PENGUIN CLASSICS

THE SAGA OF THE VOLSUNGS

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*Chapter titles with an asterisk have been supplied by the translator; all other titles are in the original manuscript.

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Introduction

The unknown Icelandic author who wrote *The Saga of the Volsungs* in the thirteenth century based his prose epic on stories found in far older Norse poetry. His sources, which may have included a lost earlier prose saga, were rich in traditional lore. *The Saga of the Volsungs* recounts runic knowledge, princely jealousies, betrayals, unrequited love, the vengeance of a barbarian queen, greedy schemes of Attila the Hun, and the mythic deeds of the dragon slayer, Sigurd the Volsung. It describes events from the ancient wars among the kings of the Burgundians, Huns, and Goths, treating some of the same legends as the Middle High German epic poem, the *Nibelungenlied.* In both accounts, though in different ways, Sigurd (Siegfried in the German tradition) acquires the Rhinegold and then becomes tragically entangled in a love triangle involving a supernatural woman. In the Norse tradition she is a valkyrie, one of Odin's warrior-maidens.

In Scandinavia, during the centuries after the Middle Ages, knowledge of the Sigurd story never died out among the rural population. Full of supernatural elements, including the schemes of one-eyed Odin, a ring of power, and the sword that was reforged, the tale was kept alive in oral tradition. In the nineteenth century, as the Volsung story was discovered by the growing urban readership, it became widely known throughout Europe. Translated into many languages, it became a primary source for writers of fantasy, and for those interested in oral legends of historical events and the mythic past of northern Europe. The saga deeply influenced Wil-

liam Morris in the nineteenth century and J. R. R. Tolkien in the twentieth. Richard Wagner, in particular, drew heavily upon the Norse Volsung material in composing the Ring cycle. In 1851 he wrote to a friend concerning the saga:

> Already in Dresden I had all imaginable trouble buying a book that no longer was to be found in any of the book shops. At last I found it in the Royal Library. It . . . is called the *Völsunga saga*—translated from Old Norse by H. von der Hagen [1815]. . . . This book I now need for repeated perusal. . . . I want to have the saga again; not in order to imitate it . . . , rather, to recall once again exactly every element that I already previously had conceived from its particular features. [Wagner's use of the Volsung material is discussed later in this Introduction.]

One can only speculate about the origin of the saga's dragon slaying and of other mythic events described in the tale. Many of the saga's historical episodes, however, may be traced to actual events that took place in the fourth and fifth centuries A.D., the period of great folk migrations in Europe. In this time of upheaval, the northern frontier defenses of the Roman Empire collapsed under the pressure of barbarian peoples, as Germanic tribes from northern and central Europe and Hunnish horsemen from Asia invaded what is now France and Germany. A seemingly endless series of skirmishes and wars were fought as tribes attempted to subjugate their enemies and to consolidate newly won territories into kingdoms and empires.

The memory of the migrations became part of the oral heritage of the tribesmen, as epic poems about heroes and their feats spread throughout the continent during succeeding centuries. In the far north legends and songs about Burgundians, Huns, and Goths, as well as new or revised stories about indigenous northern families such as the Volsungs, became an integral part of the cultural lore of Scandinavian societies. The old tales had not died out by the Viking Age (ca. 800–1070), that is, several centuries after the migration period had ended. On the contrary, during this new age of movement in Scandinavia the epic cycles of the earlier migration period seem to have gained in popularity. As Norsemen sailed out

from Viking Scandinavia in search of plunder, trade, and land, they carried with them tales of Sigurd and the Volsungs.

One of the places to which the Norsemen carried these epic lays was Iceland, an island discovered by Viking seamen in the ninth century, which soon after its settlement (ca. 870–930) became the major Norse outpost in the North Atlantic. In Iceland, as in the Norse homelands and other overseas settlements, the traditions about Sigurd and the various tribesmen—among them Huns, Goths, and Burgundians—became choice subjects for native poets.

The Saga of the Volsungs was written down sometime between 1200 and 1270. Its prose story is based to a large degree on traditional Norse verse called Eddic poetry, a form of mythic or heroic lay which developed before the year 1000 in the common oral folk culture of Old Scandinavia. Eighteen of the Eddic poems in the thirteenth-century *Codex Regius,* the most important manuscript of the *Poetic (or Elder) Edda,* treat aspects of the Volsung legend. (The specific extant poems on which the saga author relied are listed at the end of the book.) This manuscript, which is the only source for many of the Eddic poems, is, however, incomplete. An eight-page lacuna occurs in the middle of the Sigurd cycle, and the stories contained in *The Saga of the Volsungs,* chapters 24–31, are the principal source of information on the narrative contents of these lost pages.

