An Esoteric Commentary on the Volsung Saga, Part I

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A carving depicting Sigurd sucking the dragon’s blood off his thumb, from a stave church in Setesdal, Norway.

4,517 words

Part II here

The purpose of this essay is to offer an account of the hidden meaning of the Volsung Saga (Völsunga saga). In drawing out this meaning, I will approach the saga from a Traditionalist standpoint, broadly speaking; i.e., from the standpoint of Guénon and Evola. I will touch on some details concerning the relation of the saga to other sources, but I do not aim to provide anything like the sort of account a historian or philologist might give.

Some introductory remarks are necessary concerning the sources, and my methodology. The Volsung Saga is a late thirteenth-century Icelandic prose account of the clan of the Volsungs, which includes the heroes Sigmund and Sigurd.[1] Its sequel is Ragnar Lothbrok’s Saga (Ragnars saga loðbrókar), and in the only extant manuscript of the Volsung Saga the text is followed directly by the saga of Ragnar. (I will also have a few things to say in this essay about that saga as well.) We know that the Volsung Saga is based on older sources. Significant parts of it draw upon material in the Codex Regius, which was compiled earlier in the thirteenth century. Snorri Sturluson, in his Prose Edda (compiled ca. 1220), includes a summary of most elements of the Sigurd story, and quotes material found in the Codex Regius.

However, the stories of the Volsungs must be considerably older. The Ramsund carving in Sweden depicts episodes from the life of Sigurd, and it is thought to have been carved around the year 1030. We must also mention Beowulf, which includes the story of Sigmund (“Sigemund the Wælsing”), though in this version he is the dragon-slayer, not Sigurd. The manuscript of Beowulf was produced between 975 and 1025. We can safely assume that these stories had to have been circulating for a very long time before anyone thought to carve them in stone, or to incorporate them into Beowulf and any other texts. It is impossible to say when they had their origin, as the first versions were undoubtedly oral. Suffice it to say that we are dealing with a tradition that is centuries older than the first texts that give an account of it.

As Jackson Crawford has stated:

Seen in a wider context that takes in both their ancient roots and the widespread and long-lasting fame of their heroes, [the Volsung Saga and Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok] stand out not as the sources of a mythical tradition but as the culmination of it. The Saga of the Volsungs, in particular, is the masterpiece of an author who inherited a magnificent and deep-rooted set of conflicting but related traditions, and made from them a sweeping story that has become one of the longest-enduring and most influential sagas.[2]

Part of the problem with dating the sources of the Volsung Saga is that, as Crawford states, the text weaves together a number of stories that often seem loosely related. Some of these stories may be older than others, and have very distinct origins. It is likely that connections between them were made prior to the composition of the thirteenth-century saga, and it is, of course, possible that they were always connected in the minds of poets. Many elements from the Volsung Saga are to be found, as already noted, in the poems of the Codex Regius and in Snorri’s Prose Edda. What is missing from those sources, however, is most of the stories recounted in the Volsung Saga concerning the generations of Volsungs prior to Sigurd. Still, it seems likely that those stories were circulating in other forms, now mostly lost to us, long prior to their usage by the anonymous author of the saga. As already noted, Beowulf features Sigmund, father of Sigurd, though it makes the father the dragon-slayer. It is possible that there were other, older versions of Sigmund’s story in which he was also depicted as a dragon-slayer – and also possible that originally the stories of Sigmund and Sigurd had little or no relation. Connecting them may have been the inspiration of some later poet who could have transferred characteristics from one hero to the other.

Parts of the Volsung Saga seem to simply be digressions, and some parts contradict others! For example, in one chapter the tree that grows in Volsung’s hall is an oak, in another chapter it’s an apple tree. The saga also gives two conflicting accounts of the meeting of Sigurd and Brynhild. In addition, there are plot difficulties that strongly suggest that the saga writer is weaving together tales that have little connection. A good example of this is the story of Sinfjotli, son of Sigmund. After considerable dramatic build-up (including his conception as a result of the incest of Sigmund and Signy, his lycanthropy, etc.) he meets an anti-climactic end, and does nothing much (plot-wise) to pave the way for Sigurd, the apotheosis of the Volsungs. (Wagner was thus wise, in his version of the story, to swap Sinfjotli with Sigurd/Siegfried and make the latter the product of the incestuous union.[3])

All of these considerations seem to count against any approach to the Volsung Saga which would interpret it as a whole – as one, unitary tale – and offer an account of its hidden meaning. Nevertheless, that is just the approach I will take here, and it is not hard to justify it. First of all, I have already raised the possibility that these seemingly disparate and loosely-connected tales had been connected in the minds of poets for a very long time. In fact, it is possible that all the basic plot elements of the saga were in place from the beginning, at least in germinal form. The fact that some parts seem almost like separate, standalone stories could be due to the fact that elements of the original plot were extracted and elaborated upon individually by many generations of poets.

A second consideration is that even if the writer of the Volsung Saga wove together separate, only loosely-related tales, it is still true that this writer had literary intentions in combining the stories in the way that he did. We have to avoid the temptation of thinking that this saga is simply a handy compilation of stories. It is easy to fall into thinking about it this way, because we have no idea who the saga writer was. We thus tend not to think of him as an individual author, with his own perspective and intentions, but rather as a mere “anonymous compiler” of traditional stories. This could well be as big a mistake as thinking that Wagner – whose Ring weaves together the Volsung Saga with the Nibelungenlied and the stories of the gods in the Eddas – was merely grafting together different stories and had no message of his own. Thus, even if the Volsung Saga presents a patchwork of older tales, it is still entirely possible – indeed, it is likely – that the author created this tapestry because he saw deep connections between the stories, and had some meaning to communicate. It is the purpose of this essay to bring out that meaning – which I will argue is perennial or Traditional.

Finally, it must be mentioned that interpreting all texts as unitary wholes is a sound, hermeneutical methodology. Some texts only seem fragmentary on a first reading. On a deeper level, however, they exhibit unity. We would completely miss that unity if we never questioned whether our initial impression of the text might be superficial. In other words, if there really is a deeper unity to a text we are guaranteed to miss it if we don’t even try looking for it. Therefore, we have to try the experiment of reading every text, even the most seemingly disjointed, as if it is a whole, with a unity of underlying meaning. If that meaning is there, then hopefully this approach will uncover it. Of course, we must also work against the temptation to read meaning into texts where it is not present. In the case of texts like the Volsung Saga, familiarity with multiple sources from the same tradition, with the cultural context, and with perennial mythological and symbolic forms can help us both to recognize meaning, and to avoid implausible interpretations. This is a balancing act, and it is far from being an exact science.

Hopefully, the result of the present investigation will be to reveal that the Volsung Saga is a text rich with esoteric significance. I hope to shed light on significant parts of the text – though some elements may remain mysterious. And I assume I do not need to convince my readers that this investigation is worthwhile. In the cycle of Volsung tales we have the greatest heroic legends of the Germanic tradition. It is here, as many have recognized, that we find vitally important clues to the values and character of the Germanic peoples. And it is here, I will maintain, that we find veiled indications of esoteric teachings of a highly sophisticated nature. Finally, as all readers of the saga will discover, the text – even when taken on a superficial level – is exciting, endlessly imaginative, and often unsettlingly twisted and macabre.

The divisions of my commentary follow the chapter divisions in most editions of the text.[4]

1. Concerning Sigi, a son of Odin

The clan of the Volsungs are not referred to by that name from the very beginning. It takes its name from one of its greatest exemplars, who we will meet later on. The story of the clan begins with Sigi, whose father is Odin – so we may actually say that Odin is the first Volsung (what this name means, or may mean, will be discussed later). Now, we know that this god is crafty, and does everything for an ulterior motive. His two chief concerns are acquiring wisdom, and building an army of the dead that will fight by his side at Ragnarok. (These concerns are not unrelated, of course, since the wisdom Odin acquires can help him in the final battle.) We may thus assume that Odin’s purpose in siring Sigi is to create another warrior whom he can later “harvest” (to use Jackson Crawford’s term) for his army in Valhalla.[5]

What we will find, however, is that Odin’s actual plans are far more elaborate. With the Volsungs, he aims to create an entire clan of super-warriors, each generation of which is (in most cases) greater and stronger than the previous. In order to accomplish this, of course, selective breeding is necessary. The most dramatic instance in which this becomes a plot element is the incestuous union of the Volsung twins, Sigmund and Signy, which produces the hero Sinfjotli. As I will discuss in a later installment, the apparent rationale for this union (which must, I will argue, be credited to the crafty Odin) is the desire to produce a “pure” Volsung, without any admixture from outside the clan. In the case of the first Volsung, Sigi, we are given absolutely no information about the mother on whom Odin sired this boy. Thus, we are left with the impression that Sigi may be – just possibly – a “hypostasis” of Odin; another “pure Volsung,” the one who, armed with an undiluted heritage from the god himself, sires the rest of the clan.

With such parentage, one would expect great things of Sigi – but, at least at first glance, the character seems disappointing. Sigi has a friend named Skathi who is considered “powerful and great.” However, the text tells us that of the two, Sigi was more powerful and “from a better family” (hardly surprising, given his father). Note, however, that the text does not call Sigi “great” (mikill). One day Sigi goes hunting with Skathi’s slave, Brethi, who was as “talented and accomplished as many men who were considered his betters, and perhaps even more so than some such men.”[6] The result of the hunt is that Brethi kills more animals than Sigi, and more desirable ones as well. Enraged at being outshone by a slave, Sigi murders Brethi and conceals his body in a snowdrift.

Later that evening, Sigi compounds the crime by lying about it, saying that he lost track of Brethi in the forest and has no idea where he is. Skathi distrusts him, however, and his men go searching for Brethi and soon uncover his body. Sigi then receives the ultimate punishment for his crime. He is outlawed, cast out of society: “he could not remain at home with his father any longer.”[7] This is an interesting comment, for one would expect that Odin might have appeared, sired Sigi, and gone on his way. Instead, Sigi has apparently been living with Odin. Where? Probably not in Valhalla, since Sigi has to be living among men in order to be outlawed. Or could it be that Sigi has been fostered by a man? (Fosterage is a recurring theme in the saga.)

In any case, Odin does not abandon Sigi as a result of this shameful crime. Instead, it seems to strengthen their bond. The text tells us that Odin travelled with Sigi “a long way,” after the latter was commanded to leave his land. Their travels together end when they reach “some warships” – presumably a gift from Odin to Sigi. Indeed, when they part, Odin bestows an entire army on Sigi, who is “victorious in many battles.” Eventually, Sigi gains a kingdom for himself: “Hunland.” He “marries well” and achieves renown as a great king and mighty warrior. He and his wife have a son named Rerir who was “already a large and accomplished man at a young age.” The size, strength, and virility of the Volsungs are frequently mentioned in the saga, and, as noted already, they seem to increase with each subsequent generation.

Let us now address some of the peculiarities in the story of Sigi. To be “outlawed” is to be placed outside the bounds of society – its rules, mores, and of course, its protection. In essence, however, the practice of outlawing a man really consists in recognizing, officially, a status he has already chosen through his own deeds. The man who murders another member of his society, for example, has actually chosen outlawry – he has chosen to live outside society’s rules. What is significant about Sigi’s story is that it is not just his murder of the slave that breaks society’s covenants. Everything that leads up to it is also “outside the law,” or outside the norm.

Consider: Sigi not only goes hunting, alone, with a slave, he does so with another’s man’s slave. This is quite peculiar. Sigi, a free man who is “powerful” and of high birth, goes hunting with one of the lowliest members of society, who is not his to command. What is even stranger is that Brethi, the slave, is not there merely to carry Sigi’s weapons and help him bring home the kill. They are actually hunting partners, and Sigi, at least, sees them as competing. But such a relationship is one that is normally found among men who are social equals. Within the bounds of the society, these men are anything but. Keep in mind, however, that the story has them both stepping outside those bounds: they enter into the forest, into the wild, to go hunting. In the Indo-European tradition, the forest represents all that which is outside the social world. For example, as Kris Kershaw notes, the Sanskrit term usually translated “forest,” aranya, actually means what is “other than the village.”[8] (The Aranyakas, which are Hindu esoteric texts, derive their name from this term.)

Symbolically, Sigi and Brethi thus step outside the constraints of social norms. In the forest, as hunting partners, they are no longer free man and slave. Stripped, temporarily, of these social roles, the only thing that sets them apart is their skill at the primal, masculine activity with which they are engaged. And it is the slave who shows himself to be the better man! This too, of course, is contrary to what is “the norm.” We expect the free man, the powerful warrior, to be the better hunter. But the social roles do not reflect reality in this case: the “slave” is in fact master. Removed from the boundaries of society’s laws, alone in the forest, Sigi attempts to reassert his superiority in the only way he can: by killing Brethi.

Note that he does not chastise him or remind him that he is only a slave – for this would be a weak and artificial way of asserting superiority. Sigi knows that Brethi has proved himself better at the manly art of coping in the wildness that lies outside society – and Brethi knows that he knows this. To respond to Brethi by diminishing him, by reminding him of his social position, would be a craven form of compensation, and an appeal to the rules of the social world that has, in effect, been invalidated by the results of the hunt. Under the circumstances, killing Brethi is an honest, and manly response – if a bit of an overreaction (beating him up might have been sufficient). As an attempt to assert his natural superiority over Brethi, Sigi’s act is quite effective: Brethi may out-hunt Sigi, but Sigi can kill Brethi. In the end, Sigi does prove himself to be the more powerful man. Of course, in so doing, he removes any possibility that he can reenter the society that he and Brethi had left.

Now, we must assume that everything that happens to Sigi is probably somehow orchestrated by Odin. Why, then, does Odin allow his son to be placed in this situation, and to act the way that he does? Why does he bring Sigi to the ignominious fate of becoming an outlaw?

First of all, it must be said that Odin does not typically make anyone do anything. Instead, it is their own characters that typically make them do what they do. So, a better way of seeing the situation is that Odin places Sigi in this set of circumstances (or allows him to be placed) knowing that Sigi’s character will likely produce this sort of outcome. In short, Odin knows that in order for Sigi to fulfill his destiny, he must become outlawed. And the particular circumstances of his outlawry are significant as well. Remember that Odin is breeding a clan of super-warriors whom he can harvest for his army of the Einherjar. Such a race cannot prove itself within the constraints of society – it must break those constraints. Thus, Sigi, the first of the Volsung line, is placed in a primal situation in which social norms are first invalidated (the slave appears as “master”) and then completely rejected (Sigi murders Brethi).

Ultimately, the male warrior spirit always displays itself outside society, or on its margins. Even when men are fighting to defend their own society against outsiders, the fight happens essentially in a state of nature: There is no social authority governing the two sides in their confrontation, and all the rules that normally constrain man’s aggression are cancelled. Of course, in addition to warriors who fight to defend their tribe, we also have the phenomenon of rogue “warriors,” such as pirates, bandits, raiders, and gangs of all kinds. In the world of the Germanic tribes, such activities were not frowned upon, so long as these men did not victimize their own tribe and kin. Indeed, the act of raiding other tribes or slaughtering and robbing strangers was admired and served to enhance reputations. (This was also true of other Indo-European societies, including the archaic Greeks.[9]) We will encounter a dramatic instance of this later in the saga, when we come to the adventures of Sigmund and Sinfjotli.

