic Cultural Markers in the Third Reich Era Germany". International ResearchScape Journal: Vol. 7, Article 6. (2020).

hero has famously killed a dragon in the past and bathed in its blood, which resulted in the young Niblung to become immune to physical damage. Besides that the hero is also armed in a camouflage coat and at his side he bears the famous sword of the Nibelungs. As he rides for Burgundy, Sigfried is ready for battle, but the people he meets choose not to engage into combat, instead inviting him to be a guest at their court. In the following years the hero serves as an ally to Burgundy, supporting them in battle against the Danes and Saxons. Kriemhild and Sigfried fall in love with each other.

Gunther promises Sigfried the hand of Kriemhild in marriage, for a small favor in return. Gunther is determined to marry Brunhilde – the Queen of Iceland, however, everyone who attempts to court the brave Queen must first defeat her in three battles. Moreover, Brunhilde possesses magical powers, which allow her to win every single encounter. She carries a shield so heavy that four men have to carry it into the arena. With the help of Sigfried and the magical artifacts the Nibelung first brought with him to the land of Burgundy, Gunther is able to trick Brunhilde, thus being victorious in the duels and winning the Queen's hand in marriage.

A double wedding takes place: Sigfried marries Kriemhild, while Gunther takes Brunhilde as his wife. However, the second wedding does not take place accordingly. The Queen of Iceland refuses to bed Gunther. She uses her physical strength to tie down her husband, so he is unable to consume the marriage. Thus, Gunther once again reaches out for Sigfried’s help. The Völsung, equipped with his camouflage coat, manages to sneak into Brunhilde’s chambers and takes off her ring and belt. As a result Brunhilde uses her supernatural powers and becomes vulnerable to Gunther’s plans. Meanwhile, Sigfried gifts the stolen artifact to his wife Kriemhild.

Sigfried and Kriemhild chose to return to his homelands in order to properly celebrate their marriage. The hero now inherits his father’s crown and together with

Kriemhild at his side lives happily for many years in the Netherlands, where he originated. Brunhilde watches the newlyweds with disdain, being of the impression that Sigfried is no more than her husbands' subject. This hierarchy was presented to her in Iceland, when Gunther came to fight for her hand. Therefore, the Queen decides to invite Kriemhild and Sigurđ to the court of Burgundy.

Soon, conflict breaks out between the two Kings, who are unable to decide which one of them possesses a higher status. After the argument goes on for some time, Kriemhild decides to give her opinion on the matter. According to her it is undoubtedly Sigfried, who is first in the hierarchy, since he was the first one to sleep with Queen Brunhilde. As proof she shows the ring and belt she was given by her husband on their wedding night.

Hagen von Tronje, Gunther's liegeman, finds this opinion highly insulting. Such disdainfulness against the Queen is enough to enrage the man, who instantly starts to plot against Sigfried. Despite that Hagen's true intentions lie elsewhere. He wishes to attain the treasure of the Nibelungs, which is only achievable after Sigfried's death. Therefore, Hagen comes up with a plan to kill the Nibelung, and manages to persuade Gunther to join him in the attempted murder of Sigfried.

Not long after these events Sigfried decides to go hunting with the Burgunds. Kriemhild begged her husband to stay, but he would not listen. He felt safe in his surroundings and did not expect any harm to befall him on a hunting trip. The men rode out, Hagen together with them. Sigfried soon proved himself an especially skilled hunter, killing boars and even lions. Seeing this, Hagen achieves to persuade the hero to take part in an exclusive hunt, where it would just be the two of them. When Sigfried takes a bath in the river, Hagen decides to end the hero's life at once, striking him with a spear. The traitor aims for the Nibelungs only vulnerable spot, the back. The spear

pierces the hero's heart, and mortally wounded - he falls. Sigfried's corpse is brought back to Kriemhild, who swears to avenge her husband's murderer and her brother Gunther.

After years have passed, Kriemhild has the treasure of the Völsungs transported to Burgundy. She decides to share it with her brothers, even Gunther, whom she had forgiven for his deed. However, Hagen ultimately steals the treasure and drowns it in the Rhine.

13 years after Sigfried's death Krimhild is still profoundly suffering from her loss. However, she is being courted by the Hunnish King Etzel. The deeply distrustful Hagen tries to persuade Gunther to forbid Krimhild's possible marriage. Hagen is aware of how powerful King Etzel is, and fears that by his side Kriemhild could get the revenge she promised years ago. Nevertheless, the woman is stubborn and cannot be swayed by her brother. Kriemhild ends up the new Hunnish Queen through marriage to Etzel. The couple is happy for another 13 years, during that period they welcome a son – Ortlieb. Still, the Queen cannot forget the past and quickly urges her husband to invite her family to their court.

Hagen is convinced of Krimhild's bad intentions and tries to warn Gunther, telling him not to trust his sister. Gunther chooses to ignore the warnings, absolutely sure that Krimhild has already forgiven her brothers. The trip from Burgundy to Hungary starts. During their travel Gunther and his fellowship encounter mermaids, who prophesy the downfall of Burgundy. As the party arrives at the Hunnish court, Krimhild urges Hagen to return the treasure of the Nibelungs at once; she also forbids the guests to enter the feast armed.

The situation quickly escalates and a fight breaks out between the two nations. During this fight Hagen kills Ortlieb, Kriemhild and Etzel's son, thus finally bringing

the wrath of the Queen on himself. All the heroes besides Gunther and Hagen fall during the battle. The two remaining men are imprisoned and brought to Kriemhild to decide their fate. The Queen has her brother decapitated, the King of Burgundy is now dead and only Hagen remains. The infuriated Kriemhild takes Sigfried's sword and personally cuts off the head of the man who betrayed her, killing her first husband. However, this action does not please King Etzel. Seeing his wife pass a death sentence upon an achieved knight the King speaks up, one of his men – Hildebrand, quickly swings his sword at Kriemhild, killing her. The *Nibelungenlied* ends with the men mourning the dead Queen.

SIGFRIED AS A HEROIC FIGURE

In his epic journey, Sigfried is not necessarily the paragon of heroism which he seems to be. The *Nibelungenlied* gives the impression of the great deeds of the young man, but they in an extensive amount are not depicted in the text itself. We are aware that the Nibelung has killed a dragon and bathed in its blood, thus becoming nearly invincible. However, the event is only briefly retold in what seems to be rather a distant memory than a recounting of a deed few men would be capable of doing. As put by Sowinski: "The killing of the dragon is only mentioned briefly for the sake of context [...] therefore Sigfried presents himself rather as a courtly-raised royal son, whose only goal is to win over a bride. Only because of that does he embark on a journey."[12] A lot of evidence in the text points toward this opinion, as the reader is unlikely to find any truly heroic or great battles or even choices undertaken by the heroic character. Sigfried's heroism, just like the death of the dragon, is only mentioned and seems to

[12] Bernhard Sowinski. "Foreword". pp. 393.

serve the overarching idea of the epic more than the contribution of building a believable character.

However, compared to the personality of Hagen, Sigfried is rarely shown in situations where his actions could reflect his heroic status. The reader finds Hagen to be the one who has to, or dares to, make choices. Whether those choices are truly heroic and made with the best interest of the people around in mind is pushed to a secondary level of perception. During the epic Hagen proves himself to be a skilled swordsman and a man of court, who is loyal to his King. Even though Sigfried does make an alliance with the court of Burgundy and is explicitly said to bravely fight in battles alongside his new kinsmen, his actions are overshadowed by the aspiration to marry Kriemhild, which is explored as a driving force of the young Völsung from the first chapters of the epic. Moreover, in the first chapter of the *Nibelungenlied* it is Kriemhild, who is introduced first. In the context of the various issues in research of the epic instigated above, thus the question arises if there is a possibility of the beautiful maiden to be the heroic figure of the story. In the initial part of the epic her character is quite passive, causing controversy in a later episode of the narrative.

It is noteworthy that the second part of the epic, once again, predominantly pays attention to Hagen and his doings. In the eyes of his fellow knights he is a man worthy of his status and the glory ascribed to him. As mentioned above, he does prove himself an excellent swordsman and cannot be denied the virtue of loyalty towards Gunther.

Considering all of those factors, is the epic's heroic figure truly Sigfried, or are we – as readers – only conditioned to perceive him this way due to how he was introduced? Sigfried is portrayed to us as an embodiment of bravery and greatness, whereas Hagen is shown to be cunning and impulsive. However, given only the actions described in the *Nibelungenlied* this black and white depiction of the two men seems to

lack a clearly noticeable duality, leaving the reader with only impressions instead of a clean-cut, believable narrative of the fight between what is considered good and evil.

WOMEN AND SIDE CHARACTERS IN THE *NIBELUNGENLIED*

As proven in the previous chapter women in the *Völsungasaga* play a significant role and often serve as a driving force in the narrative. The *Völsungasaga* presents one of the characters – Brynhild – as a fallen Valkyrie, far more powerful than her German counterpart. While the German version of the character is easily stripped from her powers, through the removal of her magical artifacts, the Old-Norse counterpart shows the ability to foretell the future, a trait assigned only to women with strong magical powers, as mentioned in the chapter above. While in the *Nibelungenlied* following Siegmund's death the woman does not appear in the further text, in the Old-Norse *Völsungasaga* the character remains caught up in the conflict for the entirety of the text. This shows Brynhild's considerable involvement in the entire plotline of the saga, while Brunhilde's attributes seem to be put aside, as if the woman herself was of no actual importance other than becoming a wife and at some point, a reason of conflict. In the Norse texts the women seem to have much more agency. Nunzia Marullo comments "Women had to constantly show readiness to oblige manly authority, in other words, they fell short in terms of autonomy, whereas men could fully enjoy their freedom."[13]

Kriemhild's prophetic dream is only mentioned in the very beginning of the *Nibelungenlied*. Despite the use of very strong and meaningful imagery, which they young woman decides is important enough to discuss it with her mother, over the period

[13] Nunzia Marullo. *Geschlecht im Nibelungenlied und anderes mehr.* Catania: L'Università di Catania. 2021. pp. 9.

of the *Nibelungenlied* "it seems that she simply forgot about her prophetic dream,"[14] leading to a complete lack of action. She does not recognize the beginnings of the conflict in her land remaining careless, in defiance of her abilities. Brynhild's talents, however, are much more elaborated on, giving the Norse character more depth, as well as showing off and aiming to explain what is supernatural. In the case of the *Nibelungenlied* Hermann Reichert, in The Nibelungen Tradition: An Encyclopaedia, suggests defining these aspects not so much as "mythical", but as "fabulous", claiming this differentiation much more useful.[15] In fact, any superhuman forces get little to no recognition in the German text. Even though, further on the *Nibelungenlied* focuses more on its central female figure, it is again through a perspective of power struggle and future marital status that she gains any notoriety at all. Nonetheless, Kriemhild is an unquestionably active character in the afterwards section of the *Nibelungenlied*. Having sworn her revenge, she acts upon any chance she has in order to avenge her fallen husband and does not seem afraid of any means necessary to achieve her goal. Her active enmity towards Hagen is also strongly stressed in the second part of the poem. Ultimately, Kriemhilds actions are not perceived as heroic among the people of the court, as she is killed for her brutality. Anat Koplowitz-Breier perceives the heroine's action as a sign of taking on a traditionally manly role in the narrative.[16] Through the adoption of masculine behavior Kriemhild fiercely shows her strength and might, distancing herself from the classically female features such as beauty and agreeability. That act ultimately is the reason why the woman is killed. The aforementioned lack of significant agency for women in courtly narratives to which the *Nibelungenlied* belongs,

[14] Asia A. Sarakeva, Elina A. Sarakeva. *Hero and Fate in the Nibelungenlied*. [In:] Galactica Media: Journal of Media Studies. 2020. *2*(3). 161-172.
[15] Hermann Reichert. "Myth" [In:] *The Nibelungen Tradition: An Encyclopaedia.* Routledge. 2013.
[16] Anat Koplowitz-Breier. Politics and the Representation of Women in the *Nibelungenlied*. Revista de Filología Alemana vol.15. Madrid: Universidad Complutense de Madrid. (2007). pp. 14.

mixed with the struggle between gender norms and roles, seems to pose a threat to the established normal state of affairs.

Compared to the Old-Norse saga, the *Nibelungenlied* presents a visible lack of outright enmity between the two main female figures. Contrary to what happens in *The Völsungasaga*, the German epic does not contain scenes of boastful, open conflict, where the characters would speak their minds, or even slightly warp the truth so that the actions would have a stronger emotional impact onto another person. German scholar Joachim Heinzle notices this trend, however, discovers that the conflict between Brunhilde and Kriemhild is played out in a much more courtly way. Both of the women try to show off and outdo one another through the way they dress, which was a desired way at the time. Heinzle states that "the depiction of material culture in the *Nibelungenlied* is strongly leaning towards the demonstration of greatness and wealth,"[17] thus suggesting the importance of dress is an issue far beyond just the conflict between the queens, but also exists in the entirety of the epic as a crucial piece of its *Weltanschauung*.

The word itself can be compared to the latin phrase *Imago Mundi* (Worldview), but Werner Stegmaier proposes to understand the term as more than the sum of the perceivable elements of reality.[18] The term is used to describe an objective and theoretical insight to complete a subjective, but practical understanding of the world, therefore, creating a most accurate outlook on the reality shown. *Weltanschauung* is specifically used in two drastically opposite fields concerned with the description of the world. It can be frequently found in the context of physics, especially cosmology, where its use most commonly concerns the philosophy of nature. However, the phrase appeared in research much earlier, when it was used to contextualize early signs of

[17] Joachim Heinzle. *Das Nibelungenlied Lied und Sage*. Stuttgart: Primus Verlag. (2012). pp. 81.
[18] Werner Stegmaier. "Weltbild, Weltorientierung," [In:] Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie - Evangelisches Kirchenlexikon. Basel. (2007).

religion among humans. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*[19] it is used to describe any timeframe in history that shows the existence of the influence of ideology, but is commonly used in description of the Medieval, which in this case applies to the *Nibelungenlied*.

The demonstration of importance through luxury items, such as well-made clothing was proof of a high material and social status at court, therefore elaborate descriptions of garments are frequently present in courtly literature. This seems to only partly apply to the anonymous author of the German epic, who fails to describe any type of clothing in detail. Nevertheless, it cannot be said that no attention is given to attires worn in the *Nibelungenlied*, the aforementioned unknown writer focuses rather on the materials, than the execution of the courtly outfits. Instead a rich variety of descriptor words can be found in the text, most often attention is given to the materials, which are mentioned to be "oriental" and rich in accessories. Moreover, the author appears to be completely aware of how clothing is used not only to give a certain aesthetic and feeling to the described court, but serves as a certain type of weapon - reflecting social position, as well as mirroring the characters' reaction to the ongoing events. A close analysis of Kriemhild's garments after she is widowed serves as an excellent example.

As Heinzle notices that "despite the highly official courtly opportunity of fine dress it is her - as later reported - daily dress is soaked through on her breasts from the tears she cried,"[20] therefore being a demonstration of rebellion against courtly protocol, which does not allow a state of deep desperation and emptiness the character shows to be feeling. The motif of wearing simple, daily clothing takes away from the highly luxurious atmosphere and allows the author to establish a rather sad and sorrowful picture of a new reality, therefore also a new *Weltanschauung* in the epic. The new

[19] "Weltanschauung" [In:] The New Encyclopedia Britannica. 15. Edition. Encyclopedia Britannica Inc. Chicago. (1993).
[20] Joachim Heinzle. *Das Nibelungenlied.* pp. 81.

perception of the court helps establish Kriemhild's attitude towards her surroundings, moreover, it points out her exceptional loyalty towards the late Sigfried and her strong lack of interest in a new marriage.

