

The Sons of Odin: A Heroic Analysis of the Volsunga Saga

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Without the lasting power of the story, especially in the sharing of myths and legends, a society functions ethically or with much hope of retaining its individual culture. In addition to being a vehicle for spiritual and psychological illumination, myths are the means by which a culture identifies its relationship to the universe, how it defines its processes of ritual, and how significant events warrant rites of passage.

The Saga of the Volsungs, an oral account written during the latter period between 1200 and 1270 in the *Codex Regius* (Book of Kings) and discovered later in a burning barn, accounts for events that likely occurred during the transformative Indo-European migration era of the third through fifth centuries. Fortunately, unlike most other European examples of pre-Christian lore, its translation seems to be free of the "corrective" biases liberally administered by Benedictine pens. Scholars have suggested that the myth specifically reflects the wars among the Burgundians, Huns, and Goths, and the saga treats many of the same legends as the Middle High German epic poem *Nibelungenlied* written circa 1200. The legends were later immortalized for contemporary audiences through Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* tetralogy composed between 1853 and 1874.

This presentation attempts to isolate and analyze elements within this saga that are common to most hero myths. These commonalities include (1) unusual birth of the hero, (2) the concept of the mother as symbolic of the Great Goddess, (3) a search for the father, (4) a threat to the young hero, (5) quest, (6) the notion of the dragon slayer, (7) guides on the hero's path, and (8) the final confrontation with death.

This analysis is mutually fashioned in the cultural anthropological character of Levi-Strauss and the interpretive manner of Jung and Campbell. It is important then for the reader to understand that references to the text need not occur in any particular order, at all, or to a particular personage for the analysis to convey its visceral points. This approach is in league with the idea that linear interpretation functions well in logical deduction, but plays little role in mythological thinking. This is not to suggest that I am attempting to reduce the myth into impotent component parts, but the analytic process itself has much to offer.

Depending on whom one asks, "archetype" is a mutually celebrated and tabooed word within Pagandom. I should strongly point out that while this analysis is based on Jungian/Campbellian interpretations, this should not lead the reader to infer that this approach alone is valued by the writer. Archetype analysis, I suggest, offers a rich understanding to the concept of deity-within, the kinship of which is central to polytheistic thinking. I offer archetypal understanding here as a tool for one means of interpretive insight, not as an end in itself encompassing all Pagan spiritual essence.

I have also raised a few points to offer explanations of the more cryptic elements of the myth. These points, if accurate, may have been obvious to the original tale-tellers, but easily evade those of us who live in this tragically on-mythic culture.

Unusual Births

While Volsung's genealogy spans six generations, immediate unusual births are found for only three of the main personages: Sigmund, Sigurd, and in particular, Volsung.

Odin's direct descendant (great grandson), Volsung is born by being violently cut from the womb after his mother's six-year pregnancy. At birth, he emerges as an adult, and upon kissing his mother, she dies. This may imply that Volsung was then born "a man" in the fullest sense, requiring no maternal ties or rite of passage into manhood, as well as being an introduction (a warning?) of the character of life he is destined to lead. However, evidence suggests (particularly in Greek myth, which in many ways is strikingly similar to the Norse) those children who had not passed through the womb had never been fully "born." If this perspective existed among the Germanic peoples, this would also suggest that Volsung was perpetually in a liminal state, further suggesting a mystic shamanic nature about him. This would strongly tie in with his lineage to He who hung Himself upon the World Tree.

Strengthening this interpretation would be that his very conception was clearly influenced by the Gods: while barren, Volsung's mother is impregnated shortly after her husband, King Rerir, pleads to the Gods for aid in fathering an heir. Frigg, patron of marriages, hears the plea and consults Odin, who instructs the Valkyrie Hljod to settle the matter. In the guise of a crow, Hljod visits Rerir as he sits atop a mound, and gives him an apple.