Thus, there is a duality to the figure of the warrior. His prowess can be channeled into a force for protecting the tribe and preserving social order. On the other hand, if his prowess is not so channeled, it becomes a force of destruction. The latter way of life, which detaches the warrior from a social role of protection, is always powerfully attractive to men. When the warrior acts as protector of the tribe, he is essentially acting as protector of women and children, and thus as a servant of nature. But the human spirit – especially the male spirit – is characterized by the desire to disengage from natural ends and to create something noble and beautiful for its own sake – something that may be wholly impractical, and do nothing to advance survival and procreation. As D. H. Lawrence once wrote, “the desire of the human male is to build a world: not ‘to build a world for you, dear’: but to build up out of his own self and his own belief and his own effort something wonderful.”[10]

Since men find fulfillment in the role of warrior, there is thus always the possibility that they may choose to pursue that way of life for its own sake, rather than for the good of the tribe. In other words, what often begins as Dumezil’s “second function” of protection becomes a way of life unto itself, with its own values quite distinct from those of the village (which the warrior may, indeed, come to scorn). In this case, the warrior judges himself not in terms of whether he is effective in protecting the tribe, but whether he has achieved honor within the warrior band, through demonstrating his prowess and loyalty (to the band, not the tribe). It is obvious that the modern conception of the warrior, who is solely concerned with “defense” and with “peace-keeping,” is a degraded form. It is yet another illustration of the “feminized” nature of modernity, in which masculine, warrior virtues are only allowed expression when they are placed in the service of the womanly values of comfort, safety, and security.

In the ancient world, it must again be emphasized, both types of warrior were admired: the one who acts as protector of the tribe, and the one who acts independently, even as a force of pure destruction. The former was seen as “of the village,” and the latter, of course, as “of the forest.”[11] One strongly suspects that our (male) ancestors had greater admiration for the warriors who moved outside society, fighting and conquering for its own sake. And there is good reason for this. It is such men who, very often, found new tribes, new kingdoms – who make of themselves new kings, whereas the other type of warrior, the tribal protector, fights only to preserve what already exists, which he did not create, and always in the service of someone else.

Odin is the god of both types of men: He is the god of armies pledged to defend their tribe, as well as god of brigands, raiders, ruffians, bandits, and outlaws of all kinds (just like the Indian Rudra, and the Greek Hermes).[12] As the greatest of all warrior bands, Odin’s Einherjar serves as a paradigm against which all others are judged, and with which the Germanic warrior bands identified, seeing themselves as already dead and as one with their ancestors. But which sort of warriors are the Einherjar? They are loyal to no tribe. They are loyal only to each other – to the warrior band – and to Odin. And they live only to fight with each other on a daily basis, and eventually, to fight at Ragnarok. Thus, they most closely resemble the second sort of warriors described above: those that live independently of the tribe, devoted solely to the warrior life itself and the warrior code. (And the fact that the Einherjar were regarded as the ideal, as the paradigm of the warrior band itself, confirms my claim earlier that it is the second sort of warrior who was most admired, not the “protector of the tribe.”)

Of course, one might object that the Einherjar are recruited by Odin precisely as a protective force: an army that will protect him, and the tribe of the gods, against the forces of evil that will be unleashed in the final battle. However, this is simply not the case. First of all, Odin has heard the prophecy of the Volva and knows that he and the other gods will die in Ragnarok. Odin does not recruit an army to try to prevent this. He recruits an army because failing to fight is not an option. (And Odin’s resistance, utilizing the forces of the Einherjar, is itself something that is prophesied.) This is something that many will find difficult to understand, because modern people do not understand the concept of honor.

Ragnarok is really a battle between the forces of honor and a degenerate, monstrous, multi-form dishonor. Thus, Odin and his Einherjar are moved by the values of the second type of warrior I described earlier – the one who pursues the warrior way of life (which includes devotion to honor) for its own sake, and not with the end of “protection” in mind. At the final battle, Odin, the gods, and the Einherjar will face an array of monsters sired by the dishonorable Loki, all described as the epitome of treachery and evil. This includes the Midgard-serpent, who is described at one point as “honorless.”[13]

And fighting those creatures will be Sigi, alongside many other powerful warriors. Again, Odin’s purpose in creating Sigi is to give rise to the greatest of all warrior clans. Of course, Odin only seeks greatness for Sigi so that he may, at some later point, end his life and call him to Valhalla, where he will take his place as a useful member of the Einherjar. In order to make Sigi truly great among men, and worthy of a place at the table in Valhalla, Odin must remove him from society. Sigi must cease being a warrior in the service of an existing social order, and become his own master, a lone wolf who will go on to create his own world. Outlawed, returned to the state of nature, Sigi must constitute a new honor and a new code – a code disconnected from the social role of warrior as “protector.”

As we shall see, it will not be long before Odin calls Sigi to Valhalla . . .

Notes

[1] I have anglicized most Old Norse names and terms herein, avoiding special characters like þ, ð, dh, đ, etc.

[2] The Saga of the Volsungs with the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok, trans. Jackson Crawford (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2017)

[3] Wagner also alludes to the forest adventures involving Sigmund and Sinfjotli, but in his version it involves Wotan and Sigmund, who are father and son. See my book Wagner’s Ring and the Germanic Tradition, forthcoming from Counter-Currents Publishing.

[4] The chapter titles herein quote the translation by Jackson Crawford. This is the translation quoted throughout.

[5] Crawford, xi.

[6] Crawford, 1.

[7] Crawford, 1.

[8] Kris Kershaw, The One-Eyed God: Odin and the (Indo-) Germanic Männerbünde (Washington, DC: Journal of Indo-European Studies monograph no. 36), 111.

[9] See Kershaw, 16.

[10] D. H. Lawrence, Fantasia of the Unconscious (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 18.

[11] Kershaw, 108-109.

[12] Kershaw, 36.

[13] Voluspa 54; The Poetic Edda, trans. Jackson Crawford (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2015), 12.

Chapter 2. Concerning Rerir and His Son Volsung

In the previous chapter, we saw that Sigi, the son of Odin, is the first step in the god’s master plan: the creation of a new race of super-warriors, who will come to be known as the clan of the Volsungs. In order to become a truly great warrior, Sigi must transgress man’s laws and remove himself from society – entering the wilderness where he will live as his own master and create a world of his own. Thus, Sigi is outlawed for killing a slave who had outshined him in hunting. I argued in the last installment that Odin either orchestrates this event, or allows it to happen (it comes to the same thing). Once Sigi has been banished, Odin repeatedly rewards him. He accompanies Sigi on raids, gives him an army and ships, and makes him victorious in battle. Sigi is able to claim a kingdom for himself. He marries well and his wife gives him a son named Rerir, who “was already a large and accomplished man at a young age.”

But we know that Odin is a fickle god. He raises men up only to abandon them later. This is all very deliberate on the god’s part: He is building an army of the dead in Valhalla, the Einherjar. And for this purpose, he needs the best warriors. Thus, he favors certain promising men (in this case, actually sires one), and nurtures them, insuring that they receive training and experience that will mold them into formidable fighters. And he provides them with the means to advance from one victory to another, accumulating ever greater glory. Then, just when these men feel assured that they are invincible and always to be favored by the god, Odin turns on them – he allows them to be killed so that, having reached their peak, they may join his army in Valhalla.

And this is just what happens with Sigi in Chapter Two. Sigi grows old. He acquires many enemies, as all great men must. Finally, however, he is betrayed by men he had trusted: his own brothers-in-law. These men ambush Sigi and murder him and his retinue. As we will see, there are certain elements in the Volsung Saga that appear a number of times. One of these is betrayal by kin. This will occur again, much more famously, in the story of Sigurd, and elsewhere in the saga.

Upon his father’s death, Rerir claims the kingdom as his own and then raises an army to seek vengeance against his uncles. Now, what the text has to say here is interesting. We are told that Rerir does this because “they had betrayed him so severely that their kinship was now invalid.”[1] This clearly implies that killing kin was considered taboo (as I noted in Part One, raiding and murder were considered permissible by the Germanic tribes, so long as the victims were not one’s own kin, or members of one’s tribe). In this case, however, Rerir simply decides on the authority of his own judgment to lift this particular moral prohibition. Once more, we see a Volsung transgressing a significant moral and social rule. We are then told that Rerir did not stop until he had killed all his relatives who were complicit in the murder of Sigi. And, to reinforce the shocking nature of this transgression, the text says that he did this “even though such a slaughter of near relatives had until then been unheard of in every way.”[2] This transgression of moral norms, sometimes taking genuinely horrific forms, is a recurring characteristic of the Volsungs throughout the entire saga.

Despite this, Rerir becomes “an even greater man than his father had been.”[3] In other words, he is rewarded for the slaughter of his relatives. Once again, we sense the hand of Odin at work. But all is not entirely well with Rerir. Though he has all his father’s and his uncles’ lands and riches, and a wife who is worthy of him, somehow he and his Queen cannot conceive a child. We are told that they pray repeatedly to the gods to grant them a son. Frigg hears their prayer and then informs Odin, “who was not in any doubt about how to help.”[4] He summons Hljod, one of his Valkyries and the daughter of the giant Hrimnir, and gives her a magic apple. Turning into a crow, she flies off to Rerir’s kingdom and finds the King sitting on a burial mound. She drops the apple in his lap, and somehow Rerir knows what he should do with it. He returns home to the Queen and then he eats some of the apple. A short time later, the queen is pregnant. (Presumably, they had intercourse after Rerir ate the apple.)

There is more here than meets the eye in this quaint tale. First of all, let us ask which one of the pair is infertile, Rerir or his Queen. The text provides us with an answer to this question, if we read between the lines. When the apple arrives, Rerir is depicted as sitting on a howe, a burial mound. It is a well-known fact that our ancestors practiced the custom of sitting on a howe in order to increase fertility.[5] Since Rerir is doing this, the suggestion is that he believes that he is responsible for the couple’s inability to conceive. Further, the text states clearly that Rerir is the one who eats of the apple.[6]

Now, why would Rerir believe that he is the one who is infertile? Here we must infer, which is not difficult, the criteria by which such matters would have been decided in the time of the saga. In cases where the man was potent and the couple could not conceive, the woman would be assumed responsible, as there was no knowledge of “sperm count.” The only conceivable circumstance in which the couple would think the man responsible is if he were impotent. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that Rerir sits on the howe to try and restore his potency, and that when he eats the magic apple, this is accomplished.

But this is obviously a very strange situation. How does Rerir’s impotence serve Odin’s ultimate purpose of seeing the Volsung clan increase and flourish? Obviously Rerir’s condition is completely at odds with Odin’s aims – and so we sense, perhaps, the intervention of some other, contrary force in the matter. Could Rerir’s impotence be a punishment visited on him by one of the other gods? Recall that the text tells us that Frigg hears the prayers of Rerir and his Queen. It does not say that they pray to her. Indeed, it would be much more natural for them to have prayed to Freyja, who was a goddess of fertility and to whom mortals often appealed when increased fertility was desired.[7] A further oddity is that Frigg does not help the couple herself with her own magical powers, but instead informs Odin. The god then does not go himself to bring help to Rerir, but sends a loyal Valkyrie disguised as a crow. (In many other cases in the saga, he intervenes in events personally and directly.)

One possible hypothesis is that Rerir has been rendered impotent as punishment for the slaughter of his mother’s family. It is possible (though this is pure speculation) that it is indeed Frigg who has punished him in this way.[8] After all, surely Rerir’s crime would have offended Frigg, who is goddess of hearth, home, and familial bonds – and, by implication, goddess of the conventional morality that supports these (an aspect of her character that is artfully portrayed by Wagner in the Ring). If this is true, why does she tell Odin? To gloat, perhaps? In any case, Odin’s response can certainly be interpreted as subterfuge, a way of getting around Frigg and not incurring her wrath: again, he sends the Valkyrie Hljod in disguise to deliver the apple, rather than going himself.

Regardless, whether or not this theory is correct, we do feel the need of an explanation for Rerir’s impotence, since it is obviously so contrary to Odin’s plans. However, there is another, somewhat simpler hypothesis: perhaps Odin himself makes Rerir impotent because the god wants to inject his own seed, as it were, once more into the bloodline, to further strengthen it. Perhaps this is what is delivered in the apple. Eating it, Rerir impregnates his Queen with Odin’s seed, not his own. (In a later installment of this series, I will argue that something like this occurs again at the wedding feast of Signy and Siggeir, when Odin appears and plunges a sword into the tree Barnstokk.)

What occurs next in the story is equally peculiar. The Queen becomes pregnant, but the pregnancy lasts “an unusually long time.”[9] In fact, the text tells us a little later that it lasts for six years! Unusual births and strange gestations are relatively common in myth and folklore. In the Mahabharata, Queen Gandhari’s pregnancy lasts an unusually long time. Hearing that Queen Kunti has given birth to the Pandavas, Gandhari begins beating her abdomen until a kind of grey ball emerges out of her. The sage Vyasa divides the ball into 101 parts, and then places the fragments into 101 earthenware jars, where they grow into Duryodhana and his 99 brothers and one sister.

These long gestations clearly suggest that something very special is growing – something great, something that takes a great deal of time. This is certainly true in the case of Rerir’s Queen, for she gives birth to Volsung, the character from which the entire clan takes its name. When he emerges from the womb, he is “already very big.”[10] We are told, further, that he kisses his mother before she expires from the ordeal – something that would only seem possible if he had already attained a degree of mature awareness. Meanwhile, Rerir is away in battle. He becomes sick and dies of an illness, though he had “intended to join Odin,” the text says.[11] (Only men who die violently may join the Einherjar in Valhalla.) Though Odin has lost a Volsung, Rerir’s son will be ample compensation.[12]

There is a general scholarly consensus that the name “Volsung” means “stallion phallus.” Jackson Crawford buries this odd and somewhat embarrassing fact in a footnote:

Old Norse names ending in –ung are typically designations for families and not for individuals, so it is likely that the original name of the individual Volsung was Volsi, and that his name was extended later to match the name of the family named for him. This is supported by the fact that his son Sig(e)mund is called a Wælsing (= Old Norse Volsung) in Beowulf, as well as simply “son of Wæls,” an Old English cognate of the Old Norse Volsi. The name Volsi occurs in one place in Old Norse literature, in a story about the Norwegian king Ólaf Tryggvason in the manuscript Flateyjarbók. There, the name is applied to a stallion’s preserved phallus that is worshipped by a pagan family. “Phallus,” perhaps specifically “stallion’s phallus” may well be the name’s original meaning (the same root is found in other words for cylindrical objects), and the name of Volsung and his family might then have evoked the virility of a stallion.[13]

The juxtaposition of Rerir with Volsung could not be more striking: the impotent father is followed by his diametrical opposite, the son called “stallion phallus.” And Volsung certainly is virile: he produces eleven children. Ten of these are sons, and there is one daughter. The eldest son, Sigmund, is also the twin of the daughter, Signy.[14] (The other children are not named in the story.) The saga writer tells us that Sigmund and Signy were the “foremost” and “most beautiful in every way” of Volsung’s children, but that “All of Volsung’s children were great.”[15]

The proliferation of males also seems to be an expression of Volsung’s virility. We might ask (since this is likely a work of pure fiction), why not eleven sons and no daughter? It is significant that this daughter is the very first female Volsung – and we would not go wrong in assuming that she comes into the world to serve a very special purpose (a purpose, of course, that suits Odin’s plans). Those already familiar with the events of the saga, of course, know that this one daughter is necessary to produce the next generation of Volsungs.