The initial impression Brunhild makes on Gunther and Sigfried is also accompanied with a description of her clothing. A strong focus is put on the woman's "white arms,"[21] which imply her high status as royalty of Iceland. Her fair skin seems to be an attribute, because more compliments about the maiden's beauty are made. However, these comments seem to not be entirely true. Heinzle notices that the description - however vague - of Brunhild's womanly charm are introduced in a quite comical undertone.[22] The events around this account are lacking in charm - the main character encounters the queen of Iceland for the first time when she is actively taking part in a battle against her possible suitors. The humorous aspects of this encounter are, however, not the main aim of the description, because Brunhild is one of the key characters in the epic, therefore must somehow fit in with the court and its central role in the epic. She is, therefore, praised for her feminine features, but at the same time described as beastly in battle, her blows harder and more precise than those of a man. She wields a spear in one hand, and a shield of considerable size and breadth - Heinzle notices that in its thickest part the shield is portrayed to be 60 centimeters thick and made with golden ornaments, which again strongly evoke an imagery of the woman's weapons being of a substantial weight.[23]

Despite the fact that Brunhild is dressed in her armor, the narrator describes her white arms when she pushes up her sleeves. This incongruity in the text, when the woman is, yet at the same time is not wearing a full set of armor might have its roots in the "switch" between saga form and courtly epic, since the element of the supernatural

[21] Felix Genzmer. *Das Nibelungenlied*. pp. 72.
[22] Joachim Heinzle. *Das Nibelungenlied.* pp. 83.
[23] Joachim Heinzle. *Das Nibelungenlied.* pp. 82.

(Brunhild being a Valkyrie) is neither present nor truly reflected in the German rendition. The supernatural becomes the monstrous, and what is monstrous is the other. It is, however, noteworthy that even though the queen of Iceland is different (another) compared to the rest of the courtly characters in the *Nibelungenlied*, she still remains desirable to be taken as wife. From the perspective of the refined people of Burgundy it is far beyond unusual that the queen greets her guests dressed in armor, yet the poet puts strong focus onto the woman's arms and her pushed up sleeves and her viciousness in battle, which depicts Brunhild in a way that is far from an elegant courtly manner.

Uncourtly behavior is frequent with the foreign queen, which is perhaps a conscious choice of the anonymous poet - Iceland being a land far away, both historically and culturally behind compared to the rest of the progress of the Old Continent. The poet might have aimed to represent that gap through the character and behavior of Brunhild, thus making her seem lesser than Kriemhild. As Heinzle points out "all public contacts are strongly bound to conventions, the mastery of which guarantees exclusivity, as well as safety, if they are upheld,"[24] which suggests that Brunhild's place at the Burgundian court was not by definition a stable one. The queen of Iceland is seen as a woman of seemingly little courtly appeal, nonetheless, all of the items she owns are described as rather luxurious. Despite her monstrous fighting skills, as mentioned above, her shield is not only heavy, but also heavily ornate with its golden elements, fitting her gilded ring armor.

The *Nibelungenlied* does not fail to draw attention to what is material, moreover, material culture is an important element of the narration in the case of the epic. What the Old-Norse has said out right, the German text shows through its richness in detail considering the physical objects present. Linda Hurcombe recognizes this type of

[24] Joachim Heinzle. *Das Nibelungenlied.* pp. 83.

attention to detail as a crucial element in material culture. “Objects are not 'static facts' but interact with people. As much as people are in a constant state of flux, the artifacts, as material cultures, are also ever changing. with the ability to reinforce, reinvent, and renegotiate social relationships between people,”[25] Hurcombe points out, thus supporting Heinzle’s opinion on the quiet conflict between the two female characters. Hurcombe also notes that “Communication by other means is open to humans, for example speech and gesture, but objects are tangible ways in which people can interfere with the status quo,”[26] adding that material culture is extremely helpful with reading intentions from the past, because certain objects maintain their meanings and can hint at activities and their consequences through showing the ideas of agency, thus subverting us to the ideas of social communication in the re-created past. Said interferences are frequent in the German epic, when both queens are present at court they try to outdo one another in dress. This goes to such extremes that even Kriemhild’s servant-maids are dressed in eccentric garments just to fit the image of their lady and make her look wealthier and more mighty, therefore more important in the courtly light. Brunhild is not mentioned to take part in this tradition, which may once again point to the differences between the womens’ heritage. As Rodney Harrison puts it “one great advantage of adopting such a relativist pose [on material culture] (where meaning is relative to the culture or individual that produced it) is that it ought to promote greater sensitivity to the multicultural nature of our modern world,” in this case the phrase “modern world”[27] could also be applied to the Medieval/Renaissance worldview portrayed in the *Nibelungenlied*, which without a doubt can be perceived as more

[25] Linda Hurcombe. *Archaeological Artefacts as Material Culture*. pp. 103.
[26] Linda Hurcombe. *Archaeological Artefacts as Material Culture*. pp. 103.
[27] Rodney Harrison. *The Study of Objects.* Materials for a course at OpenUniversity. https://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/visual-art/an-introduction-material-culture/content-section-1.2 (retrieved: 16.06.2024).

modern than the one portrayed in the *Völsungasaga* or even the world as known by Brunhild.

In the re-created past the standards of beauty drastically differ from the ones of the modern world. Despite the mention of Brunhild's white skin and her womanly charm, there is not more detail to be known about the maiden. An incident in the first chapter of the *Nibelungenlied* sheds light on the issue. After Kriemhild's prophetic dream, which is not perceived as such due to the aforementioned reluctance towards what is paranormal, the maiden's mother tells her "You [Kriemhild] will be a beautiful woman if God blesses you with a good knight,"[28] suggesting that beauty can only be achieved through marriage. Therefore, it can be assumed that a lone woman cannot be perceived as beautiful, since she has no real value in society. In the courtly *Weltanschauung* the women have noticeably less agency then the ones in the Old-Norse text.

Even the men at court followed the new rules of fashion, they were said to wear the finest clothes a knight would need among the many heroes of the world. Heinzle also points out that the Burgundians were ascribed a special way of wearing their clothing. Mens garments would be "sawn in" in order to provide a slimmer fit and cling to the body more tightly.[29] Despite the characters being esteemed knights the court seems to follow some sort of fashion trend, possibly influenced by the French courts, or simply driven by the idea that material culture, with its oriental and ornate materials is more important than being ready for battle or spending time on activities other than hunting and lounging. Whenever they are engaged in battle the *Nibelungenlied* gives little detail of these encounters, and information is provided only on the return of the knights. Sigfried is not mentioned to take part in the courtly fashion show, however,

[28] Felix Genzmer. *Das Nibelungenlied*. pp. 7.
[29] Joachim Heinzle. *Das Nibelungenlied.* pp. 85.

given the fact that he is liked and respected by the Burgundians would suggest that he does in fact dress according to the rules. The shift in fashion from being a necessary, yet useful part of a knight's image towards the idea that it serves a purpose of establishing a place in the courtly society shows that the *Weltanschauung* in the *Nibelungenlied* and the *Völsungasaga* differ strongly in this context.

The German epic also shows a wider selection of male side characters, giving the text a more patriarchal tone, as well as exploring the ideas of courtly behavior. Women no longer truly take matters into their own hands, they seem to be surrounded by men. More said, a team of men, all of whom seem to be connected by knighthood or a strong sense of companionship. It is far less plausible that any female ideas might thrive in such a male-dominated surrounding, thus, as mentioned above, taking away their means of influencing, or even foreshadowing, the plot of the *Lied*.

The two most prevalent male figures to survive the entire plot of the epic are Gunther, the brother to Kriemhild and friend of Sigfried, as well as his most loyal companion Hagen von Tronje.

Gunther’s figure seems to mainly serve as a plot device - most of his appearances are closely connected with advancing the plot. As a persona the young king is not very decisive, and heavily relies on the actions and opinions of those close to him. A useful example is the previously mentioned episode, in which Gunther shows interest in marriage with the Queen of Iceland - Brunhild. Yet instead of proving himself worthy of marriage, the man relies on Sigfried and his excellent combat abilities to win the heart of the maiden.

It is not until late in the *Nibelungenlied* that Gunther hesitantly starts perceiving Sigfried as an opponent, however, despite the fact that he was openly insulted by Kriemhild for being lesser than Sigfried, the Burgundian does not wish to act with open

loathing towards his brother in law. At last Gunther is persuaded by his vassal Hagen to start plotting against the Nibelung hero, but only agrees to the plan in order to protect his sister. Gunther dies at the hand of his sister, who takes revenge on him for plotting against Sigfried.

Hagen von Tronje, the vassal of Gunther, is a far more resilient character in the *Nibelungenlied*. First he is introduced as a just, loyal and knowledgeable companion at the Burgundian court. Always supportive of Gunther, Hagen proves himself a great warrior with a high social status. However, his behavior changes when controversy appears at court. Whenever Brynhild reveals the secret that it was actually Sigfried, not Gunther, who had slept with the Icelandic queen, Hagen starts plotting revenge against Sigfried and his treacherous behavior, crafting a quite elaborate scheme on how to take revenge for the wrongdoing against Gunther. The vassal accomplishes his plan and mortally strikes Sigfried in the back, while on a hunting trip.

This, however, does not satisfy Hagen's disfavor of the man. The vassal becomes obsessed with the gold of the Nibelungs left behind after the deceased hero. After the treaure is brought back to Burgundy, Hagen takes it into his possession and disposes of it into the river Rhine. His actions only enrage the already infuriated Kriemhild, leading up to the final conflict between the two characters.

Notably, Kriemhild, despite her higher place at the court, still proposes to spare Hagen, speaking to him with hatred, but maintaining a fashion expected from women at court. The encounter is recalled as Kriemhild speaking "to the hero,"[30] which in this case is a disputable, yet interesting outlook on Hagen's character, which will be elaborated further in the following chapter of my thesis. Ultimately, Hagen dies,

[30] Cyril Edwards (tr.). *The Nibelungenlied: The Lay of the Nibelungs*. pp. 213.

beheaded by an enraged woman, who quickly shares the same fate for disobeying what was deemed proper.

COMPARISON BETWEEN THE *NIBELUNGENLIED* AND THE *VÖLSUNGASAGA.*

A key aspect when comparing the *Nibelungenlied* and the *Völsungasaga* is the length and thematic of both works. As discussed above, the *Nibelungenlied* focuses on a similar essential outline, however, it does not venture into the territory of the Old-Norse as much as it would be suspected. The only true mention of the North that is prevalent in the German poem is the fact that Brunhilde is said to be the Queen of Iceland and is not entirely stripped of her supernatural powers. However, another major difference between the texts is easily noted, while Brunhilde in the *Nibelungenlied* is tricked by Siegmund, the two characters never engage in an intimate relationship, as it is the case in the *Völsungasaga*. This alteration of dynamics between two key characters in the stories brings a vast shift in the development of stories. In opposition to the Old-Norse text, the *Nibelungenlied* does not present romantic conflict. The characters get married to one another without being forced to forget another, regret or immediate plans of revenge. The only situation where any of the deceitful actions of Sigfried are called upon is the moment when Kriemhild admits to owning Brunhilde's magical artifacts. This does cause a conflict, but it is significantly smaller than the one taking place in the *Völsungasaga*, where the hero's actions have far more grave consequences. The *Nibelungenlied* is kept in a more courtly manner, straying away from the controversial plotline of the Old-Norse version.

Another major difference between the two texts is the time period covered. While the *Völsungasaga* provides a full register on the Völsung family, as well as their

origin and inheritance of fate due to their names through multiple generations, the *Nibelungenlied* only focuses on one generation of characters, leaving out even more controversies, such as the birth of Sinfjotli together with the revenge arc of the children of King Völsung. Also, in the German version there is no mention of Odin, or any other god, the family could include in their bloodline. The only part, which is kept fairly accurately is the placement of certain countries and the conflicts between them. It seems that the *Nibelungenlied* is attempting to create a different story around the same historical events the *Völsungasaga* does. Prevalent in both is the motif of killing the dragon, however, the outcome is drastically different in the two versions. According to the German poem, the hero bathes in the dragon's blood, which makes him immune to physical damage, aside from one spot on his back he was unable to reach. The Old-Norse version not only tells the whole process and backstory of Fafnir, but also goes through the process of Sigurđ eating the dragon's heart and drinking its blood in order to gain knowledge, instead of physical might. Otfried Ehrismann in his research points out, what he calls "the events of the Heroic Time" claiming that through the existent ties to other texts of similar nature – including the Old-Norse Eddaic texts – and latin texts such as the *Chronica Gallica*[31] - a collection of manuscripts wchich survived from the 5th and 6th century in Gaul - scholars try to attempt the proper historical placement of the *Nibelungenlied* in a timeline. Ehrismann does, however, take into consideration the existence of a "fantastic timeline" created by the poets, whilst still trying to prove the 5th century origins of the *Nibelungenlied* to have a historical identification with the region of Burgundy.[32]

[31] R. W. Burgess (tr). *The Gallic Chronicle of 452: A New Critical Edition with a Brief Introduction.* [In:] Society and Culture in Late Antique Gaul. Revisiting the Sources. (2001). https://www.academia.edu/93364324/4_The_Gallic_Chronicle_of_452_A_New_Critical_Edition_with_a_Brief_Introduction (retrieved: 25.06.2024).
[32] Otfried Ehrismann. *Nibelungenlied. Epoche-Werk-Wirkung*. pp. 64-65.

Researchers have tried to add more context to the events shown in the German epic, through drawing from the events presented in the Old-Norse Eddic Poems. Whereas, this is not wrong, since the texts do seem to come from a common root and it is fundamental to perceive the two texts as related, such additions to the text oftentimes seem confusing, because the characters are not only named differently, but also the exact actions displayed in the *Völsungasaga* and the Eddic Poems connected to it are utterly inconsistent with the reality presented in the *Niebelungenlied*. As Sowinski notes in the afterword of Genzmers translation: "the changes in the way of narrating the *Nibelungenlied* [...] deconstruct parts of the epic, making situations such as Gunther's will to marry Brynhild seem barely motivated."[33]

One of the leading questions posed while reading the *Nibelungenlied* is Siegfriend's death. It is never referred to as a murder, however, it is also not a regular death that one might expect from this type of poem. The *Nibelungenlied* is supposed to serve as a manifest of the German life at court at the given time. Siegrfried is there to represent the values of virtue and grace, reflecting upon the courtly preferences at the time. Hagen, on the other hand, serves as a personification of revenge. The two characters are there to display the key values of their times and to show how revenge can never serve as an equal value to righteous and brave behavior from another person. Winder McConnel points out that the death of Sigfried seemed to not be influential on the Burgundians, so Hagen's deed might have been perceived as an act of heroism and built up his reputation as a great warrior.[34] Through its violence the *Nibelungenlied* looks toward the past, and the people of the earlier times, rather than the courtly behavior of the knightly ideals it claims to take from.[35] Bernhard Sowinski notices the overlap in elements between the two sagas, agreeing that the *Nibelungenlied* is inspired

[33] Bernhard Sowinski. "Afterword". [In:] Felix Genzmer (tr.). *Das Nibelungenlied*. pp. 396.
[34] Winder McConnell. *The Nibelungenlied*. Boston: Twayne Publishers. (1984). pp. 35.
[35] Felix Genzmer (tr.). *Das Nibelungenlied*. pp. 386.

by world stemming from the north of Europe and recognizes the mirroring elements, however, he also notes that the the *Völsungasaga* contains many more elements providing context for the actions presented in the German epic.[36]

POSSIBLE HISTORICAL REASONS FOR CHANGES IN THE TEXTS

There are a number of historical reasons for the texts' alterations identified by various scholars. Otfrid Ehrisman, for one, points to the structure of the *Nibelungenlied* as one of the problems in clear interpretation and research of the work. He argues that the disproportions between Part 1 "The Death of Sigurđ" – taking up 19 of 38 chapters in the poem, however with very little text – and Part 2 "The Need of the Niblungs" also known as "The Book of Kriemhild" structurally cause, as Ehrisman calls it "a disproportion and mirroring of a certain disharmony in the world,"[37] causing the text to have varying amounts of years pass between each chapter, which in turn does not overlap with what is called a traditional *Zweiteilung* (a split of the text in two equal halves). The same issue also causes a certain lack of harmony between the contents of the text and the caesura used in the composition of the poem itself.