This scene is rife with significant symbolism. The apple is obviously representative of fertility, and according to European folklore, the consumption of its fruit and seeds could cause pregnancy. Also, to the Celts (neighbors of the Teutonic peoples with whom extensive cultural interpenetration took place in the Rhineland); the apple was a sacred fruit to the summer's End (*Samhain*) season, when the world takes a dramatic turn toward winter. Heroes are frequently born when "they are needed," and the "need" is often symbolized by the winter solstice. Finally, the Idunna myth features apples as a means of preserving youth (life).

Hljod, as a shield-maiden who frequents battlefields, appears as a crow, an omnivorous scavenger bird which can be totemically identified with the valkyries. Crows (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) are related to and resemble small ravens (*Corvus corax*) in character and appearance. Ravens, of course, are totemic to the Disir's liege, Odin.

Rerir's sitting atop a mound at the time of Hljod's visit also connects with other-worldliness. In northern Europe, mounds were known burial sites as well as places of worship. In Holland, for example, such hills were used for places of magical workings and sacred objects, such as staves, runes, and talismans have been found buried in such

locations. Such hills typically featured a platform (or sitting-place) at its peak, which was accessible through subterranean passageways, further demonstrating connection with the underworld. Additionally, linguists have suggested that there is a connection between the words "king" and "hill," and in Welsh myth, the shamanic hero Pwyll is told to sit atop a mound to either see a marvel or become wounded (initiation?).

So Volsung is semi-born of a barren mother after six years of gestation with direct intervention from the Gods, and whose conception is marked from the start as possessing a foothold in the underworld. Tough act to follow.

Additionally, Volsung could be viewed as Odin's "third son," in a sense. Considering the strong magio-spiritual sympathy among the Celts and their neighbors for the number three and tri-fold events, it could be observed that Volsung is the product of *nobility and order* (personified by his father, Rerir), *wildness and berserk mayhem* (personified by his grandfather, Sigi Wolf-In-Hallowed-Places [who had also been counseled by Odin after committing murder and being banished to the woods]), and *divinity* itself (personified by Odin, Sigi's father).

As to unusual birth natures for Sigmund and Sigurd, the connections are less acute. Sigmund is born of Volsung and Hljod, the Valkyrie, who is the daughter of the giant, Hrimnir. Thus, Sigmund carries Volsung's mystic bloodline as well as that of Valkyrie and giant, even further tying the clan to the underworld as well as the primal sphere.

Sigurd, Volsung's grandson, is being born just as his mighty father, Sigmund, lay dying after his battle with King Lyngvi's host. Day is breaking as each enters their respective worlds, thus symbolic of Sigurd's birth as the "dawning of a new era." To further illustrate this, we learn later in the saga that Sigurd's mother, Hjordis, possess a gold ring (as golden as the dawning sun?) that turns cold (as cold as Sigmund's corpse?) with each *breaking day*.

The Mother as Symbolic Of the Great Goddess

The Roman historian Tacitus tells us that the ancient Germans (who are related, mythoculturally at least to the Norse) believed that "there resides in women an element of holiness and gift of prophesy...and so they do not scorn to ask their advice, or lightly disregard their replies."

Women then held a greater foothold in the intuitive psychic state than the men. Among the Norse, this is evidenced in the Norns, who decide the *wyrd* of men and who are not dissimilar to the Danish witches in Shakespeare's "Hamlet." "Knowing this, it is easy to understand why the Norse would see the valkyries as women, that human princesses could become valkyries, or that they were priestesses in their worship. In the saga, Hljod, Sigrun, and Brynhild each share a place among the Disir. Further, it is known that the *volva*, or wise women (also *fjolkunning kona* in Iceland) were believed to be shapeshifters (*hamrammr*) and diviners of runes. Norse myth indicates that while Odin is the primary magician, He was introduced to the art by Freya, and the art of *seidhr*

(oracular divination similar to that of the Pythoness at Delphi) was largely the province of women.

Brynhild possesses many characteristics of the *volva* in that she is frequently interpreting dreams and making prophesy. Gudrun, after she emerges from the forest (the underworld?), is found carving runes which are later read by Queen Kostbera.