In addition to sexual virility, Volsung is an all-around paragon of masculine virtue. “He grew big and strong at a young age, and he was very bold in every kind of deed that requires manliness and courage. He became a very great warrior, and he was victorious in his battles.”[16] We have already seen Sigi and Rerir described in similar terms. As I noted in the last installment, each generation of Volsung seems to be bigger, stronger, braver, and more virile than the last. Thus, the text informs us that Volsung’s children were “the greatest of all those mentioned in the ancient sagas, the greatest in wisdom and in all sports and all kinds of combat.”[17]

Stephen Flowers notes that in the sagas generally, it is often later generations of a family that exhibit real greatness.[18] This also makes sense in terms of the complex and mysterious Germanic conception of “the soul.” If one can acquire more than one fylgja (“guardian spirit”), which strengthens the kynfylgja (the fylgja of one’s clan), and if the hamingja (“luck”) is fed by heroic deeds, then clearly something builds or grows across several generations. (See Part Two of my essay “Ancestral Being” for more information on these concepts.) The members of the clan are the unfolding of what the clan is – the flowering of its potentialities. The full flower of the Volsungs, of course, is Sigurd, who is not only the bravest and strongest of warriors, but so tall that when he walks through a field of full-grown rye, “the bottom point of his scabbard would touch the top of the plants.”[19]

The mother of Volsung’s children is none other than the Valkyrie Hljod, who had delivered the magic apple to Rerir. She is “sent” by her father, the giant Hrimnir, to wed Volsung once he reaches maturity. There is something oddly “incestuous” about this union, given that the Valkyrie had facilitated the conception of Volsung, and is much older than him. As we have seen, when Hljod delivered the apple she was acting under the orders of Odin. It is hard to believe that that is not also the case in this instance. Yes, it is her father who sends her – but all fathers “give away” their daughters. It is highly unlikely that Hrimnir sends her to Volsung for any other reason than that Odin has requested it. So, what we have in the case of the Volsung-Hljod match is a man who is very probably a child of Odin (recall that the apple may deliver Odin’s “seed”) marrying a Valkyrie, who happens to be the daughter of a giant. It is clear that with this match, Odin aims to produce beings even greater than Volsung. It is also plausible to suppose (though the text does not give any indication of this) that Hljod may also have been sent to play the role of teacher to Volsung – initiating him into secret knowledge held only by the gods and the giants. Later in the text, Brynhild plays such a role to Sigurd.

In any case, after establishing himself in the world as a great King and father of a large brood, Volsung builds a “magnificent hall” around an immense tree whose branches weave about the beams of the roof. In the present chapter, it is described as an oak, whereas in the following chapter it becomes an apple tree. This could reflect the Icelanders’ use of “oak” (eik) as a general term for tree, or the saga writer’s reliance on different sources. The more symbolically “authentic” choice is clearly the apple tree, for we have seen an apple playing a major role already in the continuation of the Volsung clan. The name of the tree is Barnstokk, which can be translated “child tree” or “family tree.”[20] All of this obviously points to the conclusion that the tree represents the Volsung clan itself.

H. R. Ellis Davidson notes that “we have here an example of the ‘guardian tree,’ such as used to stand beside many a house in Sweden and Denmark, and which was associated with the ‘luck’ of the family.”[21] She then cites some actual historical examples of houses built around trees. However, this was by no means a common practice (so far as we know), so this detail in the saga is striking and cries out for interpretation.

Symbolically, a tree contained within a hall represents the constraint or confinement of the natural by what is human or social. In Volsung’s eyes, building the hall around the tree is likely an act of protection – of safeguarding his clan, as represented by the tree and its fruit. But what we find in the next chapter is that just as the tree is confined by the hall, its branches entangled in the beams, so has Volsung entangled his family within social ties of a highly undesirable nature. Specifically, he has married his daughter off to another king, a man she does not love and who is treacherous and dishonorable. And all of this was arranged, no doubt, with the same sort of good intentions with which he confined the tree: to safeguard his family by forming an alliance, keeping the peace, and insuring Signy’s future. As we shall see, however, Odin has different plans . . .

Notes

[1] The Saga of the Volsungs with the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok, trans. Jackson Crawford (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2017), 2.

[2] Crawford, 2.

[3] Crawford, 2.

[4] Crawford, 2.

[5] See H. R. Ellis Davidson, The Road To Hel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 105-111.

[6] As R. G. Finch notes, “no other translation seems possible.” See Finch, The Saga of the Volsungs (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1965), 3 (footnote 2).

[7] I am aware that some scholars theorize that at some remote time, Frigg and Freyja were actually one goddess, but by the time the sources of the saga were composed, these were definitely distinct figures.

[8] In Greek myth, Hera (who shares many characteristics with Frigg) curses Priapus with impotence whenever he actually tries to put his erection to real use.

[9] Crawford, 3.

[10] Crawford, 3.

[11] Crawford, 3.

[12] This sequence of events lends some support to the hypothesis that Odin deliberately renders Rerir impotent and transmits his own seed to Rerir’s Queen by means of the apple. Perhaps this King, who manages to die in his bed, was not so great after all.

[13] Crawford, x. Other scholars agree. Mindy McLeod and Bernard Mees note that volsi is slang for “penis,” derived from vǫlr, meaning “rod.” This is in turn related to Modern Norwegian volse “thick, long muscle, thick figure,” Icelandic völstur “cylinder,” dialectal Swedish volster “bulge,” Old High German wulst “bulge,” and the English dialectal word weal meaning “penis.” See McLeod and Mees, Runic Amulets and Magic Objects (Rochester, N.Y.: Boydell Press, 2006), 104. For information on the story in Flateyjarbók see the Wikipedia entry on Völsa þáttr.

[14] Sigmund literally means “victory protection” and Signy means “new victory.” It is my view that an analysis of the names in the saga does not reveal much.

[15] Crawford, 3.

[16] Crawford, 3.

[17] Crawford, 3.

[18] See Stephen E. Flowers, Sigurðr: Rebirth and the Rites of Transformation (Smithfield, Tx.: Rûna-Raven, 2011), 70.

[19] Crawford, 41.

[20] Crawford, xi.

[21] H. R. Ellis Davidson, “The Sword at the Wedding,” Folklore 71:1 (March 1960): 1-18; 4.

Chapter 3. The Marriage of Siggeir to Signy, Volsung’s Daughter

In our last installment, we met Volsung (“stallion phallus”), who becomes a great King and sires eleven children: the twin brother and sister Sigmund and Signy, and nine brothers (who go unnamed). Volsung builds a “magnificent hall” around an immense apple tree whose branches weave about the beams of the roof. The name of the tree is Barnstokk, which can be translated as “child tree” or “family tree.” Obviously, it represents the Volsung clan itself.

In Volsung’s eyes, building the hall around the tree is likely an act of protection – of safeguarding the clan, as represented by the tree and its fruit. But what we find in Chapter Three is that just as the tree is confined by the hall, its branches entangled in the beams, so has Volsung entangled his family within social ties of an unfortunate nature. Specifically, he intends to marry his daughter Signy off to Siggeir, King of Götaland, a man she “was not eager to marry.” Nevertheless, her father insists that it is “advisable” that she marry Siggeir. In other words, Volsung’s intentions are to secure his family and Kingdom by forming an alliance. Signy acquiesces, “as she did in all matters concerning her.”[1]

For the wedding feast, Volsung invites Siggeir and his men to the great hall, where the celebration takes place around the apple tree. Suddenly, a stranger walks into the revels. “He had a spotted cloak draped over himself, he was barefoot, and he had linen pants tied to his legs. He had a wide-brimmed hat on his head, and he was very tall, elderly, and had only one eye.” Needless to say, this is Odin (though the text says “no one knew who he was”). From his cloak he draws a sword and plunges it into the tree trunk “up to the hilt.” Odin then says, “Whoever draws this sword out of the tree trunk will receive the sword as a gift from me, and he will say truly that he never held a better sword in his hand than this one.”[2] The old man then swiftly leaves the hall.

Of course, we are immediately reminded of the Arthurian “sword in the stone” motif. However, in Arthurian legend, the sword signifies the right to rule: He who can pull the sword from the stone is the “true king.” Here, nothing like this is intended. The one who can pull the sword from the tree is simply the intended recipient of a very good sword indeed. We suspect, however, that much more may be going on here. Surely the crafty Odin cannot be offering a gift with no strings attached . . .

All the men try to pull the sword from the tree, but they take turns based on social rank. While we, the readers, surmise that the sword is intended for a specific person (and only for him), the characters in the story clearly believe that more than one person might have the strength to free the sword. Thinking it would be better that such a sword wind up in the hands of a well-born man, the higher-ranking men try first. After a number of those men try and fail, it is Sigmund’s turn (recall that he is Volsung’s son and Signy’s twin). Sigmund pulls the sword out of the tree with ease: “it came out in his hands as if it had sat there loose for him.”[3]

Sigmund’s feat clearly frustrates expectations of what “ought to be,” where those expectations are based entirely on social conventions concerning status. Once again, the saga depicts one of the Volsung heroes (and we will shortly see Sigmund develop into a great hero indeed) somehow breaking social convention or stepping outside its bounds – and, once more, it is at the instigation of Odin. The god has enchanted the sword so that it is not the “highest ranking” man who wins it, but rather the man who is the best – who deserves the sword through nature, not convention. But there is a further level here as well, for Sigmund’s winning the sword is intended to undermine, in a sense, yet another socially-sanctioned arrangement: the marriage of Signy and Siggeir.

After Sigmund pulls the sword from the tree, Siggeir is barely able to conceal his rage and envy. “King Siggeir offered to buy the sword from Sigmund for three times its weight in gold.” However, Siggeir responds, “You could have taken this sword from the tree as easily as I did, if it had been meant for you. But now, because it came to me, you will never receive it from my hand, even if you offer me all the gold you own.” This only enrages Siggeir further, for he suspects that he is being mocked. However, “because he was a man of underhanded character,” he pretends as if he is unphased by Sigmund’s refusal. The text tells us that that very evening, Siggeir began plotting his revenge.[4]

Why is Siggeir so enraged by Sigmund winning the sword? Is it just because he covets such a great prize? H. R. Ellis Davidson mentions the Scandinavian custom of plunging a sword into a tree or post in wedding celebrations. She notes that “in Norway there was a custom surviving into recent times for the bridegroom to plunge his sword into the roof beam, to test the ‘luck’ of the marriage by the depth of the scar made.”[5] The sexual connotations of this are obvious. Davidson also suggests that the sword represents the “luck” (hamingja) of the family itself. It is possible that Siggeir is entirely aware of this symbolic significance of the sword, “and that its possession would symbolize the ‘luck’ which would come to him with his bride, and the successful continuation of his own line in the sons to be born of the marriage.”[6] According to convention, it really should be Siggeir for whom the sword was intended. When it becomes clear that this is not the case, he feels grievously insulted.

All of this seems reasonable, and we can expand upon it. Davidson also invokes Tacitus, who mentions that among the Germans it was the custom that the bride gave her groom “some weapon.” The bride, too, received weapons from her husband (among other gifts), and she was expected to hand all these wedding gifts “on to her children, unimpaired and in worthy state, which her daughters-in-law may receive and which may be handed on again to grandchildren.” Certainly, the motif of a weapon being safeguarded by women and passed down to later generations is one of the most important elements in the plot of the Volsung Saga. Tacitus tells us also that the exchange of these wedding gifts was considered “their greatest bond, these their sacred rites, these their marriage divinities.”[7]

Given all of this, it seems clear that when Odin appears at the wedding with his sword, in effect he is providing Signy’s wedding gift to her husband. (It is natural that Odin should perform this function, since he is, after all, Signy’s great-great grandfather and the progenitor of the entire clan – although the others present are unaware of this.) When Sigmund proves to be the only one capable of receiving the sword by pulling it from Barnstokk, this effectively identifies him as Signy’s husband! Of course, this analysis of the situation further supports Davidson’s claim that Siggeir’s rage is due to his understanding of the symbolic meaning of the sword, and of Sigmund’s possession of it. Those who know what is to come in the saga know that Sigmund will become Signy’s husband – not in the eyes of society and social convention, but in the eye of Odin. The incest of Signy and Sigmund, which, as we will see, Odin brings about through an elaborate manipulation of events, is the necessary condition for producing the next generation of the Volsung clan.

Throughout this essay I have repeatedly claimed that one of the key features of the saga is that in order for the Volsung clan to flourish and multiply, Odin and its members must continually violate conventional standards of morality and social order. The incest of Sigmund and Signy is certainly the most notorious example of this – although, arguably, greater and even more shocking examples are to come.

We have seen that the first step Odin takes toward making this incest possible involves a violation of the conventions surrounding weddings and their celebration. It is he who appears as an unannounced and uninvited guest with – as I have argued – the bridal gift intended for Signy’s husband. And it is Odin who, through his magic, manipulates the moment so that Siggeir, Signy’s husband according to law and convention, impotently struggles to win the sword, but fails. Odin’s plan is for the Volsungs to bear further fruit through Signy – but not with the participation of the loathsome Siggeir. Instead, Odin signals his displeasure with King Volsung’s plan to marry his daughter off to an inferior man, and symbolically declares the winner of the sword, her twin brother Sigmund, as her true husband. In the eyes of the law, Signy and Siggeir are already man and wife by the time Odin appears in the hall (presumably the wedding preceded the feast), but we will see that their marriage is a calamity, and that none of their children survive.

In terms of the significance of the sword, we must also bear in mind Davidson’s theory that the sword represents the “luck” of the clan. Of course, Odin is the progenitor of the clan itself, who continually manipulates it to his own purposes. We must therefore also consider the possibility that, through the sword, Odin is transmitting his own “luck” to Sigmund, and thereby once again is in effect inserting his own “seed” into the Volsung bloodline.[8] But why manipulate matters so that it is the twins, Sigmund and Signy, who continue the clan through incest? Why not arrange things so that Signy winds up with a worthy man of another clan – someone who is brave and true, unlike the weak and conniving Siggeir? And if incest must be involved, why does Odin have Signy commit incest with Sigmund, rather than with one of the other nine brothers? Obviously, it is key that Signy and Sigmund are twins. Odin’s clear intention is to produce as pure a Volsung as possible, through the intercourse of the most closely related male and female of the clan. The obvious intention is that a pure Volsung will be a super-Volsung, the greatest member of the clan yet.

We will see that this intention is only partially realized. But there is a great deal to be covered in the story, before we reach the notorious episode of the incest of the twins. And some of the episodes to come are among the most gruesome and fascinating of the entire saga. . . .

Notes

[1] The Saga of the Volsungs with the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok, trans. Jackson Crawford (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2017), 4.

[2] Crawford, 4.

[3] Crawford, 5.

[4] Crawford, 5.

[5] H. R. Ellis Davidson, “The Sword at the Wedding,” Folklore 71:1 (March 1960): 1-18; 3.

[6] Davidson, 5.

[7] Tacitus’ Germany, trans. Herbert W. Benario (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 72.