Further problems connected to the structure and focus of the text have arisen in later periods. The early classification of the *Nibelungenlied* as an epos was obvious to researchers, as the story deals with the achievements of Sigfried, a well-known and great warrior as well as the fall of the Nibelungs is described in the text. However, researcher Josef Körner argued for a different way of approaching the *Nibelungenlied*. Around 1921 he spoke of it as an *Entwicklungsroman*, so a novel following the maturing of Kriemhild, explaining that "an epic individual is not principally capable of

[36] Bernhard Sowinski. "Afterword". pp. 390-392.
[37] Otfried Ehrismann. *Nibelungenlied. Epoche-Werk-Wirkung*, pp. 211.

thinking about alternative outcomes of a situation,"[38] whereas Kriemhilds abilities to plot against her family and court breaks the format of a typical epic. According to Andreas Heusler, instead of dealing with a truly Homeric epic, scientists have been concerned with a "Kriemhild-novel" or, as Heusler originally names it, a *Kriemhildenroman*.[39] The use of the word *roman* has changed its meaning in Germany throughout the times. In examples of modern literature the term is used to describe a novel, even though in the times of the *Nibelungenlied* the word was still connected to romantic situations and stories of separated love,[40] being linked to the Arthurian romance. Despite Krymhild being the first character to be introduced in the German epic an important question arises: is the woman truly the driving force of all that happens in the epic? Is the death of Sigfried meant to push her narrative, driving the character forward in order to accentuate her personal journey? As much as courtly romance elements are present in the *Nibelungenlied*, in my opinion it is still Sigfried, his deeds, greatness and treasure, which is the leading aspect of the narrative. As an epos the German text is, as Ehrisman puts it "married"[41] to the elements of courtly romance, thus mixing the two genres, nevertheless still not, at least in its entirety, losing or abandoning the elements of a heroic epic. Cyril Edwards notices the presence of those elements: "The consequence of the bathing in the blood is Svirit's (Siegmund's) supernatural strength; both this and the corresponding physical powers of Prünhilt (Brunhilde) mark these as characters who would be out of place in contemporary courtly literature."[42] At the same time the researcher notices that the warfare in the *Nibelungenlied* is characteristic to a time period close to the late 11th century or

[38] Otfried Ehrismann after Josef Körner. *Nibelungenlied.* pp. 227.
[39] Otfried Ehrismann after Andreas Heusler. *Nibelungenlied.* pp. 234.
[40] Bernhard D. Haage. *Medizin und Dichtung (Mittelalter).* [In:] Werner E. Gerabek (et al.). *Enzyklopädie Medizingeschichte*. Berlin: De Gruyter. (2005). pp. 929.
[41] Otfried Ehrismann. *Nibelungenlied. Epoche-Werk-Wirkung*. pp. 228.
[42] Cyril Edwards (tr.). *The Nibelungenlied: The Lay of the Nibelungs.* pp. xvi.

onwards, since it involves elements such as jousting one-on-one, which is a courtly behavior well known from tournaments in Arthurian romance. The motif of the promised bride, which later on becomes the catalyst of a tragic death is skipped entirely, or as Sowinski puts it: "hidden between the lines."[43]

It is hard to prove a truly Germanic origin for the text, since the *Nibelungenlied* was lost for a long period of time and resurfaced again, however, showing only remains of what once was a Germanic dream of heroism, according to Ehrisman "the idea meant to impress was one oriented towards Christianity. The *Niebelungenlied* is an epic set in a Christian day, but it is neither truly Christianic, nor pagan."[44] The scholar also claims that there is no clear evidence of reconstructing a Germanic "ideal-ethic", thus the epic does not allow for a clear reading of its religious intentions. Furthermore, the poet is said to lean towards neutral to Christian-friendly ideas, but whenever they bring any traditional epic elements into the text, from context the reader is unable to tell whether said parts are claimed to be a heroic model or rather a warning against actions such as the ones presented in the *Nibelungenlied*.[45] As far as Sigfried is recognized as a neutral character to scholars wishing to interpret the *Nibelungenlied* through a Christian lens, excused by the fact that his character was said to be a Christian, yet, chose to live his life as a man without God, Kriemhild is identified negatively, to some point even demonized. Her wish of revenge is seen as sin, nonetheless, the suffering she undergoes while being widowed are factors frequently stressed as an excuse for her actions. Ethically speaking, according to Ehrismann "Kriemhild is still not in the wrong despite having chosen revenge."[46]

[43] Bernhard Sowinski. "Afterword". pp. 392.
[44] Felix Genzmer (tr.). *Das Nibelungenlied*. pp. 235.
[45] Otfried Ehrismann. *Das Nibelungenlied*. pp. 235.
[46] Otfried Ehrismann. *Das Nibelungenlied*. pp. 240.

Bearing in mind the points investigated above, the *Nibelungenlied* presents itself as a complicated source material to work with, having undergone multiple changes, as well as disappearing for a long period of time. It is thus unclear how to approach the epic whilst trying to interpret it correctly. Moreover, it seems that a precise interpretation of the work does not exist, considering how many paths scholars have taken while analyzing the manuscript.

LOF AND *WYRD* IN THE NIBELUNGENLIED

Otfried Ehrismann claims that it is absolutely impossible to apply the concept of *wyrd* onto the *Niebelungenlied*. He is of the opinion that "the voice of fate is not present in the *Nibelungenlied*; in it [the *Nibelungenlied*] there is no more fate, but there is tragedy."[47] Therefore an attempt at finding *wyrd* in the text is impossible. However, the characters of the *Nibelungenlied* are very often tempted to commit actions which can be called *lof*.

The first instance of *lof* in the *Nibelungenlied* is Sigfried's urge to marry Kriemhild. Other than him wanting to do so, there are no duties binding him to the act. The young royal, already well known for his actions, chooses to go to war with the Burgunds, but ultimately joins them and marries the lady.

Gunther, in his actions, shows *lof* as well. His need to marry the Queen of Iceland – Brunhilde is stronger than his sense of honesty. Instead of testing his might, Gunther chooses to trick the woman with the help of Sigfried, who agrees to do so. Sigfried in this case is not persuaded by magic, alliances or anything. Gunther's wish is the only thing that causes the hero to agree to this plan.

[47] Otfried Ehrismann. *Nibelungenlied.* pp. 234.

Brunhilde too has ambitions of her own. Seeing Sigfried and Kriemhild happy does not please the Icelandic Queen, after she realizes that the couple is not one of her subjects, but owns their own lands and are her equals. The situation leads to a pride-based argument in which all of the sides act as they wish, looking only for their own benefit. Even Kriemhild, the seemingly least prideful character chooses to insult Brunhilde, bringing up the topic of her wedding night, when the clueless Queen was once again tricked by Gunther and Sigfried. Hagen is taken aback by such insults and swears to kill Sigfried for the allegation. In this particular situation all characters display examples of *lof*, through being too prideful to stand down or avoid conflict. It might be argued that only Hagen acts accordingly, putting the good name of his Queen before his own needs, but ultimately since only fate presents an opportunity for heroism.[48] Thus, considering Ehrismann's view on fate in the epic overall, the situation presents itself as rather tragic, without bringing any solutions or underlining any character's bravery. All of the parties actively involved in the conflict behave selfishly, without considering an alternative.

Another example is Sigfried, who during the hunting trip is led away from the rest, persuaded by Hagen to look for special prey, since the Völsung is a hero, not a regular man. Deceived by the praise The protagonist follows the man with no hesitation, most likely enjoying the words of praise. Sigfried agrees to the more "elite" hunt, once again showing *lof* in his behavior. Instead of staying with the rest of the hunting party, he decides to wander off in order to seek better, implying that he deserves special treatment. This leads to terrible consequences for the Völsung, because Hagen ends his life through piercing Sigfried's back with a spear. This is not heroic behavior for both of the men. The Völsung dies without a fight, hit in his only vulnerable spot, without even

[48] Stephanie Gropper. *Fate*. pp. 199.

being able to look his killer in the eyes. Hagen's actions can be called cowardly, since he does not dare to openly attack Sigfried, knowing he might lose. Instead the Burgund chooses to stab his enemy in the back, once again avoiding any sort of eye contact with the victim. The only redeeming action is Hagen openly admitting to Kriemhild that he is the one who killed Sigfried. However, the swordsman seems to be proud of his action, assuring himself that his actions were justified, considering the offense of Queen Brunhilde. This could be considered a heroic action if Hagen would not conceal his true intentions under the cover of avenging his Queen's pride. What the swordsman truly desires is the treasure of the Völsungs, therefore as soon as Kriemhild decides to bring the treasure to her, Hagen steals it and drowns it in a river, so nobody except him knows where it is.

Kriemhild's need for revenge exceeds any other, as the woman plots against her enemies for years, acting as if she has forgiven them. Her plans, however, represent her needs, when she marries Etzel, governed not by love, but the power the King has. Kriemhild uses that power to persuade troops to join her cause and after 26 years gets her revenge on whom she considers the enemies of Sigfried. By killing her own brother as well as Hagen, she is merciless. The woman does not seem to be acting out of love or need for revenge anymore, rather than because of her own ambition and a grudge she had concealed for years. Her death is not heroic in any way. Kriemhild does not recognize her revenge as accomplished and it is unclear what else she would have in mind were she not killed for her behavior.

ARTIFACTS IN THE *NIBELUNGENLIED*

Whereas the placing and use of artifacts in the V*ölsungasaga* is frequent and very straightforward, with every item having a specific origin or purpose, such as the sword Gram, or Grani - the hero's loyal steed, unfortunately it is not the case in the *Nibelungenlied*. Joachim Heinzle analyzes the multiple variants of "prequel stories" to the courtly text, and finds that it is not exactly possible to place the origin of items. As an example he gives the sword Balmung, as well as the invisibility cloak, which is used many times throughout the *Nibelungenlied* in order to deceive characters without the use of magic outright. Heinzle recalls an episode, most likely strongly inspired by the Norse stories, where Sigfried comes into possession of the artifacts through defeating a dragon.[49] This version is highly popular with interpretations displayed in modern media adaptations of the story, such as the episodical "Dark Kingdom: The Dragon King" or it's alternative title "Die Nibelungen", a very well-received German rendition of the story of Sigfried the Niblung, premiered in 2004.[50] The film became very popular amongst audiences outside of Germany and, in consequence, sparked a lot of interest in the *Nibelungenlied*.

However, other versions of the story include the sword being forged by dwarves,[51] therefore it is impossible to form an exact theory of the weapons origin. Nonetheless, Balmung plays a crucial role in the story of Sigfried, serving as a tool for protection, and ultimately becoming his owner's demise. The sword also bears emotional value, carrying stories of love, betrayal and downfall of kings and queens. Despite the lack of proper exposition, modern adaptations, as well as artists providing

[49] Joachim Heinzle. *Die Nibelungen. Lied und Sage*. Darmstadt: Primus Verlag. 2012. pp. 11.
[50] "Dark Kingdom: The Dragon King." Directed by Uli Edel. Produced by: Rola Bauer, Andreas Schmid, Konstantin Thoeren. 2004.
[51] Joachim Heinzle. *Die Nibelungen. Lied und Sage*. pp. 11.

illustrations for various works about the *Nibelungenlied* seem to be particularly drawn to the image of Balmung, which now serves as an image of heroism, passion and fearlessness.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has expanded on the idea of the German epic, showing the major differences between the text of the *Nibelungenlied* and the story presented in the Old-Norse version. The heroes in each of the text have been compared in terms of *lof* and *wyrd*, as well as their behavior in similar situations they have both encountered. The main issues, such as the portrayal of women and the courtly environment in the text of the epic have been introduced and elaborated on, reaching the conclusion that the *Nibelungenlied* allowed for much less female agency, or when that agency was present it was not accepted the way it was in the Old-Norse text. The *Nibelungenlied*, however, visibly linked to its Nordic predecessor shows ideas rooted in a time period, however, is still heavily influenced by its nordic predecessor, relying on Old-Norse texts for background information for more context to the German epic. The *Nibelungenlied* noticeably strays away from pagan ideas, twisting them into far less aggressive ways of expression and ascribes them to a wider array of characters. Nevertheless, both stories have overlapping episodes and deal with issues such as power struggle, loyalty and heroism. I have also demonstrated that in both versions artifacts play a notable role, which is presented on different levels of importance, nonetheless introducing iconic elements to both narratives.

CHAPTER 4

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this chapter is to analyze the cultural impact of the *Nibelungenlied* and the *Völsungasaga* in order to see if the source material still serves as inspiration today. In order to achieve that, this chapter will look at notable examples of works based on the epic and the saga, pointing out their affinities and differences. A special focus will be put on the "*Ring Cycle*" by Richard Wagner as well as the works of J.R.R. Tolkien. Moreover, a closer look at the Arthurian sagas/romances will be taken to ultimately establish which of the works drew inspiration from the others, and what the main dissimilarities are. Thich chapter will also examine the evolving image of the hero throughout the years to prove that it has changed over time, showing the differences between the more classic and modern perception. Moreover, the chapter will explore overlapping ideas and motifs, going in depth of how and why they are investigated in certain ways. Lastly, continuing what was previously briefly mentioned in the previous chapter of this thesis, this chapter will provide an insight into new renditions inspired by the *Nibelungenlied* and *Völsungasaga*, demonstrating that there is still interest in the source materials.

AN INTRODUCTION TO WAGNER'S RING CYCLE

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the *Nibelungenlied* earned the title of Germany's national ethos, consequently, the newly achieved status, as well as the rise in its popularity have lifted up its literary and cultural "value". Richard Wagner, a German dramatic composer and theorist, who was known for his very influential operas[1] showed his interest in the piece. Wagner broadened the German epic into a work of tremendous scale, starting by composing a musical spectacle about Sigfried, later further exploring the story it in his widely known cycle of epic music dramas "The Ring Cycle." The Cycle is, in its final form, composed of four separate dramas, each related to both the *Völsungasaga* and the *Nibelungenlied*. At first Wagner wrote two parts of the opera, later enlarging it with two more in order to complete the storyline. The full cycle of Wagner's work is viewed over a span of four (or more days) and is rarely played as a whole, but rather broken into individual pieces to be performed, where information about what happens in the previous or later operas is supplied to the viewer.[2] The characters of the operas seem to be primarily taken from the German epic, however, Wagner did not hesitate to put the Germanic version of the Norse gods into play as well. Additionally, part of the materials used in - especially the first part - the opera is directly taken from the Norse source, namely the *Poetic Edda*. To some extent the story is directly taken from the *Nibelungenlied*, others parts are changed to either fit the Norse influences or Wagner's artistic idea. For example, the already ambiguous figure of Hagen is even more complex in Wagner's work. Philosopher Slavoj Žižek comments that "although initially depicted as a dark plotter, both in the *Nibelungenlied* and Fritz Lang's film [...] he [Hagen] emerges as the ultimate hero of the entire work."[3] This statement is further backed up by the claim that Hagen's life ends in a supreme case of *Nibelungentreue* (the

[1] https://www.britannica.com/biography/Richard-Wagner-German-composer
[2] Richard Wagner. "Wagner – Ring Cycle". Classic FM. 2020. Retrieved 12 September 2020.
[3] Slavoj Žižek. "Foreword". [In:] Theodor Adorno. *In Search of Wagner*. London: Verso. (2009). pp. xii.