Signy, twin sister and wife of Sigmund, daughter of Volsung, plays the Great Mother nurturer role to her husband when she provides food for him while he is in hiding ("underground") in the forest. She also protects him by plotting revenge upon Siggeir, who brought Sigmund's ruination. (Here, "underground" has the two-fold meaning of being in seclusion and of rest, returning to the womb before rebirth. In this case, this rest is after his original defeat by Siggeir, and rebirth will come during the next attempt to vindicate himself.) Signy comes through as provider and protector again later, when she rescues Sigmund and Sigurd from certain death by giving them food and a sword with which the heroes free themselves from bondage. This may also be interpreted as the Great Goddess role as arbiter of life and death.

The Search for the Father

In the heroic cycle, the hero completes his own sense of identification by the discovery of his relationship to the universe, through a "search for the father" and by undertaking a "quest." In many small-scale societies, this is ritually enacted as a rite of passage, frequently where boys are removed from the mother and community, placed in an isolated and stressful setting with elders of their own gender, and must emerge from the experience as peers to their initiators.

This male initiatory pattern is very present in the saga, where Sinfjotli, son of Sigmund and his sister Signy unwittingly undergoes a preparatory test for tolerance by his mother, who wounds him with needle and thread. Satisfied with his reaction (or lack thereof), she sends 10-year old Sinfjotli into the woods to live with his father. There the father tests him for courage and stoutness of heart when he is instructed to bake bread with serpent-infested flour. Previous attempts by other youths, sons of Signy and the hated Siggeir, resulted in their failure and deaths as Sigmund slays them for their cowardice. Sinfjotli however completes the task, almost blithely kneading the serpent into his bread dough.

Sinfjotli's next initiatory test lasts for several years, when father and son shapeshift into wolves and raze the countryside, strikingly reminiscent of the *berserkr*, if not werewolf lore. Shortly before Sigmund would have decided the boy was fully grown, the two have a brief spat over obeying an order to howl at a given time in battle. Thus, having met the father's challenges, the hero attempts to surpass them and thereby enters recognized peer status. His initiation into manhood is complete.

Remember also that wolves are sacred to the family's progenitor, and that Sigi resided in the forest in wolf like demeanor.

The Threat to the Young Hero

Viewed collectively, the young hero has thus been born amid supernatural occurrences, has been identified as connected with the Great Mother, and has undergone trials of discovery and initiation under the mentorship of the father. Properly prepared for the world ahead, but still untested, the young hero begins to challenge his own limitations.

Sigmund and Sinfjotli's lives are threatened after they emerge from the forest, attempt to exact revenge upon King Siggeir, and are captured (twice now for Sigmund). To stall their execution, Signy convinces Siggeir to slay them slowly, binding them to a slab of stone in the center of a cairn, i.e., a conical heap of stones. (It is here where Signy will provide the sword).

This image may easily resemble the biblical crucifixion to some, but a more elusive symbolism here would be that such a structure (slab of rock in the center of a cairn) would resemble the rune *elhaz* (Z), inverted. One interpretation of this rune, according to author Michael Howard, includes a "warning of danger from subtle sources, possibly from within oneself, and including spiritual temptation and the risk of becoming involved with unreliable persons who should be treated with suspicion."

Howard's runic analysis has received some critique, but it is nevertheless significant to note Howard's findings here because these perspectives reflect *exactly* what happens to Sigurd, later in the saga, when he encounters Regin and wastes precious time amid the petty turmoil of Gjuki's court. Further, while Sinfjotli had risked death or injury during his rites of passage(outward threat), the greater danger seems to be Sigurd's, who is threatened by his own reluctance as well as those dangers from Regin and Grimhild's baneful natures (inward and outward threat).