So popular was the subject matter of the saga in the period of oral transmission that, if we are to believe later Icelandic written sources, some of the stories traveled as far as Norse Greenland. Someone in this settlement, founded in 985 by Icelanders led by Erik the Red, may have composed the Eddic poem about Attila (Atli) the Hun called "The Greenlandic Lay of Atli." This poem of heroic tragedy and revenge was later written down and preserved in Iceland.

Written Icelandic material builds on a long oral tradition. By the tenth century the Icelanders had already become renowned as storytellers throughout the northern lands, and Icelandic poets, called skalds, earned their keep in the royal courts of Scandinavia and Anglo-Saxon England. We may assume that, along with many other stories, they told the Sigurd cycle just as German poets told the story of Siegfried. It is noteworthy that about the year 1200, the *Nibelungenlied,* with its poetic version of the Siegfried

story, was written, probably in Austria. At approximately the same time or within seven decades, *The Saga of the Volsungs* was compiled in Iceland with far fewer chivalric elements than its German counterpart.

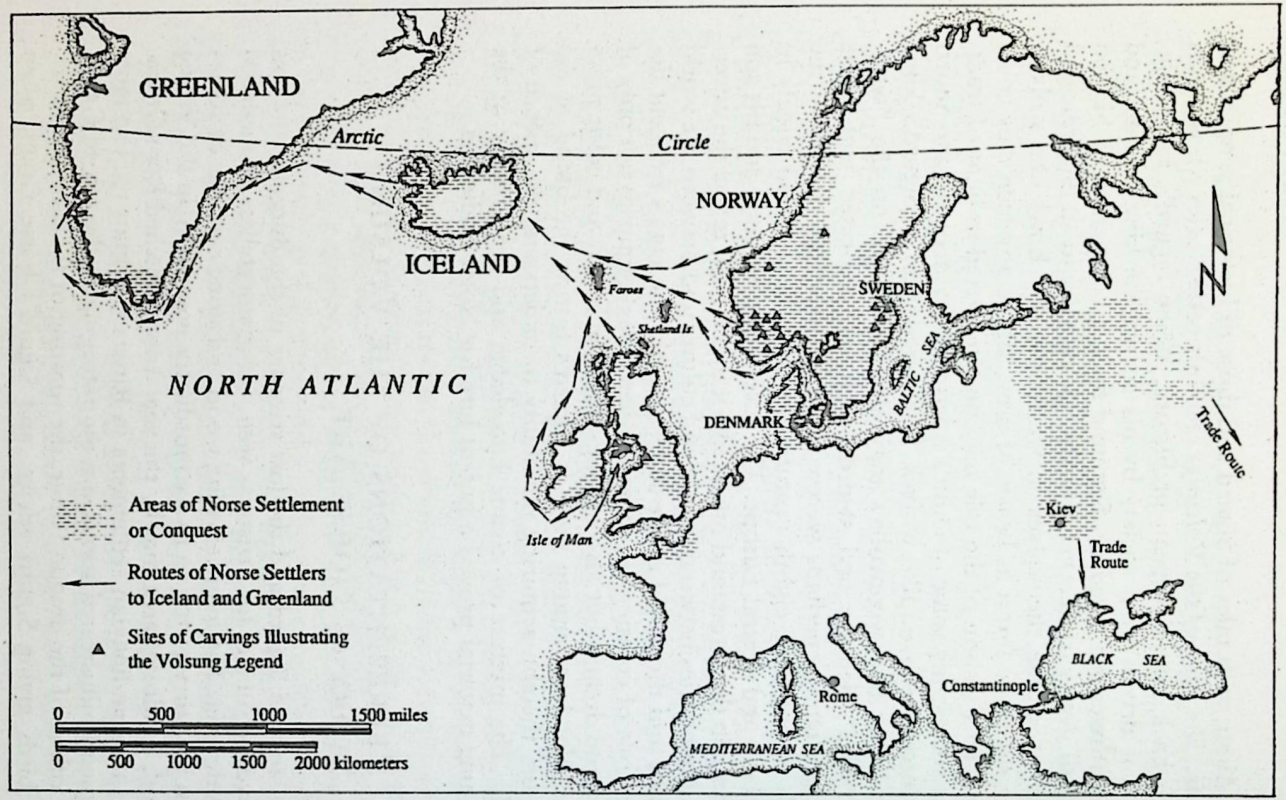
It is not by chance that in Scandinavia so much of the narrative material about the Volsungs was preserved in Iceland. This immigrant society on the fringe of European civilization, like frontier societies in other times and places, preserved old lore as a treasured link with distant homelands. Fortunately for posterity, writing became popular among the Icelanders in the thirteenth century, when interest in old tales was still strong. Almost all the Old Norse narrative material that has survived—whether myth, legend, saga, history, or poetry—is found in Icelandic manuscripts, which form the largest existing vernacular literature of the medieval West. Among the wealth of written material is Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda,* a thirteenth-century Icelandic treatise on the art of skaldic poetry and a handbook of mythological lore. The second section of Snorri's three-part prose work contains a short and highly readable summary of the Sigurd cycle which, like the much longer prose rendering of the cycle in *The Saga of the Volsungs,* is based on traditional Eddic poems. Although Snorri and the unknown author of *The Saga of the Volsungs* were treating the same material, there is no indication that the latter was familiar with Snorri's *Prose Edda.*