[8] On the sword as carrier of “luck,” see also Stephen E. Flowers, Sigurðr: Rebirth and the Rites of Transformation (Smithfield, TX: Rûna-Raven, 2011), 94ff.

Part I here, Part II here, Part III here, Part V here

In our last installment, we saw how King Volsung marries his daughter Signy off to the loathsome King Siggeir of Götaland, a man she “was not eager to marry.” Into the wedding feast marches a man who can be none other than the god Odin in his guise as the Wanderer. From his cloak he draws a sword and plunges it into Barnstokk, the tree growing in the middle of the hall (which symbolizes the Volsung clan itself). Whoever can pull the sword from the tree wins it as a gift. Only Sigmund, Signy’s twin, is able to perform this feat. He thus earns the everlasting enmity of Siggeir, who believes the sword should be his. I argued previously that this is because the sword offered at a wedding traditionally represented the “luck” of the family, and was intended for the bridegroom. Thus, when only Signy’s brother can free the sword, it seems that Odin is signaling that he is Signy’s rightful husband. Most readers will already be aware that, sure enough, it is through the incest of Signy and Sigmund that the Volsung line continues – and that this is all part of Odin’s plan.

Chapter 4. Siggeir Invites Volsung to Join Him

After Sigmund refuses to sell the sword to Siggeir, the latter begins plotting his revenge that very night – and the text tells us that he also consummates his marriage to Signy. The following morning the weather is good and Siggeir announces that he is returning home immediately. Volsung perceives that Siggeir desperately wishes to depart the feast. But Signy goes to her father, and makes one last, desperate attempt to free herself from Siggeir. Jackson Crawford translates her words to Volsung as follows:

I don’t want to go away with King Siggeir. There is nothing in my heart that smiles for him. And I know, thanks to my gift of second sight which is common in our family, that this decision will cause a disaster for us if you won’t change your mind immediately.

The words concerning “second sight” deserve a closer look. In Old Norse, the line reads veit ek af framvísi minni ok af kynfylgju várri. This might be more literally translated as “I know from my foreknowledge and from the fetch of our kin [kynfylgja].” The fylgja is one of the more complex and mysterious aspects of the Germanic pagan worldview. (See my essay “Ancestral Being.”) It is often referred to as a “guardian spirit,” which is something of an oversimplification, but helpful up to a point. The lore seems to suggest that there are fylgjur of individual men, and ones associated with entire clans are families – this is the concept of the kynfylgja (“fetch” of the kin).

This kynfylgja can sometimes become attached to a single individual who, as it were, carries the guardian spirit of the entire family. The strong suggestion here in Chapter Four is that the kynfylgja of the Volsungs has attached itself to Signy, with whom it communicates. This makes perfect sense, for we know that it is through Signy – specifically through her incest with Sigmund – that the clan will continue. Later we will see, as Stephen Flowers has discussed in detail, how the kynfylgja (or hamingja–kynfylgja, for the two concepts are hard to disentangle) is passed to later generations of the Volsungs by means of the sword won by Sigmund.[1]

In any case, Volsung ignores Signy’s words of warning. This is entirely predictable. It is virtually axiomatic in the Icelandic sagas that women’s prophecies always turn out to be true, and that they are always ignored or misinterpreted by men. It is also predictable that Volsung’s answer to her appeals entirely to social convention. Throughout the parts of this commentary I have repeatedly claimed that one of the key features of the saga is that in order for the Volsung clan to flourish and multiply, Odin and its members must continually transgress conventional standards of morality and social order. (The incest of Sigmund and Signy is only the most notorious example of this.)

It was Volsung’s concern with establishing conventional social ties – an “advisable” alliance with Siggeir – and his lack of concern for his daughter’s own feelings that has gotten his entire family into this mess. This may seem at first glance like a projection, on my part, of modern values onto our pre-modern ancestors. Yes, it is quite true that arranged marriages were common. Yet it is also true that one of the things that makes Western culture unique – and this is especially true of the culture of Northern Europe, dating to pre-modern times – is that the wishes of the parties to marriage, including those of women, were taken into consideration.[2] Thus, during the time in which the saga was written, the reaction of readers to Signy’s forced and unwanted marriage would have been very much like our own.

Appealing, once again, to social convention, Volsung tells his daughter that if she were to break her marriage vows to Siggeir it would bring shame upon the family, especially since Siggeir is innocent of wrongdoing. All trust would be lost between the parties, and Siggeir would pay the Volsungs back with hostility. Thus, “the only proper thing for us to do is to honor our end of the agreement.”[3] This is not by any means a simple conflict, and I do not mean to suggest anything as facile as an outright rejection of social convention in favor of “the heart.” The points that Volsung makes are entirely valid. There is thus a genuine and, it seems, irreconcilable conflict here. And this is a theme we find in many of the sagas and traditional stories: characters who are bound by oaths or ties to do things that cause harm or unhappiness to the undeserving. We will see this problem reappear later in the saga. In the present case, Odin has already, in effect, cut this Gordian knot with his sword: Sigmund’s winning of that sword will ultimately result in the breaking of Signy and Siggeir’s marriage, the destruction of Siggeir’s clan, and the continuation of the Volsungs.

Before Siggeir sails home with his bride, he invites Volsung and his sons to visit him in three months’ time in Götaland. He suggests that Volsung bring with him as many warriors as he wishes “who would do him credit with their company.”[4] Siggeir explains that he issues this invitation to make up for leaving the wedding feast so abruptly, which was considered bad form. Volsung accepts his invitation – oblivious, it seems, to the inevitable trap the reader knows is coming.

Chapter 5. Concerning the Treachery of King Siggeir

Three months later, travelling in three ships, Volsung, his sons, and their men arrive at Götaland late at night. They are met by Signy, who asks to speak with her father and brothers in private. She tells them that they are walking into an ambush, and that Siggeir has assembled a mighty army. She begs them to sail back, gather a larger force, and then return and wreak vengeance on Siggeir. Unsurprisingly, Volsung refuses to do this, since to flee would be dishonorable. This is certainly a questionable decision, however. Volsung and his men have not yet been engaged in battle. Instead, they have been forewarned that battle is forthcoming. What would be the shame, at this point, in withdrawing temporarily in order to assemble a larger force, if they fully intend to return and fight? Volsung’s decision is not particularly sensible, and will result in his destruction, and the destruction of almost his entire family. The words he uses to justify his decision are, nevertheless, eloquent and also somewhat surprising.

To begin with, Volsung says, “Everyone will say that I swore, while still in my mother’s womb, that I would never flee in fear from iron nor from fire, and I have kept that oath all of my days until now – and why would I not keep it in my old age?”[5] Recall that Volsung was “already very big” when he was born. Indeed, the birth killed his mother, and he kissed her before she died. As I noted in my commentary on Chapter Two, this indicates that Volsung is born with a degree of mature awareness. Thus, the saga’s writer may mean it literally when he tells us that Volsung swore this oath in his mother’s womb. Again and again, we will see that members of this clan are more than merely human (no surprise, given that Odin is the clan’s progenitor). Of course, the idea that he swore this oath in the womb could also be taken as a poetic way of underscoring the fact that such an ethos, and the instincts it gives rise to, are part of Volsung’s heritage: so deeply engrained in him that they existed in his character prior to any conscious choice.

“Everyone will die someday,” Volsung goes on to say, “and no one can escape death when his time has come. I say that we will not flee but will do everything we can in the boldest way. . . . It will never be said that I fled, nor that I begged for peace.”[6] He also reminds Signy that he has never lost a battle. She weeps and begs not to be sent back to King Siggeir, but Volsung commands her to go, and to stay with her husband regardless of what happens to them.

The following morning, Volsung and his men rise and prepare for battle. It is not long before Siggeir’s army arrives and the fighting begins. With the exaggeration typical of the sagas, we are told that “it is said that on this day, King Volsung and his sons went all the way through the ranks of King Siggeir’s army eight times, cutting with weapons in both hands.” But what we are told next is genuinely strange: “when they were preparing one more such assault, King Volsung fell dead in the middle of his own troops.”[7] The saga contains not one word about the manner of the death. Was it by sword, or axe, or spear? Nothing is said.

Furthermore, the text makes clear that he is “in the middle of his own troops,” while they were preparing another assault – in other words, during a lull in the fighting. Did Volsung receive a wound earlier from which he now succumbs? Nothing like this is mentioned. All we are are told is that, suddenly, he “fell dead.” Could this sudden death be at the hands, in fact, of Odin? Does Volsung abruptly fall dead once Odin’s favor is withdrawn from him? Certainly it is true that the death of Volsung will be necessary to advance the subsequent events of the story – events leading to the next phase in Odin’s plans to breed the perfect warrior. In the battle that follows Volsung’s death, all his men are killed, except for his ten sons. It is at this point that the events of the saga become genuinely dark and macabre, and a gloom hangs over the story. This mood will last until the birth of Sigurd in Chapter Thirteen.

Signy receives word of her father’s death and the defeat of his army. Privately, she speaks with Siggeir and makes a strange request. She asks that he not kill her brothers immediately, but instead hold them prisoner, in chains. “I recall that it is said that ‘An eye loves what it lingers on,’” she says, apparently trying to appeal to Siggeir’s sadistic nature. He responds that she is foolish to ask that her brothers suffer more than if they were simply executed. But he happily grants her request, admitting that he will enjoy prolonging their torment. Just what, we wonder, does Siggeir have in store for them?

Though he must have had at his disposal stocks, a jail, and possibly even a dungeon, Siggeir invents a novel way to bond the brothers and hold them captive. They are taken out into the forest, ordered to lie down next to each other, and a huge tree trunk is laid over their legs, so that they are pinned to the ground. At midnight on the first evening of their captivity, “an old she-wolf, huge and ugly” arrives and eats one of the brothers, devouring him completely. Now, I will go ahead and reveal that in the last line of this chapter, we are told, “Some say that this wolf was the mother of King Siggeir, and that she had taken a wolf’s form by the use of magic and sorcery.”[8]

The saga’s writer frequently uses a construction like “some say” when introducing particularly fantastic elements in the story. But the likelihood is that Siggeir does have some connection to this she-wolf. It seems probable that he holds the brothers prisoner out in the forest precisely because he knows that the she-wolf will visit them. In any case, this is the first instance of shape-shifting in the saga – several more will follow. We are told nothing else about the mother of Siggeir, and we are suspicious that, here again, we somehow find the hand of Odin at work. Consider: Why a wolf, rather than, say, a brown bear (which are plentiful in Sweden, the setting of the story)? The wolf, of course, is associated with Odin. I will return to this point later.

Signy learns, through a trusted servant, that one of her brothers has been devoured. However, she is powerless to come to their aid. On each of the following nights, the she-wolf returns and devours another brother. Soon, nine are dead and only Sigmund remains. Signy is frantic, but she devises a clever plan. Before the tenth night falls, she sends her servant to Sigmund with a pot of honey. The servant is told to spread the honey over Sigmund’s face and to leave some in his mouth.

That night, the she-wolf comes for Sigmund. She sniffs him, notices the honey, then begins licking it off his face. When she sticks her tongue into his mouth, Sigmund summons up his courage and bites down hard on the wolf’s tongue, holding onto it with all his strength. The wolf tries desperately to get loose. She tries bracing her paws against the trunk and pushes so hard on it that it breaks into pieces – thus freeing Sigmund, but still he does not let go. Finally, the wolf pulls against Sigmund with such force that her tongue is torn out at the root, and she dies on the spot.

This passage has always reminded me of an episode in Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, where Zarathustra comes upon a shepherd who is choking to death on a snake. As the shepherd slept by the roadside, a large, black snake had crawled down his throat and bit into his flesh. Zarathustra commands him, “Bite! Bite its head off! Bite” The shepherd does so, and there follows a famous passage:

Far away he spewed the head of the snake – and he jumped up. No longer shepherd, no longer human – one changed, radiant, laughing! Never yet on earth has a human being laughed as he laughed! O my brothers, I heard a laughter that was no human laughter; and now a thirst gnaws at me, a longing that never grows still. My longing for this laughter gnaws at me; oh, how do I bear to go on living! And how could I bear to die now![9]

The shepherd is choking, it seems, on evil – an evil that would consume him, unless he consumes it first. (Nietzsche does not offer an explicit interpretation of the meaning of the snake, though clearly it is malevolent.)[10] The shepherd is transformed by the experience. Does something similar happen with Sigmund? It seems highly likely that this ordeal represents a rite of passage. In a famous episode we will cover in a future installment, Sigurd kills the dragon Fafnir and eats part of his heart, thereby acquiring some of the dragon’s power. Does Sigmund acquire some of the wolf’s power by biting off its tongue? Perhaps. What is clear is that this daring feat is part of his development into the sort of hero Odin would have for his Einherjar.

In fact, before we leave Chapter Four, let us consider the subterranean way Odin has operated throughout this whole grisly episode. Why did nine brothers have to be eliminated? The answer is that it is Odin’s plan to force Sigmund and Signy together so that, I have argued, they can breed a pure Volsung, the perfect warrior. As we will see, what brings brother and sister to incest is not simply the desire to continue their clan. Instead, they want to produce a child strong enough to aid them in their plan to seek revenge against Siggeir. If some of the other brothers had been left alive, they could have banded together to go after Siggeir, and there would have been no necessity to produce a new Volsung. (Indeed, as we will see, still others must be eliminated before Signy is finally forced to consider the option of incest!)

All of this – the sword intended for Sigmund, the envy of Siggeir, the death of Volsung (who mysteriously “falls dead”), the deaths of the nine brothers – is part of the plan orchestrated by Odin. The killing of the nine brothers exhibits the same sort of cunning we find in the story of Odin’s winning the poetic mead (recounted in Snorri’s Edda). Specifically, I mean the episode in which Odin causes the death of Baugi’s nine thralls so that the giant will hire him to mow his hay, in return for one sip of the mead. We must also consider that the death of the brothers is not only by means of a wolf, an animal associated with Odin, but a werewolf. (Werewolves will appear again later, in a famous episode involving Sigmund and his son Sinfiotli.) We are told that Siggeir’s old mother is a sorceress who shape-shifts into wolfen form – undoubtedly using the same techniques of seidhr known to Odin.[11] Does she act at Odin’s behest, wittingly or unwittingly? Here we can only speculate, as the text says nothing other than what has already been mentioned. What is very clear in the story, however, is that little happens that is not somehow directly or indirectly contrived by the god.

In our next installment we will see Sigmund and Signy’s plan for revenge unfold – and we will see that, of the two, it is Signy who is the coldest and most ruthless of the surviving Volsungs.

Notes

[1] See Stephen E. Flowers, Sigurðr: Rebirth and the Rites of Transformation (Smithfield, Tx.: Rûna-Raven, 2011).

[2] See Chapter Nine of Kevin Macdonald, Cultural Insurrections (Atlanta: The Occidental Press, 2007).

[3] The Saga of the Volsungs with the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok, trans. Jackson Crawford (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2017), 5.

[4] Crawford, 6.

[5] Crawford, 6. Emphasis added.

[6] Crawford, 6.

[7] Crawford, 7.

[8] Crawford, 8. See note 10 for a more literal translation of part of this line.

[9] Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 160.

[10] Possibly it represents “slave morality.”