Nibelung loyalty), so fidelity to death for one's cause. In the case of Hagen it is rather fidelity to his master, who impersonates the cause. Thus, Žižek poses the question if Wagner "belongs to the modern epoch of freedom"[4] and therefore depicts Hagen in a bad light, after all the philosopher believes that "Hagen stands [...] for a suspension of morality on behalf of fidelity,"[5] making him the ultimate retinue. Theodor Adorno seems to agree with Žižek, commenting on the "ambiguous figures such as Hagen, who is both 'warrior' and traitor;"[6] however, this can be interpreted against Žižeks idea, undermining Hagens heroism. In the opera the character of Hagen is loyal only to Gunther, nevertheless, it is revealed that his deepest loyalty is the one in his blood. In Wagner's rendition of *The Nibelungenlied*, Hagen is a direct descendant of Albreich of Nibelheim - the irrevocable enemy of our main heroes and the thief of the guarded Rheinegold, the topic of which will be expanded on below. Adorno mentions Sigfried as the "faithless faithful,"[7] which on the other hand perfectly agrees with the image of Sigfried in the *Nibelungenlied*, where he is assumed to be Christian, but the topic is never addressed directly – as mentioned in chapter 3.

Moreover, Adorno also believes that ambiguity in characters causes the elevation to "the category of the 'interesting' as opposed to logicality in of musical language,"[8] indicating that such sentiments had previously not been used in Classicism. However, Adorno continues in his analysis: "[...] Wagner's work – his impotence in the face of the technical contradictions and the social conflicts underlying them [...] prompted his contemporaries to speak about 'decadence' – is also the path of artistic progress."[9]

[4] Slavoj Žižek. "Foreword". [In:] Theodor Adorno. *In Search of Wagner.* pp. xiii.
[5] Theodor Adorno. *In Search of Wagner*.
[6] Theodor Adorno. *In Search of Wagner*. pp. 33.
[7] Theodor Adorno. *In Search of Wagner*. pp. 33.
[8] Theodor Adorno. *In Search of Wagner*. pp. 33.
[9] Theodor Adorno. *In Search of Wagner*. pp. 34.

Importantly, Adorno criticizes Wagner for the use of "primitive" ideas in his operas. As a general comment on the Ring Cycle, Adorno observes: "The more triumphantly Wagner's music resounds, the less capable it is of discovering an enemy to subdue within itself; the triumphant cries of bourgeois victory always drowned out its mendacious claims to have done heroic deeds. It is precisely the absence of any dialectical material on which it could prove itself that condemns the Wagnerian totality to mere duration. It is evident that motifs like that of the sword or Sigfried's horn cannot be mastered by any artistic form: the criticism that he has no melodic inventiveness refers less to a failing of the subjective imagination than to lack an objective,"[10] whilst the horn refers only to inaccurate historical depiction of the characters "from the Viking Age", the rest of the comment is unmistakable critique. What is more, Adorno notices that "Thus the constant concern for vividness and effect that induces Wagner to employ signal-like motive actually leads to a lack of vividness and to technical inconsistency."[11] The signal-like motive in Wagner can be interpreted as an attempt to write music that would go closer together with the narrative, somewhat fashioning the melody after the sounds of horns and drums, which would be heard when Vikings were around. Nonetheless, Adorno finds Wagner's *Ring Cycle* to be confined, obvious and primitive, but never clearly says that the work is bad or does not deserve its fame. Adorno hesitantly admits "Act III of Sigfried and on occasion in The Valkyrie, Wagner does in fact achieve a hitherto unprecedented melodic flexibility: as if the melodic impulse had liberated itself from the fetters of the small-scale period, as if the force of urgency and expression surged far beyond the bounds of conventional structures and symmetrical proportions."[12] It is very likely that the aforementioned "primitivity" of Wagner's piece is what maintains its popularity with the public up till this day. Instead of arguing about the musical values of the

[10] Theodor Adorno. *In Search for Wagner.* pp. 41-42.
[11] Theodor Adorno. *In Search for Wagner.* pp. 42.
[12] Theodor Adorno. *In Search for Wagner.* pp. 45.

Ring Cycle, a look on how the story is presented is in order, so to shed light on Wagner's narrations and the differences to the source materials analyzed in chapters two and three.

In Wagner's time the Ring Cycle far exceeded the norms and expectations imposed upon musical pieces, moreover, his character work was curious, since while creating the individualities the composer gave them flaws and inconsistencies, visible from the very first acts of the opera. These flaws, for example Wodan's (Odin's) indecisiveness bring out a human aspect of the gods, but also encourage the audience to inquire and try to interpret the material by understanding the driving forces behind the protagonists' actions.

Wagner's characters, according to Adorno, achieve "an unprecedented melodic flexibility [...] as if the force of urgency and expression surged far beyond the bounds of conventional structures and symmetrical proportions."[13] Through this asymmetry Wagner achieves an effect similar to the one in the *Niebelungenlied*, where the split between parts, which may seem equal in numbers, is not in fact equal in pages. As already considered in chapter three, the most relevant plot line focuses on courtly affairs and alliances. This imbalance can be viewed as a universal problem, concerning both the structure and interpretation of the work, but to find this process repeated in a musical adaptation of the story is unexpected. Despite that, Wagner, having composed four parts of the Ring Cycle, is closer to explaining the lore of the Nibelungen-World than the German epic. Nonetheless, both works of art are heavily influenced by the Norse *Völsungasaga*, and undoubtedly also reach deeper into the Eddic poems to establish certain elements, especially the focus on the motif of the ring, which in the Norse saga is only briefly mentioned, but has become much more prominent, especially in Wagner's operas.

[13] Theodor Adorno. *In Search for Wagner.* pp. 45.

In the *Ring Cycle* Wagner uses each of the parts to highlight a different set of ideas and persons. The initial part of the operas strongly focuses on showing and introducing the audience to the world of the Norse gods. Despite the author using their German names it is easy to follow along with the heroes, who appear on stage. The source texts analyzed in the previous chapters require prior knowledge about the world of the gods, if any are involved, which in the case of the *Nibelungenlied* has proven unlikely. Wagner, however, puts in a tremendous amount of effort to make the gods fully fleshed-out characters, whose intentions and drives are clearly understood. Nevertheless, changes occur in the story told. Wodan (Odin) favors Sigmund and Sieglinde, but with time his intentions change.

The first part of the opera heavily concentrates on the introduction of the Rheingold, which is not the case in the source materials. Wagner, in extreme detail, depicts how the three Nymphs - possibly a mirror image of the three Fates in Old-Norse myth - protect the gold from the hands of the greedy. Between themselves they discuss the power that lies in the gold and how it can be used to manipulate and control others when in possession of the treasure. The dwarf Albreich of Nibelheim overhears the conversation and manages to trick the Nyphs and gain the gold for himself. Instead of only showing the hunger for power, Wagner's characters make their intentions clear in words. Albreich admits that for ultimate power he has abandoned love and left behind everything that was once valuable to him. He proceeds to enslave a dwarf called Mime, who is able to craft artifacts from the gold. Mime is the Wagnerian counterpart of Regin in the *Völsungasaga*. In the likes of Regin, Mime also takes care of the young Sigfried (Sigurđ) the Wölsung[14] and encourages the young hero to kill the dragon Fafner, protector of the horde of gold. Mime also gives up that in order to forge together Notung, the magical sword, this has to be done by a man without no fear. Similarly to the *Völsungasaga* the blade is an heirloom passed on from the fallen father of the hero.

[14] Wagner changes the name of the protagonist to an easier and more German-looking Wölsung.

The second part of the opera puts the Valkyrie Brunhilde center stage, who is torn by Wodan's change of heart. Whilst the Old-Norse saga never openly mentions the fall of the maiden, Wagner explains that she had acted against her father's wishes, thus she was cast out from Valhalla. It is openly revealed that the Valkyrie deeply cares for the Wölsung family. She decides not to harm them, which is against Wodan's instructions. The god ultimately agrees to encircle the Valkyrie with the Ring of Fire, so no ordinary man could find her and take her as his wife.

The third part of the opera mostly concerns Sigfried. Part of his story, more distinctly the killing of the dragon I have mentioned above. The rest of the fragment focuses on the hero growing up and learning about the differences between bravery and stupidity. This distinction is mentioned multiple times, as if being a chorus to the ongoing events.

Parallel to the events of the source stories Sigfried and Brunhilde cross paths and exchange vows. However, it is distinctly shown how much love for the young Wölsung already exists in the heart of the Valkyrie - Brunhilde admits to herself that she has loved Sigfried even before he was born, the love started when the brave woman saved the Wölsung's mother from imminent death that would come upon her as wrath of the enraged gods.

Only in the last, the fourth, part of the opera the characters of Gunter, Gudrune and Hagen appear. The events exposed in this section of the opera are nearly identical to the ones in the *Nibelungenlied*. The only major difference is that Gudrune herself is a powerful sorceress, who tricks Sigfried into forgetting the vows he gave to Brunhilde. Sigfried, knowing of the destructive powers of the ring, continues to enjoy his power. Despite that, eventually Gudrune's spell breaks and the Wölsung becomes aware of what has happened. Just as in the German epic, Sigfried is killed through a mortal blow in the back. His killer is Hagen, who unlike in the other versions of the story is revealed to be a Niflung, wanting to

re-claim Albreich's power and rule over everyone. Hagen is also the one to kill Gunter. Contrary to what happens in the *Nibelungenlied* and *the Völsungasaga*, Wagner's opera ends with Brunhilde creating a funeral pyre for her true love. Her and Grane[15], the trusty steed that accompanied her and Sigfried throughout the events of the *Ring Cycle* burn on the pyre together with the Wölsung's corpse. Through this act of courage the Valkyrie causes the end of the world of the gods and returns the Nibelung gold to the Rhinemaidens, who swear to never let it see the light of day again.

THE MOTIF OF THE CURSED GOLD

All of the texts mentioned up to this point have a motif of gold and wealth, which is usually accompanied by some sort of curse. However, depending on which of the stories we examine, details about the stack of gold vary. Moreover, alterations can be found when it comes to the contents of the gold, oftentimes specific items of supernatural power are retrieved from the treasure.

In the following section I wish to examine the functions of this motif in the *Völsungasaga*, the *Nibelungenlied* and *The Ring Cycle*.

In the *Völsungasaga* the treasure is mentioned only briefly. It is said that Sigurđ obtains a horde of gold after killing Fafnir. The hero's faithfull horse helps carry the treasure. However, when it comes to the origin of the gold, the reader is only briefly informed about a very short incident with the gods encountering a couple of characters that Sigurđ meets later on in the story. The episode concerning the death of Ottar, one of the monstrous brothers of Fafnir is presented as a side episode, seemingly not important to the events mentioned in the *Völsungasaga*. In his translation, Jackson Crawford references an Eddic poem, without

[15] Originally Grani. Wagner once again decides to change spelling.

clearly stating a reason as to why such an occurrence takes place in a Norse text presented as a separate manuscript. In this case it seems to be connected to the general knowledge and understanding of how events mentioned in both saga and poetic verse closely concern each other, stories of gods and their closest relatives, or events crucial to the Old-Norse history and world creation. Consequently, there is little or no mention of the cursed ring in the *Völsungasaga*. There is no evident weight put onto the meaning of the Niflung Ring; what is more, the ring does not even appear in Jackson Crawford's translation between the enlisted artifacts Sigurđ chooses to make his own after having killed Fafnir. Apart from a swift mention occurring as additional content, in this case it is a retrospect telling the story of how Fafnir came into the ownership of the gold. It is mentioned that "Odin took the ring Andvaranaut and covered [Otter's] whisker with it,"[16] Loki subsequently noted that he saw no good in the future of whomever this gold will belong to. The focus, however, is given to the family politics and their tragic and heroic story, rather than being shifted towards an artifact only briefly refered to and recovered without full recognition of the fact.

Nevertheless, the meaning of rings in Norse culture is the complete opposite of what we observe in the *Völsungasaga*. Rings in their various forms were used to celebrate heroic deeds, would serve as tokens of bravery, as well as imply financial and social status. According to David Day "no people in history were as obsessed with the power of the ring as the Vikings."[17] Day makes a similar observation to the one mentioned above when it comes to the meaning of rings in Norse culture. He adds that under the sign of the ring people would chart unknown territory, make oaths, make generous gifts, but most extremely - would even die or be sacrificed for a token of that sort. The need for power and eternal fame was strong in the northern cultures, and had multiple texts and poems. James Graham-Campbell and John Sheehan composed an entire paper based on the archeological findings of arm-rings

[16] Jackson Crawford. *The Saga of the Völsungs*. pp. 26.
[17] David Day. *The Ring Legends of Tolkien*. London: Octopus Publishing. 2020. pp. 30.

stored in the British Museum, where they conclude with the claim that arm-rings constitute a significant amount of riches found, which can be traced back to the Viking Age.[18] Other traditions worth mentioning are the so-called *heitstrenging*,[19] or as it is translated into English the "ring of a solemn vow". That type of vow was usually taken by heroes in the light of important events and did not always require a physical arm-ring to swear to, an example we observe in the poem *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*,[20] which Bellows translated as follows: "That evening the great vows were taken; the sacred boar was brought in, the men laid their hands thereon, and took their vows at the king's toast."[21] Based on Bellows' translation it can be stated that any sort of vow taken was treated with honor and respect, however having a visual representation of said promise was popular. The following part of the paper will not, however, revisit the *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, as it is of no importance to the topic of the thesis, but has served as a good example in presenting the importance of the Old-Norse oath. Similar traditions are carried over to the English literature canon, where oaths sworn on rings are still a tradition depicted in *Beowulf*, where it is possible to find the kenning "ring-giver"[22] in regard to a ruler, who would award his warriors with arm or neck rings for their service in battle.

In the *Nibelungenlied* the gold of the Niflungs is much more prominent in the story. It seems to be general knowledge that the river Rhein holds a hoard of gold. Similarly to its Old-Norse counterpart, the origin of the gold is shrouded in mystery. It is stated that Sigfried had won the gold in one of his many voyages. Mirroring the story from the *Völsungasaga*, the hero defeats an ancient enemy - this time the dwarf Albreich, and takes from him tokens in

[18] James Graham-Campbell, John Sheehan. *A hoard of Hiberno-Viking arm-rings, probably from Scotland*. Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland number 125. Edinburgh. (1995).
[19] "Old-Norse Dictionary - Heit-strengja". *Cleasby & Vigfusson - Old-Norse Dictionary*. Retrieved 16 December 2022.
[20] Henry Adam Bellows. *The Poetic Edda: The mythological poems*. 2004. Available at https://sacred-texts.com/neu/poe/index.htm [retrieved 30.04.2024].
[21] Henry Adam Bellows. *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* [In:] *The Poetic Edda.* Chapter IV, stanza 30. Available at: https://sacred-texts.com/neu/poe/poe18.htm [retrieved 30.04.2024].
[22] Anonymous. *Beowulf*. XLI. line 102. Accessed through Project Gutenberg. [retrieveded: 03.05.2024]

the form of supernatural items: a cloak of invisibility and a sword called Balmung.[23] Through this deed Sigfried becomes the master of the hoard of gold, called the Nibelung gold. The gold, already known for its evil influence, is kept safe in the river Rhine.