In the Middle Ages, when most narrative traditions were kept alive in verse, the Icelanders created the saga, a prose narrative form unique in Western medieval culture. Why the Icelanders became so interested in prose is not known, but it is clear that they cultivated their saga form, developing it into a suitable vehicle for long tales of epic quality, one of which is *The Saga of the Volsungs.* At times it seems as if its anonymous author was consciously trying to make history from the mythic and legendary material of his sources. It is also possible that he was drawing upon an earlier prose saga about the Volsungs. He may have been influenced by *The Saga of Thidrek of Berne,* a mid-thirteenth-century Norwegian translation of tales from north and west Germany about King Theoderic the Ostrogoth, a heroic figure from the migration period later called Dietrich of Berne. This saga is a rambling collection of stories about the king, his champions, their ancestors, and several renowned semimythic heroes, including Sigurd.

Along with tales of Sigurd and those of historical peoples and events, *The Saga of the Volsungs* recounts eerie stories whose roots reach back into European prehistory. When Sigurd's father Sigmund is driven from society by his enemy the king of Gautland (in southwestern Sweden), Sigmund finds a companion in his son Sinfjotli. Away from other humans, the two live in an underground dwelling, clothe themselves in wolfskins, and howl like wolves. They roam the forest as beasts of prey, killing any men they come upon. This section of the tale may be interpreted in light of traditions concerning some of Odin's warriors who, according to Snorri Sturluson, behaved like wolves. The description of Sigurd's kinsmen living like werewolves may also shed light on the "wolf-warriors." Helmets and sword scabbards decorated with these strange figures, perhaps werewolves or berserkers, date from the sixth through the eighth century and have been found widely in northern and central Europe. The account of Sigmund and his son Sinfjotli in the forest, and others like it in the saga, reflect the uncertain boundaries between nature and culture and between the world of men and the world of the supernatural. The saga's frequent descriptions of crossings of these borders reveal glimpses not only of fears and dreams but also of long-forgotten beliefs and cultic practices. Not least among these is Sigurd's tasting the blood of the dragon, thereby acquiring the ability to understand the speech of birds. The mixture of arcane knowledge and oral history in the Volsung material proved a potent lure for Norse audiences.

Representations of the Volsung Story in Norse Art

The story of Sigurd and the lost treasure of the Burgundians was a favorite subject for artists as well as for storytellers in medieval Scandinavia. The many existing wood and stone carvings of scenes from the story testify to its extraordinary popularity in the Viking world, a cultural area that by the year 1000 stretched from Greenland to Scandinavian settlements in Russia (see map 1). The most frequently illustrated scenes are the reforging of the sword Gram, the killing of the dragon Fafnir, the roasting of the dragon's heart, the birds giving Sigurd advice, and Sigurd's horse Grani, often



MAP 1. The world of the Vikings (ca. 1000)

loaded with treasure from the hoard. A frequently depicted episode from the second part of the saga shows Sigurd's brother-in-law King Gunnar bound in the snake pit, playing a harp with his toes.