[11] The text does not mention seidhr. Instead, it states that Siggeir changes her shape by means of tröllskapar (trolls’ lore) fjölkynngi (sorcery; literally “much magic”). However, in Chapter Seven, Signy enlists the aid of a shape-shifting witch who is literally referred to as a seiðkona (seidhr-woman).

 In our last installment, we saw that after Sigmund pulls the sword from the tree Barnstokk, Siggeir (who has just married Sigmund’s sister, Signy) offers to buy it from him. When Sigmund refuses, Siggeir immediately begins plotting revenge. On a pretext, he takes Signy and leaves the wedding feast early, inviting Volsung and his ten sons to visit him in Götaland. Three months later, travelling in three ships, Volsung, his sons, and their men arrive at Götaland late at night. They are met by Signy, who warns them that they are walking into an ambush, and that Siggeir has assembled a mighty army. Unsurprisingly, Volsung refuses to flee, saying that it would be dishonorable. In the ensuing battle, Volsung suddenly and inexplicably “falls dead” in the middle of his troops. His ten sons are taken prisoner by Siggeir and pinned under a great tree trunk in a dark part of the forest. For the next nine nights, Siggeir’s mother, who has taken the form of “an old she-wolf, huge and ugly,” eats one of the brothers, until only Sigmund is left. Before the tenth night falls, Signy sends a servant to Sigmund, who spreads honey over Sigmund’s face and in his mouth. That night, the she-wolf approaches Sigmund, sniffs him, and begins licking the honey off his face. When she sticks her tongue into his mouth, Sigmund bites down hard. The wolf struggles so fiercely her tongue is torn out at the root, and she dies on the spot. In all of this we see the hand of Odin at work, even in the sudden death of Volsung. Why did nine brothers have to be killed? As we will now see, the answer is that it is Odin’s plan to force Sigmund and Signy together so that they can breed a pure Volsung, the perfect warrior.

Chapter 6. How Sigmund Killed the Sons of Siggeir

When the wolf struggles to free herself from Sigmund, she manages to shatter the tree trunk under which Sigmund is pinned, freeing him. Sigmund ventures deeper into the forest and hides out. Anxious to learn whether he is living or dead, Signy dispatches a messenger who manages to find Sigmund, and to get the entire story from him. Then Signy herself ventures into the dark forest and meets secretly with her brother. They plot revenge, and Signy suggests that Sigmund build himself a turf house in the forest and continue to hide there. Turf houses were built by piling earth over a wood-frame roof, which provided effective insulation. Sometimes they were actually built into hillsides (which we imagine may have been the case with the house Sigmund builds, as it would have provided effective camouflage). The saga writer would have been quite familiar with turf houses, as they were very common in Iceland, and were to be found in Norway as well.

Years now pass, during which Signy makes clandestine visits to Sigmund, bringing him whatever he needs. For his part, Siggeir believes that all the Volsungs are dead. In these intervening years, Siggeir and Signy also have two sons. When the eldest turns ten, Signy sends him into the forest to live with Siggeir. Brother and sister have agreed, you see, that Sigmund needs the aid of another male in order to exact his revenge upon Siggeir. He intends to raise the boy to help him in his plan. (How the boy’s absence will be explained to Siggeir is never discussed.)

When Signy’s son arrives at Sigmund’s turf house, deep in the forest, it is already late in the day. Sigmund greets him warmly and puts the boy to work making bread. The boy’s task is to take flour from a bag and make dough, while Sigmund steps out to gather firewood. However, when Sigmund returns, he finds that the boy has not even begun his task. The boys says, “I didn’t dare touch the flour bag, because there’s something alive in there.”[1] As we will see, there is indeed a poisonous snake in the bag. And it will become clear that this is no accident: Sigmund has placed the snake there as a test. It is a test which, in Sigmund’s eyes, this boy has clearly failed.

Sigmund therefore suspects that the boy might not be brave enough to assist him in his plans. When he meets with Signy again he tells her that “he didn’t feel like a man was near him, no matter how near the boy was.”[2] In other words, the boy is fundamentally argr, the Old Norse term for “unmanly.” This is no surprise, as he is the son of the jealous and treacherous Siggeir. What comes next always shocks readers. “Then kill him,” Signy advises. “He doesn’t need to live any longer.”[3] And Sigmund does just that. Winter passes, and during the winter after that, Signy sends her younger son to Sigmund. Here the saga writer tells us that “there is no reason to dwell on that story for long,” since the same thing happens all over again. In other words, the younger boy is put to the same test, and fails it just as his brother did, proving himself insufficiently manly. Once again, Sigmund kills the boy “at the request of Signy.” (How the deaths of these children are explained to their father, Siggeir, is never discussed.)

Now, one should be careful not to draw any sweeping conclusions from this about the qualities of Viking motherhood! As I noted in earlier parts of this essay, a major theme of the saga is that the Volsungs continually transgress moral and social norms. Remember that, with the Volsungs, Odin is breeding a clan of super-warriors whom he can harvest for his army of the dead. Such a race cannot prove itself within the constraints of society – it must break those constraints. Again and again, we therefore find the Volsungs being placed in situations where they not only break moral conventions but seem to exhibit a pronounced lack of ordinary human feeling. This includes a number of crimes committed against blood relations. In Chapter Two, for example, Rerir slaughters his uncles. The text makes clear that this would have been considered a great transgression, as shocking to our ancestors as it is to us: The saga writer tells us that Rerir did this “even though such a slaughter of near relatives had until then been unheard of in every way.”[4] And here, in Chapter Six, we find Signy complicit in the murder of her own children, perhaps the least forgivable of all crimes. We will see in Chapter Thirty-Eight, however, that Gudrun, the widow of Sigurd, will surpass Signy in heartlessness: She will behead her own children.

Chapter 7. The Origin of Sinfjotli

The murder of the two children leaves Sigmund without any obvious candidates for the male accomplice he will need in order to carry out the Volsungs’ vengeance on Siggeir. Pondering this problem, Signy hits upon a solution when she is visited by what translators usually render as a “very powerful witch” (as does Crawford) or “sorceress” (as does R. G. Finch). The Old Norse word is seiðkona, or “seidhr-woman,” a practitioner of the type of magic known as seidhr, which may have involved “shamanic” elements, including trance states. Signy asks the seiðkona “to change shapes” with her. In Old Norse, the term is skipta hǫmum, where skipta means (among other things) “to change, or shift.” Hǫmum is the dative plural of hamr: “shape or form.” Thus, skipta hǫmum is literally “to shapeshift.”

Hamr is a significant term in the Norse conception of human nature. Literally, it means “skin,” and can denote the outward shape of the person. However, it was thought that an individual could possess more than one hamr, and some of these could be “projected” in order to act at a distance – as a “double” of the individual, or in some other form (e.g., an animal form).[5] For instance, in the Ynglinga Saga (Chapter Seven) Snorri Sturluson writes, “Odin shifted shape [Óðinn skipti hǫmum]. At those times his body lay as though he were asleep or dead, and he then became a bird or a beast, a fish or a serpent, and went in the blink of an eye to far-off lands on his own or other men’s errands.” What Signy requests of the seiðkona, however, is that they exchange their outer hamr, or appearance. (Interestingly, the witch’s initial reply to her request is “that’s for you to decide,” as if she is reluctant – though she grants Signy’s wish.)

In the form of Signy, the witch goes to King Siggeir and stays by his side, going to bed with him at night. Siggeir suspects nothing. Meanwhile, in the form of the witch (who is described as quite beautiful), Signy goes to her brother in the forest. When she arrives, she claims to be lost. Sigmund invites her in, saying that he would not deny hospitality to a woman travelling on her own. He offers Signy a meal and, as they eat together, “Sigmund’s eyes were often drawn to the woman,” and he begins to desire her powerfully. After the meal, he boldly tells her that he wants them to share one bed that evening. “She said nothing against this,” the saga writer tells us, “and Sigmund laid her down on his bed three nights in a row.”[6] The pattern of lying with a woman for three nights is often found in Norse literature. In Rigsthula the god Rig (Heimdall) lies for three nights with each of the women with whom he sires the three classes of thralls, freemen, and nobles. In Snorri’s account of Odin’s theft of the poetic mead, he lies for three nights with the giantess Gunlod, who guards the mead. According to some theories, the product of their union is the god Bragi. In any case, the “three nights” formula seems to guarantee conception.

Sigmund has no suspicion whatever that the beautiful woman he slept with is Signy. After the three nights have passed, Signy returns home and exchanges shapes with the witch again. If she has any misgivings about having lain with her own brother, the saga does not mention it. This incest is, needless to say, yet another instance in which the Volsungs transgress basic moral conventions, seemingly without any feelings of hesitation or remorse, and it is probably the most notorious episode in the saga (and the one thing that most people remember about Wagner’s Die Walküre). Months later, Signy gives birth to a boy, whom she names Sinfjotli.

There is some debate about the etymology of this name. R. G. Finch writes that “[t]he name probably means ‘he of the ash- (literally ‘cinder’) gold fetter,’ and is thus a kenning for wolf, though –fjotli may be a variant of Germanic \*fetulæ, ‘spotted,’ sin– being a later addition for alliterative purposes (in OE [i.e., in Beowulf] he is called simply ‘Fitela’. . . ) and his name could thus reflect his incestuous origin.”[7] If, indeed, the name does mean something like “he of the wolf,” then we may wonder whether in some way Sinfjotli owes some of his prowess to the wolf-tongue bitten off by Sigmund, and possibly ingested. (Though this is pure speculation – and, as speculation, probably goes a bit far.)

In keeping with the pattern we have seen before, Sinfjotli is described as another superb specimen of Volsung manhood: “he proved to be big and strong and good-looking, and very much of the Volsung type.”[8] When he turns ten, Signy resolves to send him to live with Sigmund in the forest. Before doing so, however, she decides to test Sinfjotli. We are told that before sending her doomed children to Sigmund (i.e., the sons she had with Siggeir), Signy had sewed their sleeves to the skin of their arms. “They had taken it badly,” the saga writer tells us. This is surely something of an understatement – and also an indication that they were likely to fail Sigmund’s test as well. Now Signy does the same thing to Sinfjotli, sewing his sleeves to his arms – but then she rips the shirt from his body, tearing his flesh! Sinfjotli does not react. “Volsung wouldn’t have thought much of such an injury,” she says to herself.[9]

When Sinfjotli arrives at Sigmund’s hut, immediately he is put to the test we’ve seen before: Sinfjotli is asked to make bread while Sigmund gathers firewood, thus leaving him alone. When Sigmund returns, Sinfjotli, unlike his ill-fated half-brothers, is almost finished making the bread. Cautiously, Sigmund asks him if he found anything unusual in the flour bag. Sinfjotli responds that he had the suspicion that something was alive in the flour when he started making the dough, but says, “I kneaded it down, whatever it was.” Sigmund is delighted, but tells him, “You can’t eat this bread tonight. You’ve ground down a huge poisonous serpent in it.” (We should note that, at this point, Sigmund has no idea that Sinfjotli is his son.)

The chapter ends with the sagaman telling us that while Sigmund was so strong he could eat poison without being killed, Sinfjotli could not do so. However, he can withstand poison falling on his skin. This small detail breaks a pattern we have seen so far: Usually, each new generation of the Volsung clan is stronger than the last. Sinfjotli, however, is not as strong as Sigmund – and his inability to ingest poison will, in fact, prove his undoing. Sinfjotli, indeed, is a rather disappointing character, and constitutes (as we shall see) a kind of puzzling dead-end in the saga – puzzling because of his origins in the notorious incest of brother and sister, and the implication that he is a pure Volsung. We expect great things of him, but he doesn’t deliver.

This flaw in the narrative structure of the story may reflect the fact that the saga writer is weaving together a number of different stories, which themselves existed in multiple variations. Wagner was certainly wise, in his revision of the story, to make Sigurd the product of the incest, and to drop the character of Sinfjtoli entirely. In the saga it is Sigurd, Sigmund’s second son, who will prove greater than his father. And one cannot help but see his most famous deed, the killing of the dragon Fafnir, foreshadowed in Sinfjotli’s killing of the “huge” (but, of course, much smaller) serpent in the bag of flour.

Sinfjotli has survived the initiation rite his half-brothers failed, at the price of their lives. In the next chapter, we will see that Sinfotli’s initiation continues, as Sigmund takes his son into the wilderness, to learn how to kill men. In one of the saga’s most famous episodes, Sigmund and Sinfjotli become werewolves, terrorizing the land. In this we will find echoes of the mysterious, half-forgotten initiation rites of the men who dedicate themselves to Odin, “leader of an army of ecstatic wolf-warriors.”[10]

Notes

[1] The Saga of the Volsungs with the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok, trans. Jackson Crawford (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2017), 9.

[2] Crawford, 9.

[3] Crawford, 9.

[4] Crawford, 2.

[5] See Claude Lecouteux, The Return of the Dead, trans. John E. Graham (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 2009), 169-170.

[6] Crawford, 9.

[7] See Finch, The Saga of the Volsungs (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1965), 9-10, footnote.

[8] Crawford, 10.

[9] Crawford, 10.

[10] See Kris Kershaw, The One-Eyed God: Odin and the (Indo-) Germanic Männerbünde (Washington, D.C.: Journal of Indo-European Studies monograph No. 36), 8.

Chapter 8. The Vengeance of the Volsungs

In the last installment of this series, we told of the birth of the hero Sinfjotli, product of the incest of the twins Sigmund and Signy. When Sinfjotli is not yet ten, Signy sends him into the forest to live with Sigmund. He has been hiding out in a turf house for years, looking forward to revenge against King Siggeir, who was responsible for the death of his father and his nine brothers. Sinfjotli owes his very existence to Signy’s desire to provide her brother with a male accomplice who can carry out that revenge. When Sinfjotli arrives at Sigmund’s hideout, he passes a test of courage (killing a large snake hidden in a bag of flour), and Sigmund determines that this “pure Volsung” is well-suited to be his companion.

However, Sinfotli is still much too young to assist Sigmund in carrying out his plans for vengeance. So, Sigmund decides that he should spend a few years accustoming Sinfjotli to “hardships.” In other words, he undertakes to train his young son (though it is important to bear in mind that at this point in the saga Sigmund is not yet aware that Sinfjotli is his own child). During the warm months, Sigmund and Sinfjotli travel “widely through the forests” and kill men “for their money.”[1]

This period spent in the forest recalls the banishment of Sigi in Chapter One, which established a pattern we find in the saga. Over and over again, the Volsungs must literally or figuratively step outside the confines of civilized society in order to realize their potential as the “super-warriors” Odin intends them to be. This usually takes the form of breaking social conventions or moral norms (e.g., murdering a slave and lying about it, killing close relatives, incest, filicide, etc.). Sigmund’s period of hiding in the wilderness recalls Sigi’s banishment. Though Sigmund has been “banished” through no crime of his own, he is effectively removed from society: neither of the kingdom of Siggeir, his mortal enemy, nor of the kingdom of the Volsungs, which has been destroyed.[2]

We should be cautious, however, about labelling their career of killing travelers as yet another instance of the Volsungs’ transgression of moral norms. As I noted in the first part of this series, such activities were not frowned upon in the Germanic world, so long as men did not victimize their own tribe and kin. Indeed, the act of raiding other tribes or slaughtering and robbing strangers was admired and served to enhance reputations. Nevertheless, it is still an act which fits the pattern I have already described. What is really key to the Volsungs’ “transgressions” is that they place them outside the bounds of societal norms. Sigmund and Sinfjotli’s acts of murder are acceptable precisely because they happen outside tribe or society, and thus occur in a kind of “state of nature.”