Henceforth, in this rendition of the story the reader does not recieve a story of gods and their mishaps. In the courtly epic, higher power, other than fate or prophecy through dream, can hardly be spotted. Nonetheless, after Sigfried's death, when the gold is transported to the Burgundian court, there is a general premonition that the Rhein-gold is cursed. As previously mentioned it seems to be knowledge gained prior to the events of the *Nibelungenlied*. What is more, most of the people at court do not wish to have the treasure transported anywhere, proceeding with caution around the pile. In truth, it is only Hagen, who demands the gold to be transported. As mentioned in chapter two, von Tronje was never truly on Siegfired's side, always looking for the opportunity to belittle, call out, or even kill the hero. This dissertation has previously made a comparison of the two male characters, but has never questioned whether the two have compared the other to themself. Based on Hagen's overbearing need to oversee and own the Nibelung gold it seems that he has wanted all the things Sigfried had before his death. His craving for the power he would hold when owning the gold was stronger than his sense of righteousness or any logical thinking he displayed prior to this moment in the story. However, Hagen did not consider the curse that befell the owner of the gold, thus, quickly meeting his end by the hands of the distraught Kriemhild.

The Ring Cycle may not exactly follow the German epic's narrative, but they are without doubt alike in their creative use of asymmetry. As previously observed, Wagner manages to introduce changes into both the Old-Norse as well as the German version of the text; he is, however, not copying any of them, but decides on his own structure and ideas. In the Ring Cycle, the composer draws from both sources, as well as the eddic poems to

[23] David Day. *The Ring Legends of Tolkien*. pp. 163.

introduce the story in another variant, which can be considered the ultimate story of the Rhein-gold. On the other hand, the Old-Norse story never offers any closure to the story of Andvaranaut, the cursed ring. However, upon further consideration the ring does not play as significant of a role in the Wölsung family saga, thus is lost or simply not mentioned again.

In contrast to the previous texts, in Wagner's cycle of operas gold is put center stage. Wagner introduces the story of the gold in the river Rhine, by focusing the entire first cycle-part on the lore of the land. The Rhine is guarded by three Nymphs, who are partly trickster characters, so their words can be deceitful or provocative depending on the topic they speak of. There is a mention of a hoard of gold buried under the waves of the river, shortly after the Nymphs sing a multi-layered piece on how that gold, with the right magical skill and an ancient spell could be forged into a powerful artifact that could help the owner control other people's minds, however, it would come with a great price.

The Nymphs' story is quickly overheard by a mysterious man, who is later revealed to be Albreich of Nibelheim. Niebelheim is described very closely to the Norse realm of Niflheim - it is said to be a cold and unfriendly place, where no good can survive and only evil chooses to roam there. In Old-Norse mythology Niflheim is governed by the goddess Hel, who collects the souls of the dead, namely the ones who did not die gloriously in battle or another heroic deed, and is treated with the respects of any land of the dead. In the Ring Cycle Nibelheim does not house the dead, yet ultimately no clear distinction is made whether or not the evil inhabitants of Wagner's vision are in fact considered dead. Nevertheless, the Nymphs do not kindly receive Albreich, repeatedly warning him of the sorrows the gold would bring.

The man does not seem impressed by the women's words, because women are seen as lesser beings and are said to be especially potent to the magical ring's influences. The Nibelung hastily admits that he had previously taken actions that had cost him a great deal,

giving up love for the sake of power. His mission is to seize the gold, use the right magic spell on it and gain supreme power over all other inhabitants of the world. To the surprise of the gods and Nymphs, the man is able to retrieve and transform the gold into a ring of power. The rest of the gold is given to a dwarf, Mime, who - obeying the words of the ring's master - crafts it into a magical helmet, allowing the owner to shapeshift and become invisible. This ability is, as mentioned above, also ascribed to the magical cloaks found in the treasures of both the *Völsungasaga* and the *Nibelungenlied*.

In possession of the ring and helmet, Albreich transforms into a serpent, greedily sitting on the pile of leftover gold. In Wagner's story it is not a hero that encounters him in such a form and slays the beast. Instead, the gods agree that their intervention is inevitable, and by the help of Loge (the germanic analog of Loki) manage to trick and capture the Nibelung. Albreich curses his ring, so that every future owner of it may suffer a terrible fate and bring death upon them, just like he has suffered by being robbed of what he thought was his own. The ring and the master thus become separated, but it is not the end of the story of the ring. The power-envy is too strong even for the gods. Wodan [Odin] refuses the ring at first. Loge, however, is not so quick to give away such a powerful artifact and tries to make it his own. Ultimately, the ring does land in Wodan's possession, and without the god realizing it, begins to bring the Allfather's downfall.

Part two of the Cycle is told by the three Fates, also present in Norse mythology. They try to see into the future in order to predict the rise of Sigfried, son of Siglinde and Sigmund. In this fragment Sigmund is referred to as "son of a wolf", which is possibly an homage to the shapeshifting episode present in the *Völsungasaga*, described in detail in the second chapter of this thesis.

Wodan, seeking a new hero to right the wrongs, delivers a magical sword to the home of Sieglinde and Sigmund. The blade he hides in an ash tree and calls it Notung. Frika, Wodans wife is, however, furious that her husband supports a cause where incest is involved and discourages the god to use the Ring of Power in order to protect the gods, arguing that forces like these are not supposed to be reckoned with. Wodan does not agree with his wife, consequently summoning his most trusted Valkyrie - Brunhilde, to come to his aid. Not only does he admit to being her true father, but also he asks the woman to take care of the Wölsung legacy. His intentions are pure, however, torn between wanting a genuine hero, who would be willing to fight the gods, and listening to Frika.

Ultimately, Wodan follows his wife's demands and decides to kill Sigmund and destroy the Notung, using his all powerful spear. Brunhilde, following her morals and heart, tries to protect the Wölsungs to the best of her abilities. She knows that an heir is already on the way and does not let Wodan kill Siglinde, whom she sends off far away, near the lair of the terrible dragon Fafner. Dealing with her father does not come easy to the Valkyrie. She is punished for not following the directions given to her, and is stripped of her powers. Before Brunhilde faces her punishment, she collects the broken elements of the sword and gives them to Sieglinde for the Wölsung son to inherit them.

Shortly after the Valkyrie is sent to earth, where she confesses she has defied her father’s orders through sensing that his heart was not true when he was instructing her to kill the family that Wodan had cared for so much. The woman does not, however, tell her father she had given the hero’s mother information about the hoarde of gold. Reluctantly, Wodan also grants his daughter the protection of a Ring of Fire (once again an element appearing in the *Völsungasaga*), she leaves her future up to fate and soon is put into a long sleep, her only companionship being her horse Grane. The steed, under a slightly altered name: Grani, appears in the *Völsungasaga*, but in the saga he is Sigurđ’s horse, which was picked out by

the help of Odin. More on Grani and his significance in the Old-Norse saga can be found in the second chapter of this thesis.

In part three Wagner deals with Sigfried's story alone. It does not drastically differ from the Old-Norse version, apart from a few unimportant details. Multiple times there is mention of how much bravery and stupidity are close as character traits, warning the hero about his future. Mirroring the *Völsungasaga*, Mime plots to kill Sigfried after the young hero slays the dragon Fafner, similarly his Old-Norse counterpart, the young Wölsung shows no fear, and likewise as in the source narratives, he comes into the possession of the ring. This time it is made clear that the ring has powers which the young Wölsung is not aware of. Similarly to the Old-Norse saga, Sigfried is able to understand bird's speech after killing the dragon, however, this time the skill comes to him without having to consume any parts of the creature. Once again we can find the corresponding elements that previously appeared in the source materials - both the *Völsungasaga* and the *Nibelungenlied*. Our hero is able to understand the speech of creatures, to be more specific: birds. As in many of the previously analyzed translations, which can be found in the second chapter, the birds are not named or enumerated. Nevertheless, they still play a pivotal role in the progress of the story through providing the hero with crucial information, which would otherwise be hidden from him. What Sigfried finds out is the *Völsungasaga* anew. The dwarf hungers for gold and is filled with bad intentions, planning the murder of the young hero. The events go on precisely in the order the Old-Norse saga established. Firstly Sigfried kills Mime for his misled aspirations, and shortly after the birds inform him about the Valkyrie in the tower nearby.

Sigfried is able to conquer the Ring of Fire on his own, once again proving that only him - a man without fear - is worthy of reforging Balmung. Not realizing what consequences his actions might have, he gives the cursed ring to Brunhilde, the Valkyrie, as a sign of his vows. The following parts of the story play out similarly to the sources discussed in the

previous two chapters. The ending of the opera Cycle is still drastically different from the source materials.

Gunhilde and Brunhilde seem to agree on what to do. The Valkyrie goes to the funeral pyre and allows herself, Grane and the Ring to be burned together with Sigfried's corpse. Meanwhile the courtly story ends with Hagen admitting his lust for power and the restoration of the Nibelheim dynasty, from which he belongs. Gunhilde punishes him by giving the hero's and the Valkyries ashes to the Rhinemaidens, who lure Hagen into the water and drown him, once again restoring the Rhein-gold to its former place, where the cursed gold can once again safely remain untouched.

OLD-NORSE SAGA INFLUENCES ON TOLKIEN

Wagner is not the only one, who was heavily influenced by the history of the Völsungs. British writer and scholar J.R.R. Tolkien was equally struck by the text from the Old-Norse times. Due to his interests in literature Tolkien's influences primarily stem from the Anglo-Saxon poem Beowulf, he was, however, also acquainted with the *Völsungasaga*. Cyril Edwards notices that the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* shows awareness of the story of Sigurđ, when a skilled minstrel recalls the story of the hero killing the dragon. The hero is praised highly, and even called the most renowned hero in the world.[24] This, however, is not the only similarity *Beowulf* shows with the Old-Norse source. More proof of Tolkien's knowledge of the Old-Norse can be found in a late publication of his notes, as well as attempts on the translation of the saga's early state - the Eddic poems, which have been compiled into *The Saga of Sigurđ and Gudrún*.[25] In this work, Tolkien focuses on creating a new translation of the tragic romance between the Old-Norse characters known from the

[24] Cyril Edwards (tr.). *The Nibelungenlied: The Lay of the Nibelungs*. pp. 220.
[25] J.R.R. Tolkien. ed. Christopher Tolkien. *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*. Harper Collins. (2009).

Völsungasaga, however, the author solely relies on Eddic Poems alone. Tolkien offers his translation of two of the poems found in the "Heroic Poems of the Codex Regius", which are included in *The Elder Edda: A Book of Viking Lore*.[26] The poems in the Edda are very fragmented, written in verse, rather than poetic form. Tom Shippey notes that: "The problem is that the oldest version of the legend, the body of heroic poems in Old-Norse preserved in the single main manuscript of Eddic poetry surviving, is incomplete, indeed has a quite literal hole in the middle of it: the famous 'gap in the Codex Regius,'[27] because around 200-300 stanzas of the manuscript were torn out. However, Tolkien was familiar with the story of the Völsungs through his interest in William Morris' version. Notwithstanding, Christopher Tolkien suggests - *The Saga of Sigurđ and Gudrún* are poems in translation. It is noteworthy that the translated texts do indeed take the shape of a poem, moreover their form is visibly coherent with the likeness of Old-Norse poems. Despite the texts having been edited and published by Tolkien's son and heir to the Tolkien estate - Christopher, the spirit and many works of J.R.R. Tolkien are not lost. Following his father's footsteps in the pursuit of literary knowledge, Christopher Tolkien has himself written a brief, yet impactful companion to his father's version of the saga.

The younger Tolkien succeeds in introducing the author's views and opinions on Eddic Poetry, and does not hesitate to add and explain notes that have been added to the texts since the time when they were written down. The linguistic and literary games Christopher Tolkien brings to light throughout his commentary, make J.R.R. 's translations seem almost alive, the spirit of the Norse saga is still strong in each line of the poem that has been improved on or re-written. It is not, and never will be, revealed if Tolkien meant to publish *The Saga of Sigurđ and Gudrún* or if the text was simply a means for the author to understand and clearly explain the Old-Norse story to his students, the saga translation being only a

[26] Andy Orchard (tr.). *The Elder Edda: A Book of Viking Lore*. London: Penguin Books. (2001).
[27] Tom Shippey. *Writing into the Gap: Tolkien's Reconstruction of the Legends of Sigurd and Gudrún*.

guidebook for those, who wanted to know more. Nevertheless, the publication of J.R.R. Tolkien's manuscript concerning an Old-Norse piece, as Christopher Tolkien claims, was his father's attempt to translate the texts so that they use "modern English fitted to Old-Norse meter,"[28] which is clearly visible in the fragments of the translations provided in the book. Similarly to *The Saga of Sigurđ and Gudrún*, also in his translation of *Beowulf*, where according to Christopher Tolkien:

> [J.R.R] Abandoning his fragmentary work on a fully alliterative translation of *Beowulf*, imitating the regularities of the old poetry, my father, as it seems to me, determined to make a translation as close as he could to the exact meaning in detail of the Old English poem, far closer than could ever be attained by translation into 'alliterative verse', but nonetheless with some suggestion of the rhythm of the original, [29]

thus once again showing that there are multiple ways of translating older texts, where in some versions details can be lost or omitted due to different reasoning. This brings to mind the scene from the *Völsungasaga*, where in some translations the birds understood by the main character were named or counted, although in others passed over. Nonetheless, Tolkien wrote down multiple options of his *Beowulf* whilst searching for the correct one. He noticed that "*Beowulf* is in fact so interesting as poetry, in places poetry so powerful, that this quite overshadows the historical content,"[30] while answering to criticism he has received on his translation, however it is only the entire piece of text that can leave a lasting impression on someone, moreso entire stories strong with not only content, but also attractive and engaging storytelling tend to be the ones to keep human interest for a long amount of time. The

[28] Christopher Tolkien. "Introduction" [In:] J.R.R. Tolkien. *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*. Harper Collins. (2009). pp. 4.
[29] Christopher Tolkien. "Introduction" [In:] J.R.R. Tolkien. *Beowulf*. Harper Collins (2013). pp. 8.
[30] J.R.R. Tolkien. "The Monsters and the Critics". [In:] *The Monsters and the Critics and other essays. The Essays of J.R.R. Tolkien*. London: HarperCollins Publishers. (2006). pp. 7.

extensive research and work the author put into his translation is reason to believe that he was deeply familiar with both pieces of literature, knowing exactly how the *Völsungasaga* had influenced the narrative and storytelling in *Beowulf*, especially when recalling the story of one brave hero Siegmund in lines 874-897 of the text. A key aspect of Tolkien's translation was treating both works with respect and recognizing the respective stories, as well as the historic and narrative values they carry with them.