Most extant carvings of the Sigurd legend appear on Christian artifacts such as stone crosses, baptismal fonts, stave church portals, and Christian rune stones. The earliest carvings that clearly portray scenes from the Sigurd legend are found on tenth- and eleventh-century stone crosses from the Isle of Man. Because of its central position in the Irish Sea, with easy access to England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, the Isle of Man served as a major Viking base and trade center. It was a meeting place during the Viking Age for Norse and Celtic cultures, including pagan and Christian religions. Baptismal fonts, like the one in the Horum church in Bohuslan, often portray King Gunnar in the snake pit playing the harp with his feet. Farther to the east, in Sweden, a number of clear representations of the Sigurd story include the famous rune stone from Ramsund showing Sigurd slaying the dragon from underneath.

The most numerous Sigurd carvings, however, are found on portals from twelfth- and thirteenth-century Norwegian stave churches. Norway in the Middle Ages had between a thousand and twelve hundred of these sometimes towering wooden structures, many of which survived until the early part of the nineteenth century. Today only about thirty stave churches remain standing. Of the portals that are preserved from churches, many of them demolished in the nineteenth century, three represent biblical scenes; all other carvings portraying human figures are based on the legends of Sigurd and King Gunnar. The portrayal of the legend on church entryways in Norway is particularly intriguing. An Old Norwegian sermon (dated ca. 1200) concerning the consecration of stave churches suggests that for these buildings, as for many other churches, the door symbolically represented a spiritual defense of the interior. Dragon slaying was suitable for representation on church portals and on other Christian carvings because in medieval Christian thought the dragon and the serpent were often connected with Satan. Cast from heaven, Satan is depicted in medieval art as a voracious monster who angrily consumes his victims.

Sigurd crossed the threshold from pagan to Christian hero because of his dragon-slaying characteristics and, perhaps, his associ-

ation with the Norwegian royal house. Until other warrior-saints became popular in the High Middle Ages, the archangel Saint Michael was the foremost dragon slayer and defender against Satan and chaos. His cult developed early in Scandinavia, and as a dragon slayer he was represented in carvings on church portals in medieval Denmark. In Norway no pre-1200 representations of Michael have been preserved, and there is no mention of carvings of this saint on Norwegian stave church portals. Can the reason for the Norwegian choice of Sigurd over Michael as dragon slayer lie in the politics of the time? Michael was a guardian angel of the Danes, the Baltic Germans, and the Ottonian rulers of the Holy Roman Empire. Since Norway may have regarded him as the symbol of aggressive foreign powers, both lay and ecclesiastic, he would be seen as an inappropriate guardian of Norwegian interests. Sigurd, meanwhile, through the tradition that his daughter Aslaug was married to the legendary ninth-century Viking hero Ragnar Lodbrok ("Hairy Breeches"), was regarded as an ancestor of the Norwegian royal house and thus a suitable champion for Norwegian Christians.

Myths, Heroes, and Social Realities

The Saga of the Volsungs falls into two distinct parts. The first part, ending with Sigurd's arrival among the Burgundians, is studded with mythic motifs, although their religious meaning and their coherence are often lost. Characters in this section include many supernatural beings: gods, giants, a valkyrie, a dwarf, and a dragon. It is difficult to discern historical precedents even for the human characters in this section. By contrast, the second part of the saga takes place in a human world with recognizable social problems. Nearly all the characters in this section may be identified with historical figures.

The first part of the saga is a valuable source of information about Odin, the one-eyed god of war, wisdom, death, and ecstasy. Odin appears here as ancestor and patron of the Volsung line and its scion, the dragon slayer Sigurd. Many of the god's characteristics described in the saga are corroborated by other sources. For example, Odin appears in other Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon

traditions as a progenitor of royal families. He also often bestows gifts on warrior-heroes, a function that he fulfills several times in the saga. It is Odin who first provides the magical sword that Sigurd later inherits from his father Sigmund. Odin also advises Sigurd how to identify the special horse Grani, a descendant of the god's own eight-legged steed Sleipnir.