Having been informed on two occasions of his fate, once by his uncle Gripir and once (in great detail) by Brynhild, Sigurd refuses to believe in or accept his own prophesied doom, a fact he dearly laments later when nearing death. Additionally, when he first meets Brynhild, he ignores her warning about the Ale of Forgetfulness (...*"Ale runes you shall know/If you desire no other's wife/To deceive you in troth/If you trust..."*), and when he does partake of it later, he tragically forgets about his beloved, spends two and a half years of blissful egotism and laziness in Gjuki's court, and marries Gudrun (thus staining his honor with shame and wreaking his heart with havoc when he realizes this after Brynhild breaks Grimhild's spell). Thus, the intrigue of life at court is a direct threat to the young hero's character. The similarity between this saga and that of Arthurian Camelot in this respect, though vague, cannot be ignored.

Sigurd's ignoring of his doom may coincide with the poetic Viking warrior mystique of "facing the odds whatever they may be," although in Sigurd's case this seems to be an effort in macho futility. On the other hand, if Sigurd had not ignored the prophesy, he never would have dared to confront the dragon at all. Perhaps, while unplanned and certainly wasteful, Sigurd's later laziness and betrayal could be construed as a personal

sacrifice, a martyr-like price paid for the greater good of slaying the dragon. Or this may simply be romantic bunk.

The Quest and the Notion of the Dragon Slayer

As noted, quest elements within the saga include the rites of passage through paternal search, and here this is also coupled with desire to revenge lost honor as a goal marker on that path. On the surface, this element can be found in Sigmund's vengeance upon Siggeir, and Sigurd's vengeance upon Lyngvi. The dragon slayer notion is found in Sigurd's confrontation with Fafnir.

After Sigmund's death, Sigurd is raised by Regin, a smith of moderate skill and the saga's trickster. Regin seems perpetually dissatisfied with things, and his favored course of action to remedy this seems to be having others fulfill his own responsibilities. He insists that Sigurd slay Fafnir for him no less than five times in the saga, not only revealing to us exactly what Regin is made of, but also revealing to the saga's audience where the pinnacle of the legend lies.

Regin fashions the sword Gram (after *three* attempts) for Sigurd, but before the fateful (!) battle, the hero vows to avenge his father by slaying King Lyngvi. This suggests a need for ritual purification, or at least to complete old business before proceeding to new business. While this delays his meeting with the serpent, this should not be interpreted as another incident of reluctance on Sigurd's part. This rather is an act of preparation, of sanctifying his honor (thus his identity) before meeting the saga's ultimate archetype of evil.

On this level, the quest includes preliminary moral and ethical battles: Sigurd's reluctance, Regin's vile craftiness and cowardice, Fafnir's temptation, Grimhild's intrigue. The slaying of the dragon is the final battle within the ongoing conflict of the hero's ethical development.

Beyond the surface, beyond the hero and dragon motif itself, a deeper psychological interpretation of the Volsunga Saga can be identified as the defeat of the subtle, destructive inner evils of the soul, which the runic correlation with the slab and cairn illustrate. This then indicates that the runic cairn symbolism is unlike its biblical crucifixion counterpart in one important distinction: the crucifixion of Jesus supposedly represented the "cleansing of man's sins," whereas the cairn symbolism only suggests a warning, pointing the way to identify those "sins." The message here is clear: responsibility for purification of the self is *ours* alone, not a savior's. (It is helpful, however if one's mate brings you a sword and a sandwich!)

Specifically, I'll offer that this saga is a warning against *cowardice and hypocrisy* (personified by Regin), *arrogance* (personified by Otr, Regin's brother), *egotism and laurel-resting* (Sigurd was warned as having fame-hunger [...]*"the harness was radiant/Which Regin had owned..."*) and was idle in court), but most of all, against

greed(personified by Fafnir). Sigurd was right on target when he told Regin that he “had lost much, and (his) kinsmen have been vile.”

Guides on the Path

During the battle with Fafnir, an interesting interplay occurs as Sigurd finds cover in a ditch (“underground”). As he prepares to engage the serpent, Regin offers Sigurd terrible combat advice, only to be unwittingly countered by Odin, who now returns to the scene after extensive foreshadowing. With this opposing counsel, the tense interplay toward the hero is humorously like the classic dual image of Conscience and Temptation upon either shoulder, only here the characterizations are better described as Bravery and Cowardice, Right and Wrong, or Success and Failure.