Tom Shippey, however, suggests that Tolkien "had a wish to retain the heroic quality of Norse sources. Tolkien made his thoughts clear [...] he argued, for one thing, that, while ancient English mythology had all but totally vanished,"[31] this opinion being in complete opposition to C. Tolkien's. Shippey also mentions a concept called the "theory of courage," which he perceives as a unique approach of confronting inevitable defeat, but not giving up regarding one's position. The different perspective of heroes fighting on, because they believe that resisting evil will be rewarded beyond death was quickly seen as hope. Tolkien was also impressed by the ability of the characters to laugh in the face of death, for example in the *Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*,[32] which I briefly mentioned in the second chapter of this thesis, however in translation the laughter was mostly reduced to a smile.

Moreover, Shippey suggests that:

> *The Völsunga Saga* is unquestionably füll of interest, as a story, and in way — a very Tolkienian way - it is the more interesting because of its evident faults, for what these do is prove that the saga as we have it is at the end of a chain of transmission, in which different authors have grafted in originally separate stories, put forward their own explanations, and created inconsistencies while trying to eliminate yet

[31] Tom Shippey. "Tolkien and the Appeal of the Pagan: Edda and Kalevala." [In:] *Tolkien and the Invention of Myth*. Jane Chance (ed.). University Press of Kentucky: Kentucky. (2004). pp 153.
[32] Jackson Crawford. *The Poetic Edda: Stories of the Norse Gods and Heroes.*

> others. The saga is therefore at the same time the work of a single author, and the product of an unknown succession of them,[33]

hence, not only agreeing with the statement that has been made in the second chapter of this thesis, but also providing plausible information that support Tolkien's interest in stories that were previously existing in oral forms, but can now be found in written forms with an indefinite imprint of those, who have compiled said texts. Tolkien partly uses this method of storytelling in his famous work *The Hobbit*,[34] in which the story is not told actively, but written down from memory by the main character Bilbo Baggins, thus maintaining an aura of having an unreliable narrator, which gives more space not only for interpretation, but for various points of view of the tale.

According to Shippey: "These qualities together not only form a coherent philosophy; they also mark a quite distinctive literary style [...] 'rootedness'."[35] Shippey implies that rooted works such as Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda* fit a specific worldview, thus generating a mythology unless it previously happened the other way around. Therefore, the story continues with its inevitable flaws, where plots, motives and symbols are worked into the minds of later generations.[36] Shippey also is of the belief that "The air of summarizing much more extensive knowledge is another feature of Snorri's work that Tolkien spent a great effort to recapture in many versions of *The Silmarillion*,"[37] which later on continues to be allusive in *The Lord of the Rings.*

Just like the *Snorra Edda*, Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* is an explanatory work, which helps navigate the complicated cosmology of the world created in his works. In his Snorri-esque tome, Tolkien too, introduces the history of his cosmos through creating various

[33] Tom Shippey. *Writing into the Gap*. pp. 3
[34] J.R.R. Tolkien. *The Hobbit.* Harper Collins. (2013).
[35] Tom Shippey. *Tolkien and the Appeal of the Pagan: Edda and Kalevala*. pp. 153.
[36] Tom Shippey. *Tolkien and the Appeal of the Pagan: Edda and Kalevala*. pp. 153-154.
[37] Tom Shippey. *Tolkien and the Appeal of the Pagan: Edda and Kalevala*. pp. 154.

sections, which deal with consecutive times starting with the creation of Eä - the world as it is in Tolkien's universe. Separate sections are used to describe the Valar and Maiar, who in this cosmos serve as gods, and could be easily connected to Snorri's tales of the Æsir and the Vanir, the Norse pantheon of gods. However, this thesis does not mean to establish a strong comparison between Tolkien's and the Old-Norse races, since the aforementioned Norse deities are only one of many inspirations, more of which will be discussed in the later part of this thesis. Nevertheless, just like Sturlusson, Tolkien keeps expanding his work with "more modern" tales, such as the creation of Middle-Earth (a creation myth is also found in the *Prose Edda*), as well as the wars over the Silmarils - brilliant jewels, from which the collection inherits its name.

Tolkien offers a backlog of stories set in his cosmos. Similarly to Snorri Sturlusson's text, *The Silmarillion* contains plenty of summarized or re-told stories, which can later be found in the author's other works, or works concerned with the same realm. As an example serves the story of *Beren and Luthien*, a simple, yet epic love story between a human hero, after partaking in battle in the wars of the Silmarils - Beren falls in love with an Elven maiden, Luthien. The girl's father does not, however, appreciate this connection, driven by the thought that no Man is good enough for his daughter, and decides to send Beren to retrieve a price for Luthien's hand - a treasure seemingly unreachable, which is one of the Silmaril jewels. On his quest, Beren is captured by Sauron, who at the time is a loyal servant of the Valar Melkor (also known as Morgoth) - the great servant of Darkness. With the help of Luthien, the man manages to escape, he also completes the quest given to him by stealing one of the jewels. So, the first union between man and elf was made, however, after Beren's death, his elven betrothed also dies from grief. The beauty of Beren and Luthien's love moved the Valar Mandos - keeper of souls so much that he restored Berens life and thus

allowed Luthien to renounce her immortality, allowing the lovers to share the same fate after their deaths.

This story is particularly valuable when it comes to understanding Tolkien and his works. Not only is this story another example of a heroic journey in search of valuable treasure, motivated by love, which we can see partially reflects the experiences of the heroes in the *Völsungasaga* and the *Nibelungenlied*, but it is also a piece of self-reflection on Tolkien's behalf. The story unfolds in fiction and in reality, since the late J.R.R. Tolkien together with his wife Edith are buried in Wolvercote Cemetery, Oxford, UK under their legal names and the nicknames Beren and Luthien.

Fig. 6. J.R.R. Tolkien's grave, Wolvercote Cemetery, Oxford, UK. Source: https://www.beyondthelamppost.com/jrr-tolkien-grave/

The Silmarillion becomes a collected guide through the cosmology and history of what makes the cosmos and worlds in Tolkien's universe. Each of Tolkien's works set in Middle-Earth has a backstory in the tome, that helps the understanding of how significant the stories are in the grand scheme, broken up into multiple chapters that concern numerous topics and places. An example of this is the description of Sauron's rise to power, how he defeated his enemies to ultimately forge the One Ring, that later is the driving force of *The Lord of the Rings*.

The same is true about the *Snorra Edda*, which clearly addresses many Old-Norse stories, be it god- or human- related. Just like the *Silmarilion* it is split up into sub-chapters, based on the times or types of stories. The first part of Snorri's work, the second section in *The Prose Edda* - *Gylfaginning* - describes the basics of the Norse cosmos, telling tales about both the creation and end of the world. Sturluson also describes the story of Sigurđ the Völsung, but similarly to *Beren and Luthien* it is only one of the many stories collected in the volume. Thus the similarities between the works of Snorri and Tolkien are easily spotted.

However, it is worth mentioning that Tolkien did not only focus on Old-Norse text and mythology while seeking inspiration for his works. The Finnish work *The Kalevala* plays a substantial role in his work. Best known in its translation by Elias Lönnrot. *The Kalevala* is the most famous epic originating in Finland, therefore it will not be thoroughly discussed in this dissertation. Nonetheless, Shippey concludes as follows: "[...] what Snorri's *Edda* and the *Kalevala* did for Tolkien was to give him two quite different but complementary views of a pre-Christian age, both the products of Christians looking back at but still in touch with pagan imaginations,"[38] which also can be successfully applied to most of Tolkien's works, especially the ones where the main focus lies on worldbuilding and understanding of the powers in and surrounding Middle-Earth. The author also claims that the fierce Old-Norse

[38] Tom Shippey. *Tolkien and the Appeal of the Pagan: Edda and Kalevala*. pp. 159.

mythology was an inspiration for the character of Gandalf, a divine, short-tempered messenger, with an unpredictable chance of humor. David Day notices that the idea of Gandalf is drawn from many different sources. Not only does the wizard display the archetype of the teacher in Campbell's theory - discussed in more detail in chapter one; Gandalf is also in a way a personification of Odin: an old man, with impressive knowledge, a big beard and a wanderer's outfit, who happens to appear at the right time just in order to lead the remaining heroes in a specific direction.[39] It also doesn't slip Day's attention that the name Gandalf is drawn from an Eddic poem called *Dvergatal*. What is more, many of the dwarves enumerated in Tolkien's crew in *The Hobbit* bear the names of dwarves listed in the Old-Norse source. The *Dvergatal*, which is a part of the poem *Voluspa*, in which a seeres elaborates on the events of Ragnarok, enumerates dwarfs such as: Durin,

> 11. Nyi and Nithi, | Northri and Suthri, Austri and Vestri, | Althjof, Dvalin, Nar and Nain, | Niping, Dain, Bifur, Bofur, | Bombur, Nori, An and Onar, | Ai, Mjothvitnir.
>
> 12. Vigg and Gandalf) | Vindalf, Thrain, Thekk and Thorin, | Thror, Vit and Lit, Nyr and Nyrath,-- | now have I told-- Regin and Rathsvith-- | the list aright.
>
> 13. Fili, Kili, | Fundin, Nali, Heptifili, | Hannar, Sviur, Frar, Hornbori, | Fræg and Loni, Aurvang, Jari, | Eikinskjaldi.
>
> 14. The race of the dwarfs | in Dvalin's throng Down to Lofar | the list must I tell; The rocks they left, | and through wet lands They sought a home | in the fields of sand.
>
> 15. There were Draupnir | and Dolgthrasir, Hor, Haugspori, | Hlevang, Gloin, Dori, Ori, | Duf, Andvari, Skirfir, Virfir, | Skafith, Ai.[40]

[39] David Day. *The Heroes of Tolkien*. Cassell Illustrated: London. (2017). pp. 153.
[40] Henry Adam Bellows. *Voluspa*. https://www.voluspa.org/poeticedda.htm (retrieved: 18.05.2024). Stanzas 11-15.

Generally, in the works of Tolkien the reader is able to find many more examples of such 'Christianized' even though the stories of Middle-Earth [Midgard] are not necessarily blatantly Christian attachment to the ancient gods. From the Eddic poem *Völsuspa*, Tolkien borrows the names of many of his characters that would later on inhabit Middle Earth. Most notably a dwarven name - Gandalf - is taken from the *Dvergatal* and given to the powerful wizard, well known and loved. Many of those names can easily be recognized as names Tolkien used for his dwarves in *The Hobbit*, most notably Thorin - a name that corresponds to the rightful heir of The Lonely Mountain, occupied by Smaug the Dragon. Other names such as Dvalin, Bifur, Bofur, Nori, Fili and Killi are found in the dwarven company described in Tolkien's Middle-Earth.

This is especially noticeable when using Henry Adam Bellows' translation of the Eddic poems.[41] Moreover, the Icelandic narrative poem *Völundarkvitha*[42] was a partial inspiration behind Tolkien's character Gollum. The poem reveals an outlaw, who has stolen a cursed ring and in fear of losing it has himself buried alive with his treasure.[43] Day also makes statements such as: "Tolkien's Dragon [Smaug] is closer to the crafty and evil dragon of the *Völsungasaga,*"[44] which is in many details true. Both Smaug and Fafnir are sentient and ancient creatures, in a way polarized by the strength they possess due to guarding all the power that can be harnessed from the gold. Through their love of gold they both end up stuck guarding a valuable treasure that, in fact, does not belong to them. Through recognizing Fafnir's greed and ability to mislead his own family in order to gain more of the gold's potential, similarly we find Smaug deliberately choosing a lair in a gold-filled mountain. The gold overall rightfully belongs to the dwarves, but the dragon does not recognize good or bad deeds, he is the slave of the gold. The need to possess is stronger than his will, which mirrors

[41] Henry Adam Bellows (tr). *The Poetic Edda: The Mythological Poems*, Dover Publications: New York. (2004). pp. 7-8. [the original translation dates back to the year 1936]
[42] Henry Adam Bellows (tr). *The Poetic Edda.*
[43] David Day. *The Dark Powers of Tolkien*. Cassell Illustrated: London. (2018). pp. 211.
[44] David Day. *The Hobbits of Tolkien*. Cassell Illustrated: London. (2019). pp. 147-148.

the dwarf Albreich in the *Ring Cycle*, as well as Fafnir, not willing to let his treasure be taken away. Day also mentions the issue with the proper etymology of dragons, snakes in the Old-Norse, which I have discussed in more detail in chapter 2 of this thesis, which leads to an interesting dichotomy in Tolkien's works, where the author has decided on the shape of his character - a dragon, yet still at times calls him "worm", proving how heavily the Norse texts have influenced him.

In his *The Hobbit* Tolkien has seemingly purposefully moved away from the classical archetype of a great hero being the one, who achieves victory when in conflict with the dragon. Even though, ultimately, Smaug is killed by Bard the Bowman, who later comes into power, this would not be possible without the character of Bilbo Baggins. The Hobbit, a seemingly careless, happy creature and "distinctively English,"[45] while in a conversation with the gold-obsessed dragon, was able to work out the great serpents flaws. It is in consequence of Bilbo's actions that Smaug the dragon is defeated. Tom Shippey notices the conversation between the Hobbit and the dragon Smaug, and without any doubt counts it as one of many inspirations Tolkien took from the Old-Norse saga.[46]

ARTHURIAN MYTHS

David Day, a passionate researcher of the works of J.R.R. Tolkien notices that: "The creation of the essentially medieval King Arthur and his court of Camelot, with its Christian ethos, naturally resulted in some reshaping of the fiercer aspects of the early pagan tradition."[47] Nevertheless, Day manages to find many corresponding factors between Arthur, Tolkien's Aragorn, and Sigurđ Völsung. Sigurđ, a wild warrior would not have found his spot at Arthur's round table, however Aragorn – the essentially pagan, but polite and courtly hero

[45] David Day. *The Heroes of Tolkien*. Cassell Illustrated: London. (2019). pp. 141.
[46] Tom Shippey. *Tolkien and the Appeal of the Pagan: Edda and Kalevala.* pp.7
[47] David Day. *The Heroes of Tolkien*. pp. 196.

could be found more upright and ethically driven than Arthur himself. Despite the difficulties in comparison of those three characters, the reader can notice identical patterns. All of the heroes were orphaned by their fathers and are rightfully heirs to kingdoms, which have been taken away from them in battle. Ultimately, they face their obstacles and are able to win back their kingdoms all being married to strong female characters, who stand by their sides no matter what.

An interesting connection between the Arthurian Legend and the *Völsungasaga* is the process of recovering a sword meant only for the hero. The fated sword seems to be a motif that was either kept from pre-Christian times. Some of the earliest stories concerning Arthur are found in Welsh poems of the seventh century; there can be little doubt that the warlike king belongs to the heroic traditions of both Ireland and Wales. He appears in several Irish sagas, one of which describes how he stole the hounds of the Fenian leader Finn MacCool on one of his daring raids."[48] Those elements used in the Legend of King Arthur, or a way of showing "rootedness". Tolkien's hero Aragorn also possesses a sword fated to him, the story of it is, however, closer to Sigurđ's Gram, as it too shatters into pieces and can be reforged to be used again. Obviously lacking the motif of the destined sword is the *Nibelungenlied*, which on the other hand was inspired by the Arthurian Legend in different ways – more courtly and fittingly Christian. The topic of the magical swords will be reintroduced in further detail below.