Sigurd is an Odinic hero, and at crucial moments for Sigurd's ancestors, Odin's intervention assures the continuation of the family that is to produce the monster slayer. Thus when the marriage bed of Sigurd's great-grandfather, King Rerir, is barren, Odin sends Rerir an apple of fertility. The token is carried by a "wish-maiden," one of Odin's supernatural women who flies in the guise of a crow, a carrion bird similar to Odin's ravens. This divine intervention results in the miraculous birth of King Volsung. Later Volsung further reinforces the progenitorial link with the god by marrying the wish maiden who brought the apple that precipitated his own birth. The implied incestuousness of this marriage is echoed later in the saga by the sexual union of Volsung's twin children, Sigmund and Signy. Volsung has an additional connection with fertility cults: his name corresponds to an Old Norse fertility god called Volsi, whom Norwegian peasants represented as a deified horse phallus in *The Tale of Volsi.* This short Christian satire on pagan beliefs probably contains elements of actual pagan ritual. The tale was inserted into *The Saga of Saint Olaf* found in *Flateyjarbók,* a major fourteenth-century Icelandic manuscript named for the island Flatey in western Iceland where the book was found.

Odin, together with the silent god Hoenir and the trickster Loki, sets in motion the events that bring a great treasure from the chthonic world of the dwarves into the world of men. The treasure, which passes through the hands of nearly all classes of beings in the Norse cosmos—dwarves, gods, giants, a dragon, and humans—carries a curse and serves to link the human tragedy of the second part of the saga with the supernatural prehistory of the first part. A particular item in the treasure is a special ring called Andvaranaut, a cursed magical object that even Odin is not able to keep for himself.

What purpose, we may ask, do Sigurd's supernatural advantages and Odin's patronage serve? Although Sigurd has many semidivine attributes, he does not thirst after immortality as do

many heroes. The patronage of the highest god and Sigurd's special equipment make him formidable among men but not invincible. The issue of immortality is more clearly drawn in the *Nibelungenlied,* where Siegfried bathes in the blood of the dragon and, like Achilles, becomes invulnerable to weapons except in one part of his body. Furthermore, unlike the exploits of such monster slayers as Beowulf and the heroes of creation epics, Sigurd's dragon slaying and subsequent knowledge do not bring order or safety to the world. On the contrary, his memorable deed has disastrous consequences: almost all persons who come in contact with Sigurd or his family experience tragedy.

Sigurd's susceptibility to the opposing attractions of the real and supernatural worlds is perhaps heightened by the ambivalence of his own nature. Though finally incorporated by marriage into the real world of the Burgundians, he retains certain supernatural abilities, such as the power to assume the shape of others. He uses his otherworldly powers of shape-changing to trick Brynhild by appearing in the guise of his brother-in-law. For reasons that are not explained, Odin distances himself from Sigurd after the monster has been slain. Perhaps Sigurd is no longer of use to the god. It is noteworthy that, after the killing of the dragon, Odin appears only once more in the saga, at the tale's end, when he counsels Jormunrek the Gothic king on how to kill Gudrun's sons.

An overriding theme of tension between marriage and blood bonds runs through the saga. For generation after generation, strife with kin by marriage brings a series of misfortunes upon the Volsungs. Marriage creates new kinship alliances, which are vital for survival in societies like the one pictured in the saga, where there is no effective central order and only a rudimentary judiciary. Many of the saga's major characters are kings or noble retainers, individuals prepared to fight regularly to maintain their status. Even though pledges were exchanged between lord and retainer, the most trustworthy defense lay in the family. Yet villainy often arose from within that social unit, especially in the weak link of the in-law relationship.

In the saga, the Volsungs seldom have dependable blood relations. Sigurd grows up without a father, an element of his upbringing for which the dragon mocks him. The absence of the support that blood relations might supply exacerbates Sigurd's problems

with in-laws, who are often untrustworthy. Germanic societies tended to be patrilocal: that is, a man married a woman outside his group and brought her to live with his family instead of their living with hers. Sigurd breaks the usual social pattern after marrying the Burgundian princess Gudrun by settling among his in-laws at Worms. There the protection of both his person and his treasure is dependent upon the goodwill of his wife's Burgundian kinsmen.

The saga makes much of the disturbing fact that Sigurd's brothers-in-law plot against him, even though two of them have increased their obligations to him by establishing blood brotherhood. It is the third Burgundian brother, not bound to the outsider by a ritual blood tie, who carries out the attack on Sigurd. In part the recurring pattern of strife among in-laws comes from the sources available to the saga author. Many of the poems he drew upon for his prose narrative were small tragedies that, like the saga, focused on intrafamily rivalry over treasure and status. Linked together one after the other, the small tragedies weave a larger tale of horror.