Further, Kris Kershaw discusses (at great length) how the training of young warriors in Indo-European societies often occurred in a condition that placed them literally outside the perimeter of civilization, and in a kind of indefinite moral state. Kershaw mentions the ancient Cretan custom in which an older man “kidnapped” a young boy from his home and spent two months with him in the forest, teaching him how to hunt. In reality, the “kidnapping” was arranged in advance and with the consent of the parents: it was a rite of initiation.[3] Scholars have also argued that the Norse Sagas contain hazy recollections of ancient initiation rites – and Kershaw endorses the view that the story of Sigmund and Sinfjotli is one such case.[4] (The pattern of initiation cited by Kershaw fits the case of the career of the young Sigurd even more closely.)

To return to our story, one day Sigmund and Sinfjoti, while out robbing, come upon a house “where two men were sleeping who wore thick golden rings.” We are told that these men were princes (literally “king’s sons,” konungasynir) who had “suffered an evil fate.” Wolfskins (úlfahamir) hung over them. “They could only come out of the wolfskins every tenth day.”[5] Sigmund and Sinfjotli put on the wolfskins and find that they cannot remove them. Their voices become wolf howls, but they are able to understand each other.

This episode is one of the most mysterious in the saga. Who are these princes? How did they come to suffer this “evil fate”? Why are they specifically described as wearing “thick golden rings”? And why on earth do Sigmund and Sinfjotli put on the wolfskins? Answers to these questions are not provided, and we can only offer some conjectures. First, the gold rings may very well foreshadow the cursed gold rings (there are more than one) that appear later in the saga, thanks to Sigurd slaying the dragon Fafnir and making off with his hoard.

Why Sigmund and Sinfjotli put the skins on, however, is a difficult matter. Surely, Sigmund at least must have been aware of the powers of such animal skins, and the lore concerning werewolves (including, quite possibly, the difficulty of returning from the werewolf condition). Indeed, it seems fair to suppose that the whole reason Sigmund puts on the wolfskin, and the young Sinfjotli follows his lead, is that he expects something magical to occur. Kershaw believes, and I think this is correct, that putting on the wolfskins is another rite of initiation (or a part of the initiation of Sinfotli already taking place).

Kershaw notes that “The werewolf life is part of the training of the young warrior throughout the [Indo-European] world.”[6] Here, Kershaw means that it was common for young warriors to identify with the wolf. This identification, furthermore, may have been very literal – in other words, young warriors could have believed that they took on the spirit of the wolf, and were to some degree transformed into wolves. In the Norse tradition, such warriors were identified, of course, as the úlfheðnar (approximately, “those wearing a wolf cloak”). There are references to the úlfheðnar in several sagas, and one of the Torslunda plates (sixth/seventh century) depicts what seems to be an úlfheðinn.

Úlfhéðinn in the Torslunda plates (bottom left)

These “werewolf warriors” were consecrated to Odin, and Kershaw argues for an interpretation of the god as “leader of an army of ecstatic wolf-warriors.”[7] Kershaw is here drawing on the work of Otto Höfler, who “explained the many facets of this ‘most multiform’ of gods by deriving them all from his role as god of the ecstatic warrior brotherhoods.”[8] Kershaw translates Óðr as ekstasis, a practice I have defended in a number of essays, in which I have discussed the concept of ekstasis at length.[9] In brief, an ecstatic state is one in which we “stand outside ourselves”; one in which we are transported beyond the ordinary level of our existence and feel transformed and inspired.

Certainly, the condition of the úlfheðinn qualifies as an ecstatic state. Let us note in passing that this is a way. In other words, it is a path to the transcendence of ordinary human existence, to the transfiguration of the self in identity with something greater. In this particular case, the úlfheðinn frees himself from human physical and social limitations through identification with a splendid beast noted for its power, courage, and rapacity – as well as its capacity to evoke fear in men and other animals. As Kershaw notes, the wolf belongs outside the village – as does the novice warrior, in training. We may add to this that, really, all warriors, in a certain sense, belong outside the village: their experience of death sets them forever apart, in spirit, from the realms of domesticity and social convention. The “lone wolf” represents the extreme case of one who completely identifies with this “apartness” and rejects home and hearth.[10] Certainly, Sigmund can be considered such a “lone wolf,” since, as I have noted already, he is a man without a society or tribe. (The same, of course, is true of Sinfjotli.)

We must also consider the manner in which Sigmund and Sinfjotli take on wolf form. Claude Lecouteux in his Witches, Werewolves, and Fairies: Shapeshifters and Astral Doubles in the Middle Ages believes that the account of lycanthropy in the Volsung Saga is a kind of garbled recollection of shapeshifting, possibly influenced by Christian prejudices.[11] In classic Norse accounts of shapeshifting, individuals are said to possess more than one physical shape. The Old Norse term for this is hamr, which literally means “skin.” Shapeshifting into animal form involved projecting an animal form (“skin”; hamr) that already dwelt within the body of the shapeshifter. Consider, for example, Ynglinga Saga 7: “Odin often changed himself; at those times his body lay as though he were asleep or dead, and he then became a bird or a beast, a fish or a dragon, and went off in an instant to far-off lands on his own or other men’s errands.”[12]

Note that this mentions that the shapeshifter lay as if he were asleep or dead. And what do we find in the Volsung Saga? The princes are found asleep in their beds, with the úlfahamir (wolf skins) “hanging above them.” Recall that we are never told who these two princes are, or why they have suffered an “evil fate.” It is entirely possible that this is, as Lecouteux suggests, a garbled recollection of an older version of the story in which the princes are asleep because they are projecting their “skins.”[13] But why would the story have been so greatly changed? Why would an internal “skin” have become an external one?

Lecouteux discusses how Christianity sought to stamp out the pagan belief in a soul containing more than one hamr, and literalized accounts of lycanthropy (or other forms of shapeshifting) as involving “putting on skins.” Lecouteux offers multiple examples of this, saying of the trial transcript of one man accused of being a werewolf, “There is no longer a question of a body in lethargy, and metamorphosis is here replaced by a wolf garment.”[14] If this hypothesis is correct, I would suggest further that the “princes,” in older versions of the tale, were probably Sigmund and Sinfjotli themselves – both of whom are of royal blood, of course, and who certainly have “suffered an evil fate,” at the hands of Siggeir. The werewolf episode may thus have originally involved Sigmund and Sinfjotli lying down in their beds and shapeshifting through the projection of a hamr in wolf form. Furthermore, it may be that the episode originally involved Sigmund teaching Sinfjotli how to shapeshift into the form of the wolf, as a deliberate part of his training (as opposed to how the saga writer presents the discovery of the “wolfskins” as happenstance).

In any case, once Sigmund and Sinfjotli have transformed into wolves, they decide to go their separate ways, at least for a while. Before doing so, they make an agreement that, while alone, they will attack no more than seven men at a time. If they should encounter a larger group, they agree to call to the other for help. At this point, we should note the obvious: that the pair are no longer engaged in the activity of robbing men, but solely in slaughtering them. And, we might add, eating them and drinking their blood. In Helgakvitha Hundingsbana I, stanza 36, in the Poetic Edda, Sinfjotli is attacked by his opponent Guthmund with a series of accusations, amongst which is “You have eaten dead men’s flesh . . . your cold mouth has often sucked wounds.”[15] This seems clearly to be a reference to Sinfjotli’s time as a werewolf. Kershaw notes, in addition, that “[d]rinking blood and eating raw meat were reputed to make warriors fierce and formed a standard part of the education of the adolescent Männerbündler.”[16] This is yet another reason to think that, originally, the werewolf episode was orchestrated by Sigmund as part of Sinfjotli’s training.

At a certain point during their adventures in wolfen form, Sigmund comes up against seven men, but finds he needs help nevertheless. He calls on Sinfjotli, who rushes to his aid and helps his father kill the men. Later on, Sinfjotli breaks their agreement by trying to take on eleven men by himself! Sinfjotli is badly injured, but Sigmund rushes to help him and dispatches the men. In response, not only does Sinfjotli express no gratitude for this, he taunts Sigmund over the fact that the older man had needed aid in attacking a mere seven men, while he, Sinfjotli, had boldly taken on eleven. This is a typical display of adolescent hubris, and were he in his right mind, Sigmund would probably only have chastised his son. But in his wolf form, Sigmund is possessed with the spirit of the beast, and drunk on the blood of the men he has slain. Thus, he responds by lunging at Sinfjotli and biting him in the neck.

The boy, in fact, is mortally wounded. Sigmund puts Sinfjotli on his back and returns to the turf house. There, filled with remorse, Sigmund curses the wolf skins (“saying the trolls could take them”) – which neither he nor Sinfjotli are able to get out of. Sinfjotli lingers, and then one day Sigmund sees two weasels fighting. One bites the other in the neck, just as Sigmund had bitten Sinfjotli. The victorious weasel then rushes into the forest and returns with a leaf. He places it on the other weasel’s wound, whereupon the poor beast springs up as if he had never been harmed. Presently, Sigmund sees a raven flying overhead, carrying the same sort of leaf. It lands and offers the leaf to Sigmund, who then places it on Sinfjotli’s wound. Sinfjotli is immediately healed, just as the weasel was.

This motif of the Lebenskraut (“leaf of life” or “herb of life”) shows up in more than one of the Kinder- und Hausmärchen of the Brothers Brimm. The example that is closest to the episode in the Volsung Saga occurs in “The Three Snake Leaves” (Die drei Schlangenblätter). A young man agrees to be entombed with his dead wife, a beautiful princess, and hacks to pieces a snake that he finds in the crypt:

After a time a second snake crept out of the hole, and when it saw the other lying dead and cut in pieces, it went back, but soon came again with three green leaves in its mouth. Then it took the three pieces of the snake, laid them together as they ought to go, and placed one of the leaves on each wound. Immediately the severed parts joined themselves together, the snake moved, and became alive again, and both of them hastened away together.[17]

The young man then uses the leaves to revive his dead wife, with unfortunate results: she is restored to life all right, but she becomes evil in the process. (If something similar happens to Sinfjotli, this is not made clear.) It is apparent that the Lebenskraut is a very old legend, a memory of which managed to survive in folktales. Astute readers of the stories collected by the Grimms will recognize quite a few survivals from pre-Christian, Germanic mythology.

In terms of its place within the saga, it is clear that the episode with the Lebenskraut has been orchestrated by Odin. The weasels are clearly assigned the task of pantomiming the confrontation of Sigmund and Sinfjotli, and the raven is, of course, one of the beasts most closely associated with Odin. Either the raven is one of Odin’s messengers, or it is the god himself. Either way, it is obvious that this episode constitutes another of Odin’s repeated interventions in the story. The god not only wishes Sinfjotli to live, but apparently also wishes Sigmund to succeed in his vengeance against Siggeir, for which he needs the help of the younger man.

We will see the terrible way in which father and son wreak that vengeance, when we continue our account of Chapter Eight in the next installment . . .

Notes

[1] The Saga of the Volsungs with the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok, trans. Jackson Crawford (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2017), 10.

[2] “Liminal” is the term Kris Kershaw uses repeatedly to describe the state of certain warriors in the Indo-European tradition. See Kris Kershaw, The One-Eyed God: Odin and the (Indo-) Germanic Männerbünde (Washington, DC: Journal of Indo-European Studies monograph No. 36).

[3] Kershaw, 53.

[4] Kershaw, 57; 59-62.

[5] Crawford, 11.

[6] Kershaw, 60.

[7] Kershaw, 8.

[8] Kershaw, 69.

[9] See in particular my essays “The Gifts of Ódhinn and His Brothers” and “The Stones Cry Out” in What is a Rune? And Other Essays (San Francisco: Counter-Currents Publishing, 2015).

[10] Kershaw, 177.

[11] See Claude Lecouteux, Witches, Werewolves, and Fairies: Shapeshifters and Astral Doubles in the Middle Ages, trans. Clare Frock (Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions, 2003).

[12] Snorri Sturluson, Heimskringla, trans. A.H. Smith (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1990), 5.

[13] Lecouteux, 121.

[14] Lecouteux, 168.

[15] The Poetic Edda, trans. Jackson Crawford (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2015) 197, st. 36.

[16] Kershaw, 143.

[17] Grimms’ Complete Fairy Tales, no translator credited (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2012), 227.

Chapter 8. The Vengeance of the Volsungs, Continued

In the last installment of this series, we learned of the life Sigmund leads in the forest with his son Sinfjotli – the product of Sigmund’s incestuous union with his sister, Signy. It is important to note, however, that at this point in the story, Sigmund has no idea that that union took place, or that Sinfjotli is his son. He thinks the boy is the child of Signy and the odious King Siggeir.

As part of his plan to seek revenge against Siggeir for the death of his father and brothers, Sigmund decides to put Sinfjotli through a process of training in the forest. This involves robbing and killing travelers. At one point, Sigmund introduces the boy to “the werewolf life” (as Kris Kershaw puts it). And so the two transform themselves into wolves and slaughter men together. I discussed at length the reasons why the story given in the saga is a garbled account of shapeshifting – and a rather hazy recollection of what was very probably a deliberate initiation rite.

At one point, Sigmund and Sinfjtoli quarrel while still in wolf form. Sigmund bites Sinfjotli in the neck and mortally wounds him. However, a raven appears bearing a magical leaf (yet another of Odin’s many appearances in the saga). When Sigmund puts the leaf on Sinfjotli’s wound, the boy springs up unharmed. I discussed the tradition of this magical leaf – or Lebenskraut (“leaf of life”) – as it survives in the tales of the Brothers Grimm.

In any case, after Sinfjotli is healed (much to Sigmund’s relief), they remain in wolf form until nine nights have passed. On the tenth day since putting on the wolf skins, father and son are finally able to remove them. The saga writer tells us that they curse the skins and then burn them, so that they will never harm anyone else. He tells us, further, that Sigmund and Sinfjotli did “many brave things” in the land of King Siggeir, during this “time of bad fate.”[1] Nothing else is said about these exploits, and the saga writer then moves on to the account of Sigmund’s revenge against Siggeir.

However, some further information on the adventures of Sigmund and Sinfjotli is to be found in Beowulf. That poem predates the version of the Volsung exploits with which we are dealing here: the manuscript of Beowulf dates to 975-1025, whereas the Volsung Saga is dated to the late thirteenth century. Note, however, that these are only the manuscript dates: both texts relate to traditions that are much older. In Beowulf, Sigmund is “Sigemund,” his father Volsung is “Wæls,” and Sinfjotli is “Fitela.” At one point (lines 832-857), a minstrel relates some details about Sigemund. He refers to the “many feats and marvels,” the “struggles and wanderings of Wæls’s son.” An aura of mystery surrounds these in Beowulf also, as we are told that these are “things unknown to anyone, except Fitela.” Here, Fitela/Sinfjotli is described as the nephew of Sigemund, rather than his son. Of course, in Sigmund’s own eyes in the Volsung Saga – at least until the truth is revealed to him – he is the boy’s uncle.