Another similarity between the Legend of King Arthur and the *Völsungasaga* is the ability to prophesy. According to Alan Lupack "The Welsh Myrddin [Merlin] poems demonstrate the existence of both prophetic traditions."[49] In the same paragraph the author mentions a Scottish version of Merlin, who is said to dwell in the forest and tell prophecies. The prophetic talents are displayed in the Old-Norse sagas as well, which might be another

[48] Arthur Cotterel. *An Encyclopedia of Mythology: Norse, Greek & Roman, Celtic.* London: Annes Publishing. (2007). pp. 134.
[49] Alan Lupack. *Guide to Arthurian Literature and Legend.* Oxford University Press: Oxford. (2007). pp. 330.

point leading to mutual knowledge about the oral history between the Saxons and Norse. The Irish version of the sorcerer even foretells the hero's predicted death by spear, which in turn resembles the death of Siegmund in the *Nibelungenlied*. According to Arthur Cotterell:

> Merlin's birth was the subject of a strange story. Apparently, the Britons were told that a great fortress they had built on Salisbury plain, possibly near Stonehenge, would never be safe until the ground there had been soaked by the blood of a child who had no mortal father. Such a half-human sacrifice seemed impossible to achieve, until it was learned that a beautiful girl was with child by a demon. The child turned out to be Merlin, who, though baptized as a Christian, still possessed fabulous powers inherited from his demon father. Somehow the boy did not need to be sacrificed for the sake of the fortress because it is likely that Merlin was able to deal with the problem by means of magic. [...][50]

The fact that Merlin's origins mix the pre-Christian with Christian ideas is strange, condsidering his later assistance to Arthur. Merlin also sided with Uther Pendragon, using his supernatural gifts whenever necessary, for ex,ample in order to conceive Arthur, Merlin disguised Uther as a Cornish nobleman, so he could bed his [the nobleman's] wife – Igraine, [51] which once again suggests a certain mirroring of what happened in the *Völsungasaga*, where deception is used towards women in order to ensure that they - willingly or not - take part in the grand scheme of things.

[50] Arthur Cotterel. An Encyclopedia of Mythology: Norse, Greek & Roman, Celtic. pp. 150.
[51] Arthur Cotterel. *An Encyclopedia of Mythology: Norse, Greek & Roman, Celtic.* pp. 150.

Andrzej Sapkowski points out that there were multiple versions of delivering the story of King Arthur, all focused on various aspects. Similarly to the *Völsungasaga* and *Nibelungenlied* there is not one definitive way of telling the Arthurian myth. However, *Le Morte D'arthur* by Thomas Malory being the most popular among the many versions - to the point that ever since its publication it never went out of print - of the Arthurian Legend has established itself as the classic myth.[52] It is, however, noteworthy to notice that prior to the multiple changes the Arthurian Myth has been exposed to, the Celtic stories that mention heroes not unlike Arthur himself, being descendants of gods or somehow god-like, which is the case in the *Völsungasaga* as well.

Whilst it is challenging to draw a In Malory's Arthurian Saga there is frequent mention of the Holy Grail, which was previously said to not be the case in all versions of the myth. However, Lancelot, the most loyal servant in all 7 kingdoms and abroad decides to venture on a quest to retrieve said Holy Grail in order to better himself even more. His striving for spiritual perfection can be compared to Hagen's struggle to possess the Niflung gold for himself. In this case both the gold as well as the Grail serve as treacherous lure for both the characters, ultimately leading them astray in their actions, as well as moral identity. This being said, there might not be gold involved in the Arthurian Saga, however, an element resembling a wonderful, magical treasure is still present in the story, thus once again proving that all of the aforementioned texts have more elements in common than it may seem at first.

Any clear conclusions based on source materials all changed throughout the years, especially those coming from oral tradition – which is the case of all three works mentioned, it can be agreed that all works: The Arthurian Legend, *The Völsungasaga* and *The Nibelungenlied* seem to be influenced not only by each other, but by sources probably

[52] Andrzej Sapkowski. *Świat króla Artura*. Warsaw: Supernowa. (2021). pp. 32-43.

stemming from pagan times, rooting deep into the traditions of the Norse, Saxon and Germanic countries.[53]

THE UNMISTAKEN ARTIFACT: THE MAGICAL SWORD

Gram in the *Völsungasaga*, Notung in the *Nibelungenlied*, Balmung in Wagner's *Ring Cycle*, Narsil - Aragorn's sword in *Lord of the Rings* and Excalibur, famously handled by King Arthur. In all texts, despite being derived from different cultures and time periods one artifact is always the same, no matter the story. The magical sword promised and granted only to the true hero is what ties all of the stories together. Regardless of details, the swords of the greatest heroes in their respective realms are earned by going through a series of challenges, each differing in character depending on the text. Nonetheless, all the trials demand the heroes to prove their might and honesty.

However, more frequent elements can be seen through a closer examination of how all of the men came into possession of their weapons. Some of them are inherited from their fathers, shattered and having to be reforged in order to make the weapon worthy once again to fight dark and supernatural powers. The weapons are frequently found or linked to a tree. I believe that this motif is showing the force of nature, in both meanings of the phrase. Not only do the heroes have strong connections to their lands, their ancestry, their blood, which are all connected to the natural world. On the other hand, the force of nature we see is also strictly associated to the behaviors we see consequently in all of the heroes. In the end a hero can not be created out of sheer force of will, they are created through their own actions, which come natural to them, because it is them, and nobody else, who are able to help the stories become exactly as we read and analyze them.

[53] Andrzej Sapkowski. *Świat króla Artura*. pp. 94.

In whatever rendition of the story of Arthur the character is presented as the oldest son of king Uther Pendragon. Arthur is always good in nature, fair and the only one able to retrieve the sword Excalibur from its resting place - usually a stone or a tree stump. Arthur is the middleground between an Old-Norse hero destined to succeed and an epic knight involved in courtly matters, whom we can recognize in the German epic. Elements of the supernatural, especially the Lady of the Lake, who grants the King a new weapon, are still present in Arthurian myth. The resemblance is, however, closer to what we see in Wagner's opera - a magical being in control of something bigger, that ultimately results in the hero's death and the prophecy that he shall rise again.

The sword is an universal item ascribed to the hero, especially if it is crafted by a powerful and possibly supernatural force. The swords in the *Völsungasaga*, the *Nibelungenlied*, the Arthurian Myth and *The Lord of the Rings* all share this special bond with their owners. Not only have they been forged for them to inherit, the swords also represent an important part of the material culture of all of the mentioned worlds. No other sword of this status can be found in the respective stories, even though other magical artifacts may in some cases appear, the sword, however, stays the same - an element of power and status, indicating the one true hero of the work. Moreover, the motif of the sword being broken might exceed the strictly material aspect of it and provoke what Jan Assmann calls "cultural memory"- the belief all cultural products, including texts, tend to undergo so-called cultural recycling. This process is further explained by the author, who states that "cultural memory is formed by symbolic heritage embodied in texts, rites, monuments, celebrations, objects, sacred scriptures and other media that serve as mnemonic triggers to initiate meanings associated with what has happened."[54] The process includes all types of retellings

[54] Jan Assmann, Assmann Aleida. *Communicative and Cultural Memory*. São Paulo. May 15th, 2013.

and borrowings present in culture.[55] This means that all characters, who can be assigned to any previously known pattern are a form of re-telling the original story. In the case of the texts analyzed in this thesis, the form of a retelling hardly applied, however the belief that the human need for similar behaviors over the years can simply be explained through this phenomenon. Assmann notes that "The solution to this [repeatedness of behaviors] problem is offered by cultural memory, a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behavior and experience in the interactive framework of a society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation,"[56] which in the case of the broken swords would imply that once encountered in a story the pieces of the sword that need to be re-gathered and reforged in order to fulfill their rightful purpose is recognized by the human minds as a crucial element of heroic stories. This can lead to believe that the common motif in the sources mentioned is more than just a coincidence, on the contrary, it is a (semi)conscious choice made by the authors of the respective pieces in order to progress the forms and ways heroic epics, while still maintaining a certain familiarity through the recognition of the broken sword element. Despite the fact that Assmanns theory has been since expanded by other scholars, the elements mentioned above remain the same, working on common grounds between all sciences that apply cultural memory as a possible theory. Assmann also argues that objects of cultural memory have developed in the times of stories told through an oral recalling of the plot, which is the case in the *Völsungasaga*, but that the elements usually they are predicted to fade within a century of the element's rise, however, the process of writing them might have been the solution for such key features not to vanish. Such an outlook would not only bring the narratives closer together, but to a point bind them

[55]Astrid Erll, *Cultural Memory Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*. Berlin and New York: de Gruyter. (2008). pp. 116 -117.
[56] Jan Assmann. "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity." [In:] New German Critique, No. 65. Cultural History/Cultural Studies (Spring - Summer). (1995). pp. 125-133.

to be a recognizable medium through which ideas of greatness and heroism, of pure heart and fighting obstacles were told, and most likely will be told in a similar way in the future.

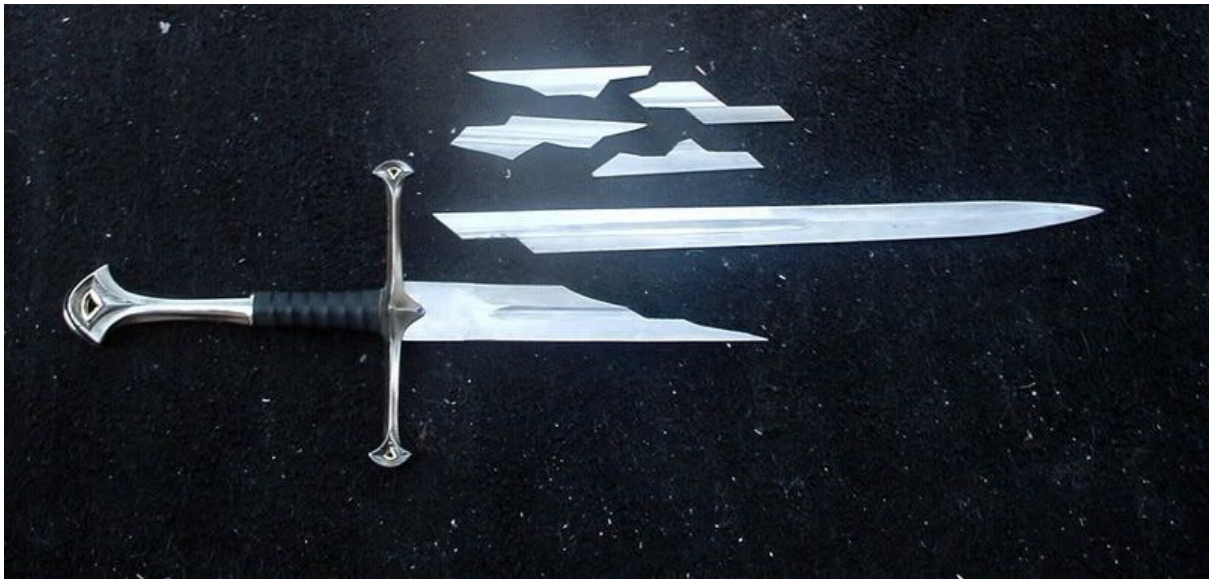

Fig. 7 A rendition of Narsil, the broken sword of Aragorn.

Source: https://www.pinterest.ca/pin/519391769510586024/

What all of the swords have in common is that they have been passed down to the "chosen ones", the heroes, who do not only seek fame, but also play important roles in their respective narratives.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE *VÖLSUNGASAGA* AND THE *NIBELUNGENLIED* ON THE IMAGE OF THE HEROIC FIGURE

As it has already been observed in the previous chapters, the heroes in the *Völsungasaga* and the *Nibelungenlied* differ in many behaviors. Their stories ultimately proved to be drastically different. However, the image of the heroic character has served as a solid foundation for future heroes, such as the aforementioned Aragorn. Despite the changes noticeable between the Old-Norse saga and the German epic, values such as loyalty, bravery

and greatness remain unchanged. In the end, both Sigurđ and Sigfried pursued undertakings that were many times questionable, however, Sigurđ proved to be less selfish during his lifetime. This however, might have also occurred because of the time of action of the *Nibelungenlied* in which as readers we lack significant information about Sigfried's previous life.

It is safe to state that both works of literature have heavily influenced the general definition of heroism and have set certain standards for their literary descendants. However, the heroes of the 21st century are far from the ideals provided by the analyzed texts. The question of what it means to be a hero has developed together with humans and their needs for "proper" role models. I believe that there will always be heroes – whether real or fictional – since they are a crucial aspect of humanity in general. With time the hero figure in literature becomes more humane, as an example serves Tolkien's Aragorn. Aside from his love for an elven woman, he is nothing but courageous, fair and loyal towards his companions. His father, Arathorn, has died early, so the hero grew up fostered by Elrond in the elven Rivendell. Instead of acting out the "chosen one" path of action and reaction, Aragorn remains very grounded and finally takes his rightful place, so he can please the Elf Elrond and marry his daughter. The hero in Tolkien was at first torn, not taking up his claim of Gondor. First, Aragorn did not know about his heritage, he was kept a secret to ensure his safety. After Elrond enlightened him and passed down his father's sword - Narsil - to the young man, Aragorn set out on great journeys, strengthening himself as a warrior, but also building character.[57]

Looking up to someone or even imagining an ideal, courageous individual, who lives their life without fear is a much needed aspect of being human. The hero archetype will always be present in our lives, however, the portrayal will highly likely keep on changing as

[57] J.R.R. Tolkien. *The Silmarillion*. pp. 357-381.

the years pass. To sum up, the heroes discussed above were the ones needed at the times of their existence and most definitely have had influence on multiple heroic characters. The discussion of whether they have proven to be archetypal or have fit into a standard category of a heroic story is told through multiple varying components, as both stories have shown the true capabilities of Sigurđ and Sigfried.

COMPARISON AND SUMMARY OF THE USE OF *LOF* AND *WYRD*

Multiple statements throughout this thesis have been made about the *lof* and *wyrd* elements of the explored literary works. Surprisingly, the *Nibelungenlied* and the *Völsungasaga* have proven to be more contrasting than it may seem at first glance. After a close analysis of the works it can be stated that the two are similar in some core aspects and events, a shared background is definite, since scholars of both literary works mention the Eddic Poems as inspiration or stories "filling out" the timeline for the works.

However, the major difference is the Christian motif of denying fate. Due to this aspect the use of *lof* and *wyrd* in order to properly compare the volumes becomes impossible. Nonetheless, the concept of *lof* remains the same and is to a degree excessively visible in the German epic. Interestingly, this specific way of analyzing both manuscripts has demonstrated the evolution of the hero figure as an individual, together with a great role religion has played in maintaining and re-telling oral-based stories.

Anyhow, it is important to emphasize how influential the *Nibelungenlied* is, having inspired musical arrangements as well as many movies, video game etc. Both high culture, as well as popular culture are unlikely to soon forget the hero who killed the dragon, whether they have been acquainted with the story through the Old-Norse or the German version.

More and more scholars are starting to research topics within the Old-Norse studies. Thanks to a great array of sources in multiple languages it has become easier to explore the

lesser known areas in the field. As more and more translations of Old-Norse text emerge, it will be easier ro examine and find out more details about pagan ancestors, their culture and their archetype. Sigurđ Völsung, one of the most recognizable characters from the sagas can in this way be compared to his German counterpart from the *Nibelungenlied* with unexpected outcome.