History and Legend: Burgundians, Huns, Goths, and Sigurd the Dragon Slayer

Because verifiable information about the migrations era is limited, the period is a historical snake pit that requires scholars to act much like King Gunnar, who in the saga played the harp with his toes. The writings of Greeks and Romans about their barbarian opponents and neighbors have in modern times come under increasing scrutiny, and the old assumption that tribal names necessarily denote significant or continuing ethnic, cultural (archaeological), or political grouping is questionable. Differing views that often depend on interpretation cannot be proved or disproved by reference to irrefutable fact, since the sources are often uncritical or incomplete and at times are contradictory. For example, four different accounts in ancient writings record the destruction of the Burgundians. It is possible that "Burgundians" becomes a topos in classical sources and in Germanic material, the equivalent of disaster to a family through betrayal. To whatever degree this idea may or may

not be valid, connecting the saga and poetic references with historical events is certainly speculative.

The element of speculation is further increased by an awareness of the way in which legends grow. The process of taking root in oral memory tends to obscure their origins, and this observation is true regarding the deadly clash between the Burgundians, led by Gunnar and Hogni, and the Huns under King Atli (Attila, called Etzel in German sources). The most that can be said about Gunnar, for example, is that the historical king of the Burgundians, Gundaharius, is one of the main sources for the fictional King Gunnar; the two are by no means identical. In some instances a legend may develop so fully that its hero shares only a name with the historical figure with whom he is identified. In other instances, legendary and historical events may correspond without any association between the names of the figures involved.

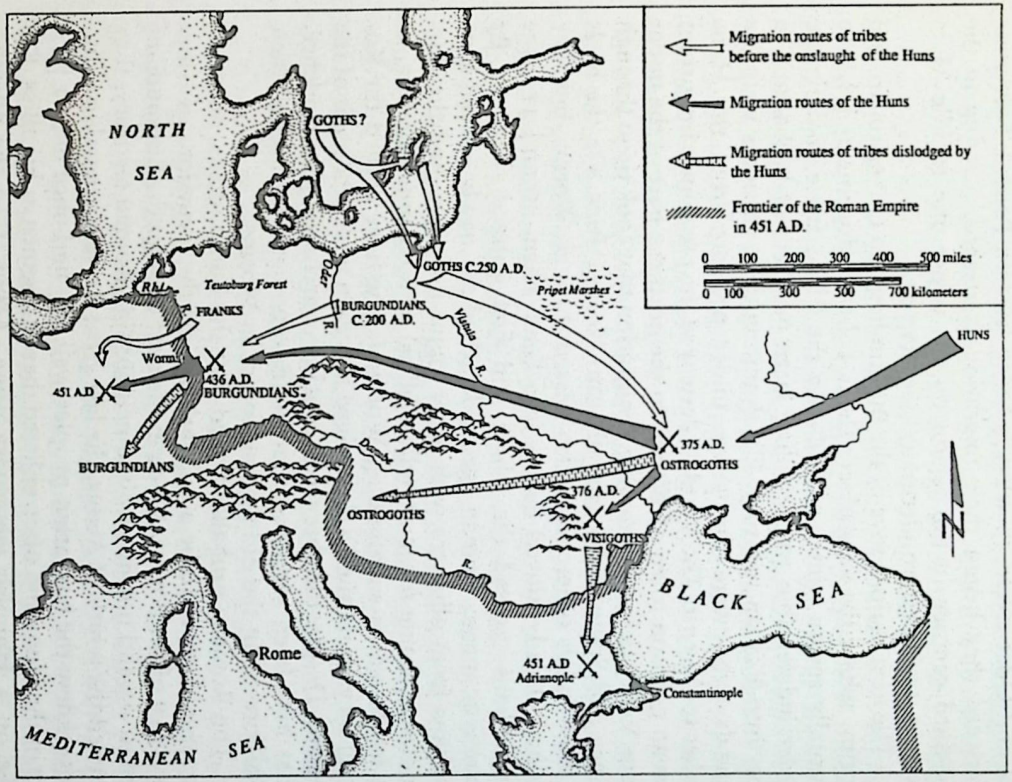
Often characters who lived centuries or decades apart become contemporaries in legend. In *The Saga of the Volsungs,* for instance, Gundaharius (d. 437), Attila (d. 453), and Ermenrichus (king of the Goths, d. 375) are presented as the contemporaries Gunnar, Atli, and Jormunrek. Conflicts between nations or tribes are often reduced to quarrels between families, as witnessed by the way the saga treats the struggle between the Burgundians and the Huns. The absence of evidence that the Icelandic saga audience understood or gave any thought to the ethnic difference between the Huns and the Germanic tribesmen is noteworthy. The oriental origin of Attila is forgotten, and he is treated as one of several competing leaders in the migration period.