The minstrel goes on to refer to “feuds” and “foul doings” to which Sigmund was party. Uncle and nephew are said to have killed giants: “their conquering swords had brought them down.” Sigemund’s fame and glory grew after his death, especially on account of “his courage when he killed the dragon.” We are told that “under gray stone he dared to enter [the dragon’s lair], all by himself to face the worst, without Fitela.” Sigemund drove his sword right through the dragon and into the rock wall of the dragon’s lair. “The hot dragon melted,” we are informed, possibly due to its boiling blood. Sigemund then makes off with the dragon’s vast hoard, loading it onto his boat. But this is all the minstrel has to say about Sigemund and Fitela.

In sum, Beowulf offers only two specific examples of the “further adventures” of Sigmund and Sinfjotli: killing giants, and killing a dragon and taking his treasure (which Sigemund accomplishes without Fitela). It is obvious, however, that the episode with the dragon is the same adventure that is related several chapters later in the Volsung Saga, where it is attributed to Sigurd, rather than Sigmund. (Even the small detail of “under gray stone” may refer to Sigemund crawling underneath the dragon to strike up at its belly – just as Sigurd does.) Thus, it appears that Beowulf transfers the dragon-slaying episode from Sigurd to Sigemund. Alternatively, there may have been different traditions, prior to Beowulf, that ascribed the dragon slaying to different figures, and it is just possible that in the earliest (oral) versions of the tale, the original dragon slayer may have been Sigemund/Sigmund.

To return to our story, once Sinfjotlu is fully grown, Sigmund decides it is time to carry out his revenge against Siggeir. They sneak into the King’s “house” and hide behind some beer barrels outside the main hall. Somehow, Sigmund has warned Signy of their arrival, and she comes to meet them. The three agree on a plan, and it is decided that they will carry it out when night falls. The saga writer then tells us that Signy’s two young boys are playing with some gold pieces nearby, rolling them on the floor. (These must be children she has had with Siggeir since the first two were slaughtered by Sigmund, and since the birth of Sinfjotli.)

One of the gold pieces gets away from the children and rolls behind the beer barrels. When one of the boys goes to retrieve it, he finds Sigmund and Sinfjotli hiding. Immediately, he rushes into the hall to inform his father, who correctly infers that some treachery is afoot. Signy witnesses this. She takes both boys by the hand and leads them out of the hall and to Sigmund. “I advise you to kill them,” she says. And one suspects, given earlier events, that Sigmund will gladly oblige her. Yet he refuses. “I will not kill your children, even if they’ve betrayed me,”[2] he says. Why does Sigmund refuse to kill the boys?

Had Sigmund not killed the other two children – the ones who failed the test with the serpent – they could have revealed his presence to King Siggeir. Furthermore, killing Siggeir’s descendants has to be part of Sigmund’s plan for revenge: if any of Siggeir’s children were left alive, they would seek revenge against Sigmund. This is, of course, the reason why Siggeir himself sought to kill all the Volsungs, save Signy. It therefore makes sense that Sigmund should be willing to kill the two younger sons of Siggeir, who have just betrayed him. But his words to Signy strongly suggest that he is weary of killing children. Sinfjotli, however, has no such qualms: “he drew his sword and killed both children, and threw them into the hall at the feet of King Siggeir.”[3]

Siggeir orders his men to seize Sigmund and Sinfjotli. The valiant pair put up a good fight, but they are quickly overwhelmed, captured, and put in chains. The sadistic King Siggeir then enjoys contemplating what sort of execution would be the slowest and most unpleasant. He finally decides to entomb them in a burial mound and let the pair either slowly suffocate or starve to death. (Since the mound is described as being made of stone and turf, it is likely that there would be ventilation through tiny cracks in the materials – so starvation seems the more likely outcome.) Siggeir orders that the two men be separated by a very large, flat stone set upright, dividing the interior of the mound into two chambers, “because he thought it would be worse for them to be separated even though they could hear one another.”[4] It is important to note that at this point in the story it is not clear that Siggeir is aware of the identity of Sigmund and Sinfjotli, and that they are Volsungs (the text will soon give us reason to think that he only comes to learn this later).

Slaves are ordered to seal the mound. As they are doing so, Signy appears and tosses a bundle of straw into Sinfjotli’s side of the mound. She orders the slaves not to tell Siggeir that she has done this. Later, at nightfall, Sinfjotli calls to Sigmund: “I don’t expect we’ll lack food for a while. Queen Signy has thrown a side of bacon into the mound for us, and wrapped it up in straw.”[5] Of course, this is a goof on the part of the saga writer. If Sigmund and Sinfjotli are kept apart by the great stone mentioned earlier (and described in detail in the chapter), how can they possibly share food with each other? And why does Sinfjotli simply assume that he’s been tossed a side of bacon? (Perhaps in an earlier version of the story, Signy mentions this when she tosses in the bundle of straw.)

Sinfjotli quickly discovers, however, that it is not a side of bacon the straw conceals but Sigmund’s sword – the one he received as a gift from Odin, having pulled it from the tree Barnstokk. Sigmund and Sinfjotli are jubilant, for they know that with this mighty sword they can free themselves from the tomb. The description of how they go about doing so is, however, a bit confusing:

Now Sinfjotli stabbed up through the earth above the stone and cut hard. The sword bit into the stone. Then Sigmund took the point of the blade in hand and the two of them together sawed through the stone until it was split in half . . . And now they were both free to move around in the burial mound, and they cut through stone and iron [their chains?] and escaped.[6]

What seems to be meant is that Sinfjotli plunges the sword into the layer of earth above the stone, resting against its top end. He shoves the tip of the sword toward Sigmund’s side and begins cutting. Sigmund takes the tip of the sword in hand and, the two of them using the sword together like a saw, they cut the stone in two. In his description, the saga writer quotes a poetic source, introducing it with “as the poem tells”:

They cut that great stone

with their strength.

Sigmund wielded the sword,

and Sinfjotli did as well.

These lines actually come from a poem now lost to us (they do not appear in the Poetic Edda). They represent a brief, tantalizing glimpse of the lost sources on which the saga writer based his text.

Sigmund and Sinfjotli now set fire to Siggeir’s hall, whose occupants awaken to find the building blazing around them. Siggeir calls out from the hall, asking who has done this. Sigmund replies, “Here I am with Sinfjotli, my nephew, and now we think that you ought to know that not all the Volsungs are dead.” Sigmund then asks for Signy to come outside so that he can honor her. “He said that he wanted to compensate her this way for her miseries.”[7]

Signy emerges – and proceeds to reveal everything to Sigmund:

Now you will see whether I have remembered the murder of King Volsung by King Siggeir. I had our children killed, when I thought they were too slow to avenge our father, and Sigmund, I went to you in the forest disguised as a sorceress, and Sinfjotli is your and my son. He is exceedingly manly, because he is the son of both a son and a daughter of Volsung.[8]

The description of Sinfjotli as “exceedingly manly” continues the practice, of which there are several examples in the saga, of emphasizing the size, strength, and virility of the male members of the Volsung clan. As noted in a previous installment of this essay, each generation of Volsungs seems to be bigger, stronger, braver, and more virile than the last. (Though it is not clear that Sinfjotli is more powerful than Sigmund, indeed there is reason to think he is not: Chapter Seven informs us that, unlike Sigmund, Sinfjotli could not eat or drink poison, though he could survive poison falling on his skin.) The most extreme praise is reserved for Sigurd, greatest of the Volsung clan, and, as we will see, the description of his manly virtues occupies an entire chapter.

Signy goes on to say that all she has done has been to bring about the death of Siggeir. But she adds, “I have done so much to accomplish my vengeance that I cannot choose to live.”[9] She has, of course, done terrible things to realize the vengeance of the Volsungs against Siggeir: including committing incest with her own brother, and (as she mentions) having her children killed. I have noted in previous installments that one major theme of the saga is that the Volsungs seem to always find themselves committing great crimes. And one wonders if this is all part of Odin’s plan. Is it necessary for them to transgress human laws and mores, and to commit acts of almost unimaginable cruelty and callousness, in order for them to become the race of super-warriors Odin wishes to breed (all of whom, upon death, shall be recruited into his army of the Einherjar)? It is interesting, however, that so far in the saga, the most heinous deeds of all have been committed by a Volsung woman.

In any case, Signy announces that she intends now to die with Siggeir – by choice (even though she had had no choice about living with him). After kissing both Sigmund and Sinfjotli goodbye, she returns to the blazing hall and dies there with Siggeir and all his men. We will see the character of Signy reborn in Gudrun, the wife of Sigurd: the story of Gudrun (or “Kriemhild” in the Nibelugenlied) and her revenge against her husband’s murderers repeats a number of motifs from the life of Signy, including killing her own children and burning down her hated husband’s hall.

We are told that after the death of Signy, Sigmund and Sinfjotli “got an army and ships.” We are not told how they accomplish this, but we have already seen that such things seem to simply fall into place for the Volsungs (one suspects, of course, the hand of Odin at work). Sigmund and son return to the ancestral lands of the Volsungs. Many years, of course, have passed since the entire clan left there on their ill-fated visit to King Siggeir. In the meantime, a pretender has claimed the Volsung kingdom. But Sigmund and Sinfjotli drive him out, and Sigmund becomes a great and powerful king, “both wise and well-advised.”[10] And he decides to remarry. However, Sigmund makes a bad choice. As we will see in chapters to come that his new wife, Borghild, turns out to be a witch, who harbors nothing but malice toward Sinfjotli.

Sigmund and Borghild have two sons together, Helgi and Hamund. The saga writer tells us that when Helgi was born, the norns visited him “to determine his fate.” We should not assume, however, that this refers to the “three weird sisters” with whom most readers are familiar: Urth, Verdandi, and Skuld. After discussing those three in his Prose Edda, Snorri states that “[t]here are other norns who visit everyone when they are born to shape their lives, and these are of divine origin, though others are of the race of elves, and a third group are of the race of dwarfs.”[11] Thus, there is actually an indefinite number of norns. Those who visit Helgi declare that he is destined to become “the most famous of all kings.”

At just about the same time, Sigmund returns from battle, and the saga writer gives us some insight into Norse naming customs. Sigmund gives his son a clove of garlic (it is not clear what the significance of this is) and the name “Helgi.” As a “naming gift,” he also gives him the lands of Hringstathir and Solfjoll, as well as a sword. He also urges the infant to “do great things and to be a Volsung.”[12]

And Helgi does turn out to be quite a Volsung, indeed. We are told that not only was he “better than other men at every kind of skill,” he rode into battle at the tender age of fifteen![13] Sigmund makes Helgi king over the army, and together with Sinfjotli, they command the troops. It should not puzzle us why Sigmund gives the leadership position to Helgi, rather than Sinfjotli. Helgi is, after all, the product of his marriage to his Queen, Borghild, while Sinfjotli, even though he is older, is an illegitimate child. (Furthermore, the “official story” Sigmund may have adopted with Borghild and others is that Sinfjotli is his nephew.) To have favored Sinfjotli over Helgi would have insulted Borghild. And, as will soon become apparent, she does not need any more reasons to resent Sinfjotli.

The story of Helgi is told in the next chapter of the saga. It constitutes a digression from the main story, though a very interesting and illuminating one.

Notes

[1] The Saga of the Volsungs with the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok, trans. Jackson Crawford (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2017), 12.

[2] Crawford, 12.

[3] Crawford, 12.

[4] Crawford, 13.

[5] Crawford, 13.

[6] Crawford, 13.

[7] Crawford, 13.

[8] Crawford, 14.

[9] Crawford, 14.

[10] Crawford, 14.

[11] Snorri Sturluson, Edda, trans. Anthony Faulkes (London: Everyman’s Library, 1995), 18.

[12] Crawford, 14.

[13] Crawford, 14.

In our last installment, we saw Sigmund and Sinfjotli (the product of Sigmund’s incestuous union with his sister, Signy) return to the ancestral lands of the Volsungs. Many years have passed since the entire clan left there, and, in the meantime, a pretender has claimed the Volsung kingdom. But Sigmund and Sinfjotli drive him out, and Sigmund becomes a great and powerful king, “both wise and well-advised.”[1] He decides to marry a woman named Borghild, and they have two sons together, Helgi and Hamund.

When Helgi is born, the Norns visit him “to determine his fate.” They declare that he is destined to become “the most famous of all kings.” Sigmund returns from battle, and gives his son a clove of garlic and the name “Helgi” (in Old Norse, “holiness”; from Proto-Norse \*hailaga, “dedicated to the gods”). As a “naming gift” he also gives him the lands of Hringstathir and Solfjoll, as well as a sword. Sigmund urges the infant to “do great things and to be a Volsung.”[2]

If anything, Helgi surpasses his father’s expectations. We are told that not only was he “better than other men at every kind of skill,” he rode into battle at the age of fifteen![3] Sigmund makes Helgi king over the army, and together with Sinfjotli they command the troops. The tale of Helgi is told in the ninth chapter of the saga and constitutes a fascinating digression from the main story. It draws upon material in two poems of the Poetic Edda: Helgakvitha Hundingsbana I (The First Poem of Helgi, Killer of Hunding), and Helgakvitha Hundingsbana II. The differences between the text of the Volsung Saga and these older sources are illuminating.

However, in addition to the two poems just mentioned, the Poetic Edda also contains Helgakvitha Hjorvarthsonnar (The Poem of Helgi, Son of Hjorvarth). Ostensibly, this concerns a different Helgi – however, Helgi Hundingsbana is supposed to be the reincarnation of Helgi Hjorvarthsonnar. Thus, weaving together the full story of “Helgi” turns out to be a complicated task. And we are left with the additional problem of why the tale of Helgi appears in the Volsung Saga at all – since, on the surface at least, it does nothing to advance the story, and appears to be a straightforward digression. Appearances, however, may be deceiving.

Chapter 9. Concerning Helgi, Killer of Hunding

Helgi encounters a king named Hunding in battle and kills him. (Little is actually said about Hunding in the saga, and in the Poetic Edda; Wagner will flesh out the character a good deal for Die Walküre.) Naturally, Hunding’s sons want revenge, and they assemble a large army to take on Helgi and his men. A great battle follows, in which Helgi personally slays Hunding’s sons Alf, Eyjolf, Hervarth, and Hagbarth.[4] On leaving the battlefield, Helgi encounters “several noble-looking women near a forest.” One of these is Sigrun, who is “by far the most magnificent.”[5] What is not made clear in the text is that Sigrun and the other women are, in fact, Valkyries. However, this is made explicit in Helgakvitha Hundingsbana I (henceforth HH I), st. 15-17:[6]

Then light shone

from Logafjoll,

and in those lights

he saw lightning.

He saw Valkyries

wearing helmets

in the high heavens;

their armor was bloody,

and banners waved

from their spears.[7]

Note that in HH I, but not in the saga, the women are flying. Sigrun (whose name means “Victory Rune”) is the daughter of King Hogni, who has promised her in marriage to Hothbrodd, son of King Granmar. She does not desire this match, however, saying, “I have answered that I would no sooner marry Hothbrodd than a nestling crow. But it will happen, unless you forbid him and come against him with an army and take me away, because there is no king I would rather share a home with than you.”[8] Apparently it is love at first sight – for both – and Helgi gladly accepts the challenge.