CULTURAL HERITAGE OF THE VÖLSUNGASAGA AND THE NIBELUNGENLIED

The *Nibelungenlied* has and still is proving its popularity among readers. Between the years 1810 and 1890 in Germany, Bernhard Sowinski notices that: "29 different *Nibelung*-translations as well as 120 different full or partial retellings appeared,"[58] whereas by translation the scholar probably means translations from High-Old-German into a newer form of the language, the numbers still show high engagement in the topic. That engagement was also partly caused by the *Nibelungenlied*'s introduction into school mandatory reading, where both the older and newer versions were studied at higher institutions.[59] As already mentioned in the previous chapter, multiple films were produced based on the story. Many other productions loosely based or inspired by the *Nibelungenlied* also exist, however it is impossible to name them all, because the material varies between films, manga, attempts at video games etc. and is no longer based on the epic itself. Aside from the aforementioned, the episodical "Dark Kingdom: The Dragon King"[60] or "Die Nibelungen" premiered in 2004. The movie was published in two parts in German National Television, due to high demand, a

[58] Bernard Sowinski. "Afterword" [In:] Felix Genzmer (tr.) *Das Nibelungenlied*. pp.405.
[59] Felix Genzmer (tr.). *Das Nibelungenlied*. pp. 405.
[60] "Dark Kingdom: The Dragon King." Directed by Uli Edel. Produced by: Rola Bauer, Andreas Schmid, Konstantin Thoeren. 2004.

shorter version of the serialized movie was produced for English-speaking audiences; it was, however, presented under various titles.[61]

The movie, despite its popularity, is a pulp version of the *Nibelungenlied*. It does tell the exact same story, but adds the element of a Linden leaf falling on Sigfried's - in the movie he also responds to the name Erik - back, while he is bathing in dragon blood to help his healing abilities, as he has noticed that this happened when he was fighting the dragon. This seemingly harmless addition to the story of the Nibelungs led to an enormous misconception about the *Lied*. Sadly, even though the leaf was never mentioned in the original material, a vast majority of people remember it and reproduce this element as canon, despite it not being so.

Not only the story of Sigfried is important to those, who wish to retell the *Nibelungenlied*. Literary fiction about Hagen von Tronje can also be easily found. The most known example is a novel titled *Hagen von Tronje: A Nibelungen-Roman*.[62] In his book author Wolfgang Hohlbein explores the character of Hagen from a perspective varying to the one presented in the *Nibelungenlied*. The author provides his main character with more internal conflicts, pointing especially to Hagen's deep motivations of loyalty that govern the character's behavior. Moreover, the battles described in the novel have a physical effect on Hagen. Unlike in the source material, where the main characters seem to have plot armor,[63] in Hohlbein's version the knight is taken captive, loses and eye and falls ill prior to Brunhilde entering the Worms court. Moreover, Hagen's plan to kill Sigfried in order to show loyalty to Gunther, his king, is more complex than it is depicted in the *Nibelungenlied*. Once again, Sigfried is impervious to weapons, due to a bath in Fafnir's blood - which in the

[61] The Sword of Xanten. Uli Edel (dir.). (2004) Written by: Diane Duane, Peter Morwood, Uli Edel. Starring: Benno Fürmann, Kristanna Løken. A review of the movie: Jamie Russell. https://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2004/11/15/sword_of_xanten_2004_review.shtml https://www.bbc.co.uk/gloucestershire/films/reviews/n_s/sword_of_xanten.shtml (retrieved: 02.06.2024).
[62] Wolfgang Hohlbein. *Hagen von Tronje: A Nibelungen-Roman*. Vienna: Carl Ueberreuter Verlag. (1986).
[63] Where they are only sometimes wounded, but never to a degree that could impair them or cause enough harm for them to be unable to take part in the later events of the story.

Völsungasaga is mentioned to be highly acidic and burning the flesh upon touch - his only weak spot being located between the shoulder blades, where a linden leaf had landed on Sigfried during his bath (adding a more modern twist to the story, due to the introduction of a Greek-based story of Achilles, who could only be wounded near the ankle. The (re)mixing of cultures and ideas, that would allow easier association between mythical stories and ultimately lead to a more unified image of a hero).

It is possible to see more attempts at pop cultural takes on the *Völsungasaga* and the *Nibelungenlied* through new media such as an attempt at creating the game "Nibelungen Saga", which was canceled by the producer in 2013. Multiple comic books have been released over the years in order to promote the poem to a younger audience - many of them issued by city councils such as Bayern[64] or multimedia companies such as BR,[65] where it accompanies an audio guide. The *Nibelungenlied* gained so much notoriety it was even picked up as a manga series in 2012, which was ongoing for two years under the title *Boukoku no Sigfried*,[66] which can be vaguely translated into "The exiled Sigfried."[67] The series explores the Old-German poem in new ways, straying from the original story, however still treating the main character as a heroic figure. Interestingly, the story is not fashioned in a European way, but is drawn and portrayed in the characteristic style of manga, containing multiple chapters broken up into volumes, making the *Nibelungenlied* more familiar to the target audience. Nevertheless, *Boukoku no Sigfried* uses multiple German descriptors to flesh out its main character. Sigfried in the manga is referred to as the *Stolz Ritter*, which translates to "The Proud Knight". In the source material the main character cannot necessarily be described as proud, since he is not particularly joyous of his deeds, but rather owns up to the deeds and reputation that is given to him. Moreover, Balmung, the sword becomes *Berühmte*

[64] https://www.bsv-shop.bayern.de/Comic-Nibelungenlied (retrieved: 19.05.2024).
[65] https://www.br.de/medienkompetenzprojekte/burg-prunn-nibelungenlied-audioguide-kelheim-100.html (retrieved: 19.05.2024).
[66] Amane Yoshikazu. *Boukoku no Siegfried*. Shounen Rival, 2012-2014.
[67] Translation based on translate.google.com

Balmung (the Famous Balmung) in the manga, adding an even more epic tone to the heroic tale. The storyline, however, is kept simple. No courtly affairs or romances receive attention from the author of the series - Amane Yoshikazu - instead it is the pure need of wanting to be a praised and virtuous hero that drives Sigfried in this adaptation of the story. *Boukoku no Sigfried* does, on the other hand, utilizes the connection between the hero and Fafnir the Dragon very well, making the fight one of the crucial points of the re-telling. Instead of just maintaining this part of the story as a singular event, that is described well, but not dwelled upon much further outside of the horde of gold. The approach taken by the manga is drastically different from what happens in the source material. After his fight with the dragon Sigfried reveals that he is the last survivor of the lost nation, who has traveled in order to become a legend, so he and his nation are never forgotten. He makes a promise to Fafnir, that the great dragon will be part of his legacy. What happened to Sigfried during the "bossfight" could be perceived strictly against canon - the hero loses an arm, which cripples him beyond a point of a magical or miraculous healing. Thus, in the manga the audience receives a modern rendition of an imperfect hero, which has nothing to do with emotions, but with physical loss and endurance beyond the pain that has been dealt to Sigfried. Although, the motif of immortality or impervious to weapons, previously used in multiple adaptations, is re-used in the manga to raise the stakes and serve as a supernatural occurrence to help out the hero in his future endeavors.

Due to its declining popularity on the market, however, the last two chapters of *Boukoku no Sigfried* were released on the artist website. Creating a brand new, multicultural experience of the German epic has been formed thanks to this adaptation, regardless of sales. The sheer attempt of re-creating a story entirely rooted in Europe and (re)presenting it to an Asian audience is proof that a hero like Sigfried is not merely appreciated in one specific

form, but more so serves as a bigger idea of heroism, which can be appreciated regardless of his origin.

The city of Worms in Germany, where the events of the *Nibelungenlied* takes place possesses an impressive amount of data about the German epic in the Nibelungen museum. The museum organizes multiple annual events and actively publishes research as well as books that help with the understanding of the *Nibelungenlied*. The museum's press has a vast ofer of children and young-adult books, as well as serious research bindings.[68]

[68] https://www.nibelungenlied-gesellschaft.de/nlg/ (retrieved: 01.06.2024).

CONCLUSION

This chapter has looked at the influences made by the *Nibelungenlied* and the *Völsungasaga*, as well as provided a contrast of the works in comparison to each other. Comparisons to other works of, such as the Wagnerian *Ring Cycle*, the Myth of King Arthur and the works of J.R.R Tolkien have also been presented in detail, showing how the image of a hero has been changing, yet growing from the same roots for centuries.

The chapter has explored the progression of the definition of a hero and heroic tradition from the Old-Norse times until present day, coming to a conclusion that a hero archetype will always stay with humans, however the times, and thus needed hero's quickly change. The presented heroes will always have a space in culture, since they have influenced it in a substantial way. It cannot, however, be said that all of the heroes were direct copies of the ones that came before. Nonetheless, progress in heroic actions can be seen, and clear connections can be drawn through the ages and places where heroic stories were told. Ultimately, I have proven that neither *lof* or *wyrd* truly make a hero. It is an inherent ability to govern fairly and follow a moral compass that creates all of the characters so often looked up on in myths and stories.

A close examination of Wagner's work has been shown, closely examining the variations in the story. I have established that all similarities are based on the Old-Norse text, the variations only being woven in because of the changing times. The motif of the Gold as well as that of the Ring have been closely assessed, as they are an unchanged element in all renditions. As well as the magical sword, the power and appearance of which is almost identical, despite other differences in the material.

Lastly, an analysis of the impact of the source manuscripts was investigated through giving specific examples based on pop culture, literature and film, showing an undying interest in the heroic stories discussed in this thesis.

CONCLUSIONS

This thesis has introduced and examined the image of an Old-Norse hero, based on its thorough analysis of *The Saga of the Völsungs*. Through showing the family relations in the saga it is clearly established why exactly Sigurđ is chosen to achieve greatness. The research on elements such as the shapeshifting and divine intervention has provided background to the story itself, at the same time pointing out determining factors of the saga's essence, which are later referred back to. This thesis established that the motif of a sentient dragon was developed centuries ago, and is still used in modern literature, such as *The Hobbit*. The same can be said for the magic sword, or the hero's closest artifact most commonly forged and received through divine intervention, but passed down from father to son. Moreover, the second chapter of the work has demonstrated how much pride the Norse still take in their sagas, a key element being the representation of Sigurđ's horse and sword on a national stamp.

The close reading of the *Nibelungenlied* has allowed the thesis to find common tropes and, most importantly, an indistinguishable root between the Old-Norse Saga and the German epic. Although the German text does heavily focus on courtly affairs, it still maintains corresponding events with the same outcomes. Despite the much smaller female agency, the *Nibelungenlied* still portrays female rage and a need for vengeance the same way its Norse counterpart does. Contrary to what one might believe, the same gruesomeness and viciousness is represented in a drastically varying environment, concerned more with courtly affairs than fight and survival.

It is noteworthy that this thesis has also succeeded in introducing - with details - Richard Wagner's opera *The Ring Cycle*, comparing its themes with what was previously established to be the heart and soul of the source works. Astonishingly enough, Wagner has

used multiple of the previously discussed elements to retell the *Nibelungenlied*, however, slightly straying away from its original text. The thesis has proven that the Wagnerian opera is a re-imagining of the *Nibelungenlied* and the *Völsungasaga* all at once. The composer did not shy away from using the supernatural, as well as elements of mythology to convey his rendition of the story.

The most crucial components of heroism, which include equipment and attitude, have been shown to reflect in other important creations as well. The thesis draws a clear comparison between the Old-Norse hero and the Arthurian hero, despite them being deceivingly different at first glance. Both of the texts have also heavily reflected on the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, who was familiar with the source works and did not hesitate to reach for them when building his own universe.

Last, but not least, the vast influence of the story of Sigurđ/Sigfried according to which version is being drawn from has been presented in the thesis. A close look, as well as a brief plot summary have been provided for multiple works of modern culture, varying in form and medium.

The thesis successfully defined an image of the Old-Norse hero and has found/re-found it in numerous other materials on heroic deeds. It has become clear to what extent the *Völsungasaga* has managed to root itself in various works, even though sometimes it may not be obvious at first glance. It is safe to say that the Old-Norse saga is one of the sources that was the foundation of the image of heroism, reaching far, just as the Norsemen did.

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SUMMARY IN ENGLISH

The thesis presents a multi-contextual analysis and comparison of the Old-Norse Saga *The Völsungasaga* and the German epic The *Nibelungenlied*, which in essence are supposed to account on the same story, however, they are presented vitally differently. The thesis identifies major distinctions offered through the analysis of the source texts – with consideration of various translations of the texts – based on themes such as the heroic behavior, side characters, animals, artefacts as well as the depiction of traditions, considering the representation of said customs in both of the source texts.

The analysis of *The Völsungasaga* and The *Nibelungenlied* is used to apply on works inspired by the two great texts, closely evaluating Richard Wagner's "The Ring Cycle" operas and other works based on the story of Sigurđ/Sigfried. Chapter four also addresses other types of media, such as manga and film, adding to the idea of the source stories' receptions and potential re-writings.

The last chapter too, provides a view on modern ideas of heroism and its depiction. Arthurian myth and the works of J.R.R. Tolkien are examined in terms of comparison with what is represented in the source texts, showing a significant overlap of motifs in all texts. Those motifs are then analyzed and compared with the other sources examined. The thesis offers a conclusion based on the various ideas portrayed, and offers a coherent idea of the hero figure and traditions throughout the *The Völsungasaga* and The *Nibelungenlied* as well as the texts' influences on modern literature, art and other media.

Keywords: Old-Norse, The Völsungasaga, The Nibelungenlied, epic, saga, Viking studies, Medieval texts, Tolkien, hero, tradition, heroism.

SUMMARY IN POLISH - STRESZCZENIE PO POLSKU

Rozprawa prezentuje wielokontekstualną analizę oraz porównanie staronordyckiej “Sagi o Wölsungach” oraz niemieckiego eposu “Pieśń o Nibelungach”, które w założeniu opisują tę samą historię, natomiast przedstawione są bardzo odmiennie. Rozprawa przedstawia kluczowe elementy różniące treści, analizując teksy źródłowe, zwracając uwagę na mnogość tłumaczeń. Teksty analizowane są pod względem przedstawienia motywów heroicznego zachowania, postaci pobocznych, przedstawieniu tradycji i obyczajów oraz sposobów w jakich ta jest prezentowana w źródłach.

Analiza “Sagi o Wölsungach” oraz “Pieśni o Nibelungach” wykorzystana jest do dalszych rozważań o cyklu oper “Pierścień Nibelungów” Richarda Wagnera, które bazowane są na historii Sigurđa/Zygfryda. Rozdział czwarty omawia również inne rodzaje mediów, takie jak manga czy film, poszerzając wiedzę na temat recepcji i potencjalnej re-kreacji historii z tekstów źródłowych.

Ostatni rozdział naświetla ewolucję poglądów na heroizm i jego przedstawienie w literaturze. Mit Arturiański oraz prace J.R.R. Tolkiena czytane są poprzez porównanie z tym co zawarte w kluczowych źródłowych manuskryptach, ukazując wiele pokrewieństw w motywach użytych we wszystkich omawianych tekstach. Rozprawa przedstawia wyjaśnienia tytułowych zagadnień oraz prezentuje spójną ideę bohatera oraz tradycji w “Sadze o Wölsungach” oraz “Pieśni o Nibelungach”, jak i również wpływy, które te teksty źródłowe miały na nowoczesną literaturę, sztukę oraz inne media..

Słowa kluczowe: staronordyckie, Saga o Wölsungach, Pieśń o Nibelungach, etos, saga, studia nad Wikingami, teksty Średniowieczne, Tolkien, bohater, tradycja, heroizm