If we have come to question classical writings, the writers themselves, especially in the period of the late Roman Empire, seem to be secure in their views: those who mention the Burgundians perceived them as a historical people. The Roman historian Tacitus, writing about the Germanic tribes beyond the Rhine frontier at the end of the first century A.D., unfortunately does not mention the Burgundians, and we have no certain knowledge about their earliest history. In late classical and early medieval sources they are associated with the island of Bornholm in the Baltic Sea. Scholars now generally doubt such a connection, and attempts to demonstrate archeologically a postulated migration from Scandinavia to the mainland in the first century B.C. have been unsuccessful. Nev-

ertheless, a Scandinavian origin for the Burgundians is at least as logical as any other possibility. By the second century A.D. Burgundians are reported to have been living in the area between the Vistula and Oder rivers, in what is today western Poland. Sometime afterward they began their migration westward, arriving in the mid-third century in the region on the upper and middle Main River in southwestern Germany (see map 2).

The next major move of the Burgundians, to the region around Worms, where the saga places them, is better documented. In the unusually severe winter of 406–407 the Rhine froze, making the border indefensible and enabling large numbers of barbarians to cross into Roman territory. Chief among these invaders were the Vandals, who were themselves under pressure from the Huns farther to the east. The Vandals destroyed the previously important Roman garrison town of Worms in the northern part of the upper Rhine Valley before continuing a migration that took them through France and Spain and eventually into North Africa. On the heels of the Vandals other tribes also passed through Worms, but they too had already moved deeper into Gaul when, around 413, the Burgundians crossed the Rhine and first entered the area. By diplomatic means Roman agents detached the newly arrived Burgundians from alliances with other major intruders, and the Burgundians became *foederati* (client-allies) of the Roman Empire. In the fertile region surrounding Worms (some have argued for Koblenz) they established a short-lived kingdom under the aegis of the Romans. Despite the absence of conclusive archaeological evidence, it has long been supposed that the Burgundians established their royal fortress in the old Roman forum in Worms.

The Romans probably hoped that the Burgundians, once settled, would prove to be a bulwark against the incursions of tribes living east of the border. When in the next decades the Burgundians tried to expand northward into neighboring Roman territory, they incurred the wrath of Aetius, the last great Roman general in Gaul. Aetius knew the barbarian peoples well. He had once been a hostage of the Huns and often enlisted these horsemen as his allies. Relying on a Hunnish mercenary army, Aetius, then the effective leader of the Western Empire, attacked the Burgundians in 436 and completely routed them. The Burgundians, it is said, lost their king Gundaharius, his whole family, and 20,000 men. After the Huns



MAP 2. Migrations of the tribes central to *The Saga of the Volsungs* up to the death of Attila the Hun

withdrew from the region around Worms, the area was occupied by the Alemanni, another Germanic tribe, who in turn were conquered by the Franks in the late fifth century.

But the Burgundians did not disappear from history. Under the protection of the victorious Aetius, those who survived the battle migrated south to the region near Lake Geneva. In less than two decades the Burgundians had surprisingly regained enough strength to resume their fight against the Huns. In 451, under the generalship of Aetius, they joined with the Franks, the Visigoths, and the Gallo-Romans to repel an invasion of Gaul by Attila. The victorious alliance, however, soon fell apart. The Burgundians turned on the Gallo-Romans and, by defeating them, quickly became a major power within the crumbling empire. By the latter part of the fifth century they had extended their power over most of eastern Gaul and had established their capital at Lyon. The surrounding region came to be called Burgundy, a name it has kept. The Burgundians, however, were unable to maintain their independence. A series of conflicts with the Franks and the Goths sapped their strength, and in 534 what was left of their kingdom was annexed by the Franks. Thereafter the Burgundians were absorbed into Frankish society, eventually losing their ethnic identity.