True to his nature, Regin runs off when events go against him (just *seeing* Fafnir is enough) and packs it in under a heather bush. This in itself would likely have evoked peals of laughter from the horn-quaffing audiences who heard the saga being told, who may have known the herb lore of heather: it reputedly grants immortality.

Since Odin is directly responsible for the Volsung line, it isn't surprising that he steers the clan's direction from time to time, or simply takes an interested peek at their activities. He does this not only in the fateful battle with Fafnir, but earlier. It is Odin who, as a wanderer, gives Sigurd the magical horse Grani. It is Odin who, as old man Fjölfnir, hitches a ride on Sigurd's longship while they are en route to Lyngvi's kingdom and vanishes just prior to the battle. It is Odin who gives Sigmund his sword, thrust into a tree deeply enough that only Sigmund may withdraw it, marking him as divinely protected (at least until the first battle with Lyngvi). This same sword was reforged (reborn?) as Gram, with which Fafnir is slain. (More commonalities with the Arthurian cycle?)

Confrontation with Death

Physical death doesn't seem to be as important a confrontation in this saga: the killing of king's sons makes for afternoon pastimes; life is cheap. There is, however, an essence that is highly prized, and the loss of which a great detriment: personal honor, troth, without which life is of little value.

Sigurd's honor is tarnished when, still under the influence of Grimhild's Ale of Forgetfulness and sorcery, he “breaks the rules” connected with his otherworldliness--leaping the fire wall protecting Brynhild. He does this, however, not to woo her for himself, but to do so for Gunnar, into whose likeness he has been shifted into. Brynhild, sworn to wed whomever exacted such a feat (knowing full well that only Sigurd could accomplish it), is thus forced to marry outside of love: Gunnar.

In the end, for honor, Sigmund refuses healing after he reasoned that Odin had ceased to protect him. Signy immolates herself with her despised husband, Siggeir, because she feels that to be away from his side (divorce) would be a fate worse than death, and that her treachery toward him (while deserved) warranted her life forfeited in atonement. In

attempting to save face (and Brynhild's false love), Gunnar actually damages his reputation by betraying Sigurd and (as Regin would have done) delegating the murder. He is rewarded when a suicidal, prophetic Brynhild portends the eradication of his line.

The strong underlying message here seems to be that suicide is an acceptable solution to crisis. It is important to bear in mind, of course, the context of the age behind the culture and society that produced this lore, and how very different ours is to it in the twentieth century. Suicide may have been an acceptable end to fifth century Vikings, samurai, and the like, but it certainly isn't in our culture, regardless of our devotion to the sagas. However, this does clearly suggest to us that the Gods aren't very lenient when it comes to oathbreaking.

In his death, Sigurd faces the betrayal that had been prophesied. Because his own web of crossed vows and broken promises (after trusting the strangers of Gjuki's court) would never permit him to have Brynhild again (a fact which struck him dumb upon the realization of it) the only means for him to save honor was, he reasoned, to end his life. In death, however, hero and beloved escape intrigue and betrayal and rejoin in the Halls.

After their deaths, as they lay upon the smoldering embers of their pyre, Gudrun vanishes into the forest, like Sigi and Sigmund and Sinfjotli before her. How beautifully fitting it is that the cry of wolves greet her there.

Source Material

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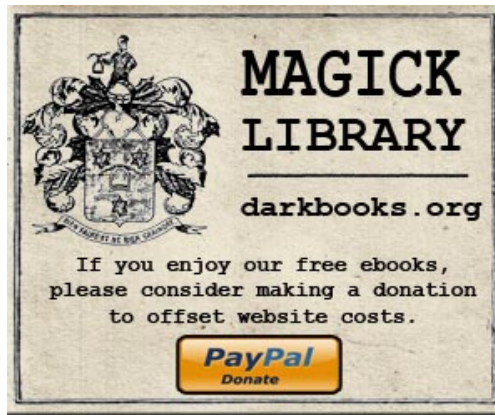
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