Immediately, he sends “men with gifts” to gather troops and assemble an army. (This was a common Scandinavian practice: one obtained the loyalty of men by offering them gifts of various kinds.) The result is beyond his wildest expectations. A great army comes to him from Hethinsey, and troops also arrive from Norvasund with “large, beautiful ships.” Helgi’s captain, Leif, states, “My lord, it is impossible to count all the ships that have come from Norvasund. But there are 14,400 men on them, and another half as many elsewhere.”[9] (This gives a total of 21,600 troops; in HH I st. 24, the ships are described as “serpent-headed.”)

With Helgi in command, the ships sail into a fjord, but soon encounter a terrific storm. We are told that the sound of the waves hitting the decks was “like the sound of boulders crashing together.” Helgi tells his men not to fear and “not to reef the sails, but to set them all even higher than before.”[10] Strikingly, this event recurs in the life of Sigurd, much later in the text, in very similar language: “Sigurd did not order his men to reef the sails, even though they were ripping, but instead he ordered them set even higher.”[11] As we shall see, this is one of a number of cases in which the life of Helgi seems to foreshadow that of Sigurd (or, one could say equally well, in which the life of Sigurd repeats elements of the life of Helgi).

At the height of the storm, Sigrun appears, riding on the land overlooking the ships in the water. She directs Helgi and his men to a safe harbor at a place called Gnipaland. In HH I, however, Sigrun actually flies above the ships:

But bold Sigrun

protected them,

she flew above

their danger.

With the strength

of Ran in her hand,

she saved the ships

at Gnipaland.[12]

The absence of this element in the saga, as well as the omission of the fact that Sigrun is a Valkyrie, suggests that the saga writer is deliberately trying to “humanize” the character – though his motives are unclear.

In any case, Hothbrodd and his men see all of these events from the land. Granmar (son of King Granmar and brother of Hothbrodd) comes riding along the coast and calls down to the ships, asking who leads this army. Sinfjotli responds, and his bizarre exchange with Granmar is one of the highlights of the saga, and of HH I. He is described in HH I (st. 33) as carrying “a red battle-shield rimmed with gold.”[13] The Volsung Saga expands on this, describing him as wearing “a helmet on his head that was as reflective as glass, and a coat of chainmail that shone like snow, and a spear in his hand with a noble flag on it, and a gold-bordered shield held before him.”[14] The overall effect is one of purity and nobility. Granmar will seek to undermine this in his exchange with Sinfjotli.

Famously, they exchange a stream of wild insults, and it is Sinfjotli especially who stoops quite low. The saga writer is thus being deliberately ironic when he says that “Sinfjotli knew how to talk to kings.”[15] Sinfjotli advises Granmar to tell his people that Helgi and the Volsungs have arrived: “after you’ve fed your pigs and dogs and found your wife.” The suggestion that Granmar, a king’s son, would feed his own animals is a deliberate insult, as is the reference to his wife, the implication being that she may be unfaithful, or at least not under Granmar’s control.

Granmar responds in kind, making references to Sinfjotli’s personal history – all episodes with which we are already familiar. He refers to Sinfjotli as “living a long time off wolves’ food” (alluding to the time Sinfjotli spent as a werewolf). Granmar also refers to Sinfjotli having killed his own brothers – which, as we know, is true: he killed Signy’s two young sons, his half-brothers. He also mentions that Sinfjotli has “often sucked a cold corpse for its blood,” probably a reference again to Sinfjotli’s time in wolf form. Strangely, Granmar mentions nothing about the fact that Sinfjotli is the product of incest. Perhaps he does not know about this (but then how does he know about Sinfjotli’s lycanthropy?).

The remainder of the insults exchanged by Granmar and Sinfjotli all have to do with impugning each other’s manliness. Sinfjotli “reminds” Granmar of the time he spent as “the witch-woman [völva] on Varinsey,” when he wanted a husband and chose Sinfjotli! Presumably this is a lie, as is everything else that follows. Later, Sinfjotli claims, Granmar was a Valkyrie in Asgard (meaning, probably, he was a serving wench in Valhalla), and men fought over him (presumably, to bed him/her). Then, Sinfjotli makes the outrageous claim that “I fathered nine wolves with you in Laganes; I was the father to each of them.” Again and again, the basic suggestion is that Granmar has willingly played the sexually receptive role.

Granmar proceeds to outdo these claims by suggesting that none can be true, because Sinfjotli was actually castrated by some giant women. In HH I (st. 40), Granmar (who is called there Guthmund, and is described as “half-god”) approaches things differently. In addition to the castration claim, he also says that Sinfjotli was not “father to any wolves, you’re older than all of them.”[16] In the saga chapter, Granmar then repeats the claims about Sinfjotli’s lycanthropy, and his murder of his half-brothers, referring to him as “stepson of King Siggeir.” His description of the murder of the half-brothers is more vivid in HH I (st. 41), where Guthmund/Granmar refers to how Sinfjotli “cut open the chests” of his brothers.[17]

Continuing his emasculation of Granmar, Sinfjotli now asks him to recall that he was once the “mare of the stallion Grani, and I rode you at the race in Bravellir.”[18] Now, it is a well-known fact that Grani is also the name of Sigurd’s horse (though, of course, at this point in the saga, Sigurd is not yet born). Jackson Crawford comments as follows: “This is not an unusual name for a stallion; it means ‘whiskery’. . . [T]here is no reason to think that this is the same Grani as Sigurd’s.”[19] Strictly speaking, Crawford is correct, though if we assume that these are legends, and not reports of historical events, it is interesting that the name Grani is employed twice in the account of the Volsungs’ exploits (the saga writer takes the name from HH I, where Sinfjotli also accuses Guthmund/Granmar of having been “mare of the stallion Grani”).

Finally, Sinfjotli accuses Granmar of having been “goatherd of the giant Gaulnir.”[20] HH I includes a bit more detail here:

No one thought you

were any kind of man

when you milked

the goats of Gullnir,

or when you were the daughter of Imd,

wearing a ratty dress.

Should I say any more?[21]

The entire exchange of insults is certainly comical, but it is also far more interesting than it may at first appear. Imagine if a man in today’s world tried to insult another by saying that he had once been a mare, or a she-wolf who’d given birth to the first man’s nine pups. The recipient of such accusations would probably be more amazed, and amused, than insulted. The reason why these comments were insulting in the world of Sinfjotli and Granmar is quite simply that such things were actually considered possible.

Note that Sinfjotli’s first insult has to do with Granmar having been a witch. This establishes the idea that he (or she) is capable of shapeshifting. Sinfjotli suggests that Granmar has shapeshifted to become a Valkyrie, a she-wolf, a mare, and (in HH I only) the daughter of Imd. The thinly-veiled suggestion is that Granmar has used the power of shapeshifting to repeatedly gratify his desire to play the female sexual role. In Norse society, there could be no more dreadful an insult. Further, Sinfjotli’s accusations are offered in response to Granmar mentioning Sinfjotli’s time as a werewolf. In other words, Granmar’s (truthful) accusations concerning Sinfjotli’s shapeshifting and its bloody consequences cause Sinfjotli to retaliate with (probably false) accusations concerning Granmar’s shapeshifting, charging him not with mere bloodthirstiness, but with something far worse: ergi (unmanliness). When we enter the world of the sagas, we encounter a very different human reality in which, due to the presence of magic, there are no fixed boundaries between different human forms, and human and animal forms. As we shall see later on, there are no fixed boundaries even between the living and the dead.

The exchange of insults ends with Granmar saying, “I would rather feed your corpse to the ravens than talk with you any longer.”[22] Helgi then intervenes, saying that it would be better for them to fight than to continue arguing. Helgi also rebukes Sinfjotli for the “shameful” things he has said, reminding him that King Granmar’s sons “are tough men.”[23] Granmar rides away and meets with Hothbrodd to let him know what is happening. Hothbrodd now gathers his army, sending word to “the sons of Hring, and to King Hogni and old Álf.”[24] When the two armies meet, there is a fierce battle, and many lives are lost.

Bear in mind that the reason for all this is simply one man’s desire for a beautiful Valkyrie. The Trojan War comes to mind as a parallel – though it lasted a lot longer. There is no Thersites here to object that the kings already have enough women and loot. Indeed, the men who have come to fight for Helgi and Hothbrodd probably care very little about the “justice” of the cause, and whether one beautiful Valkyrie is worth such slaughter. They seek their king’s favor, and they seek glory. In fact, the men who fight for Helgi may admire the fact that one man could be so daring and so grand in his quest to possess Sigrun.

During the course of the battle, “they saw a huge group of shieldmaidens [skjaldmær], and to look upon them was like gazing into a flame.”[25] The term “shieldmaidens” was sometimes used to refer to Valkyries, and, indeed, the description of their appearance strongly suggests we are dealing with superhuman females. Moreover, we are told that “Princess Sigrun was there.” In single combat, Helgi kills Hothbrodd. Sigrun congratulates him, saying, “Have my thanks for this valiant deed. His lands are now yours. This is a very joyful day for me, and you will receive great fame and praise for having killed such a great king.”[26]

Helgi marries Sigrun and becomes (needless to say) “a great and famous king.” However, at this point the story of Helgi ends with a whimper, as the saga writer flatly informs us “but he does not feature further in the saga.”[27] I now turn to further details about Helgi to be found in the Poetic Edda. I have already mentioned some of these, but there is a great deal more and it is intrinsically interesting, for a variety of reasons.

First of all, the prose introduction to HH I states, “Here begins the poem of the Volsungs.”[28] This is because it is the first of the poems in the Codex Regius to deal with the Volsungs. There may have been (and, indeed, really must have been) poems dealing with the events of the saga discussed in earlier installments of this series, but these were not preserved in the Codex Regius. Nevertheless, it is interesting that this poem and two others concerning a hero named “Helgi” have survived, and that they contain so much detail (more than one would think, judging from the rather cursory treatment of Helgi in the Volsung Saga). It seems clear that originally, Helgi was a much more important figure. It is also interesting to note that in the Codex Regius, the poem concerning Helgi Hjorvarthssonar is sandwiched between the two poems concerning Helgi Hundingsbana, even though, as Jackson Crawford notes, these seem to be two different Helgi’s (thus, in his edition of the Poetic Edda, Crawford puts HH I together with Helgakvitha Hundingsbana II, henceforth HH II).

At the beginning of HH I, the Norns visit the newborn Helgi, just as they do in the Volsung Saga. Here they are referred to specifically as the Norns who “make fate for the noble-born.”[29] This is because there are apparently different Norns for different categories of people, and for the different creatures in Midgard. Snorri writes, “There are other Norns [aside from Urth, Verthandi, and Skuld] who visit everyone when they are born to shape their lives, and these are of divine origin, though others are of the race of elves, and a third group are of the race of dwarfs.”[30] Snorri also tells us that “good Norns” (of “noble parentage”) shape good lives and “evil Norns” make bad lives.

And there is more about the Norns in HH I. In stanza 3: “They decided his fate with their power” (“fate” here is örlögþáttu, literally “strand/thread of fate.”). And:

They had bands

made of gold;

they laid them down

under the night-time sky.[31]

Jackson Crawford is unusual among translators in rendering the passage this way. Carolyne Larrington gives it as “they prepared the golden thread and fastened it in the middle of the moon’s hall.”[32] (She notes, however, that “moon’s hall” means “sky.”) The troublesome words here are greiddu gullin. Greiddu is the plural past indicative of greiða, which can mean “to unravel” or to “comb,” which suggests something being done with thread. But it can also mean “to get ready” and “to make.” Gullin is the accusative plural of gull, which means “gold” in the sense of a gold object or prize. Larrington is assuming that here gullin refers to “golden thread” (though gullin is plural). Crawford rejects this, and theorizes (oddly) that gullin may refer to gold “bands” (in the sense of rings?).

Crawford translates the next stanza as follows:

They hid their ends

in the east and west,

to show the borders

of the lands this king should rule.

One of the Norns[33]

hid the third end

in the north; she said

it would hold forever.

Clearly, Crawford cannot think that the “bands” in question are rings or loops, for this would make the passage nonsense (rings do not have “ends”). It is thus easy to see why other translators have thought that the reference is to threads. In any case, what is referred to here is quite mysterious, including the Norns’ act of placing the “ends” of these objects (whatever they are) in the east, west, and north.

We are then told that Helgi’s parents were “grieved” by a further determination of Helgi’s fate, this time coming from ravens. Note that in order to be aware of this, they would have to understand the language of birds. In the poem Rigsthula, we are told that the child King, as part of his royal tutelage, learned the language of birds (see my essay “What Does it Mean to be True to the Aesir?”. This will turn out to be (in a manner of speaking) a Volsung family trait. (It must derive originally from Odin, who, of course, could understand the language spoken by his two ravens, Huginn and Muninn.) In any case, the ravens’ prophesy concerning Helgi is as follows:

“Sigmund’s young son

will wear armor!

He’s just a day old;

His first day has just dawned.

But he has sharp eyes

like a war-king;

that boy’s a friend of wolves –

we’ll be happy and well-fed!”[34]

(In other words, Helgi will be responsible for the deaths of many men, on whose corpses the ravens will feed.)

It is HH II, however, that really contains a treasure trove of information on Helgi, as well as some great, highly macabre drama – most of which is omitted by the anonymous author of the Volsung Saga. We will explore that hoard in our next installment.

Notes

[1] The Saga of the Volsungs with the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok (henceforth VS), trans. Jackson Crawford (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2017), 14.

[2] Crawford, VS, 14.

[3] Crawford, VS, 14.

[4] Note that I am Anglicizing all names and thus omitting accent marks, and changing ð to th.

[5] Crawford, VS, 15.

[6] St = stanza/s.

[7] The Poetic Edda, trans. Jackson Crawford (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2015), 192-193. Henceforth PE.

[8] Crawford, VS, 15.

[9] Crawford, VS, 15.

[10] Crawford, VS, 15-16.

[11] Crawford, VS, 29. This occurs in Chapter Seventeen.

[12] Crawford, PE, 196. Ran is a Norse sea goddess. At HH I st. 54, Sigrun is referred to as “Sigrun, the flying Valkyrie.”

[13] Crawford, PE, 196.

[14] Crawford, VS, 16.

[15] Crawford, VS, 16.

[16] Crawford, PE, 198.

[17] Crawford, PE, 198

[18] Crawford, VS, 16.

[19 Crawford, VS, 138.

[20] Crawford, VS, 16.

[21] Crawford, PE, 198-199.

[22] Crawford, VS, 16.

[23] Crawford, VS, 17.

[24] Crawford, VS, 17.

[25] Crawford, VS, 17.

[26] Crawford, VS, 17.

[27] Crawford, VS, 17.

[28] Crawford, PE, 189.

[29] St. 2; Crawford, PE, 190.

[30] Snorri Sturluson, Edda, trans. Anthony Faulkes (London: Everyman’s Library, 1995), 18.

[31] Crawford, PE, 190.

[32] The Poetic Edda, trans. Carolyne Larrington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 115.

[33] The passage actually refers, as Larrington makes clear, to “the kinswoman of Neri.” We have no idea who Neri is, but Larrington assumes that Neri (and her kinswoman) are Norns, as does Crawford. See Larrington, p. 115 and 278.

[34] Crawford, PE, 190-191.