The Huns were pastoral nomads who originated in the Altai Mountains of central Asia. Because no written record of their native language has survived, we can only guess at the nature of Hunnish languages from names recorded in other peoples' writings. Probably a substantial group of Hunnish peoples spoke some form of Turkic, a subfamily of the Altaic languages. Little definitive information about the Huns' early history is available, although it has long been supposed that they were related to the Hsiung-nu, against whom the Chinese erected the Great Wall. Until the time of Attila in the fifth century, when rudimentary forms of statehood began to take shape, the Huns were chiefly a loose association of different tribes. They were skillful horsemen who fought as mounted archers. The accuracy of their compound bows and their reputation for cruelty inspired fear among enemies.

One such enemy was the Ostrogoths, a people represented in the saga by their king Jormunrek. In the fourth century the Ostrogoths ruled a vast empire north of the Black Sea, stretching across the grasslands of Russia from the Don River to the Dniester

and extending from the Crimea to the Pripet marshes. The earliest history of the Goths is shrouded in obscurity, but they almost certainly originated in southern Scandinavia and migrated across the Baltic in the first century A.D., probably giving their name to the Baltic island of Gotland. By the third century the Goths were inhabiting a region near the Vistula, in present-day Poland, before migrating southeast.

By the fourth century the Goths had split into two major groups, the Visigoths, living in present-day Rumania, and the Ostrogoths. How the Ostrogoths acquired their empire and came to dominate the many peoples it included remains a mystery. The Huns fell upon and destroyed the Ostrogothic empire when, around 375, they suddenly invaded the steppes of present-day Russia. Continuing on the offensive, they advanced into central Europe and enslaved the tribes in their path. In 376 they overwhelmed the Visigoths, whose remnants then sought safety within the borders of the Roman Empire. After that victory the Huns settled down on the Hungarian plain, having in three short years wiped out a century-long Gothic expansion.

After destroying the Visigoths, the Huns remained quiet for half a century, but about 430 they were again on the move. It was at this time that the army of Hunnish mercenaries, acting under the orders of Aetius, crushed the Burgundians. At approximately the same time, the Huns, in a series of similar but unconnected raids on other Germanic tribesmen, Romans, and eastern peoples, expanded their own empire until it reached from Europe to the Persian and perhaps even to the Chinese frontier. Beginning in 434, Attila and his brother Bleda ruled the empire jointly. In 445, after murdering his brother, Attila became the sole ruler. His apparently weak control over the eastern part of the empire, however, diminished his ability to acquire sufficient reinforcements of Hunnish warriors and trained horses.

At the heart of the Hunnish empire was its capital, the "Ring," a circular city of tents, wooden palaces, and wagons, at whose center stood Attila's royal residence. Attila's court was a meeting place for hostages, retainers, and warriors from the various subject tribes. Large contingents of the latter were incorporated into the Hunnish armies, whose military organization was modified in Attila's time to reflect the growing importance of units of armored

warriors often drawn from the conquered peoples. Poems such as the Anglo-Saxon "Waldere" and parts of the different Sigurd/Siegfried traditions show traces of what most certainly was a series of heroic cycles about Attila's court and the champions of the period.

After Attila's death in 453, his numerous quarreling sons divided the empire into separate dominions. In 454 an alliance of subjected tribes revolted and inflicted a crushing defeat upon their masters. The Goths remained for the most part neutral in this battle, but over the next decade they too fought a series of mostly successful engagements against the Huns. These reversals reduced the Huns to insignificance, and after the mid-sixth century they are no longer mentioned in the sources. Because of the temporary nature of their buildings and towns, no major archaeological trace of the Hunnish empire has been found. The modern Hungarians are not descended from this group but stem from a later migration of the distantly related Magyars.

What is the connection between the historical Huns, Burgundians, and Goths and the characters who play prominent roles in *The Saga of the Volsungs*? The answer is clouded by time. Obviously Atli, king of the Huns in the saga, is based on Attila, and Gunnar represents Gundaharius, the ill-fated Burgundian king. Without doubt the later Burgundians, even under the Franks, retained knowledge of their ancestors. A sixth-century law code names Gibica, Gundaharius, and Gislaharius as early Burgundian rulers. Gibica corresponds to Gjuki, the father of Gunnar; Gundaharius, to Gunnar; and Gislaharius, to Giselher, who appears in the *Nibelungenlied* as one of the kings jointly ruling Burgundy. Atli's betrayal of Gunnar and Hogni in the saga reflects the historical destruction of Gundaharius's kingdom by the Hunnish mercenary army.

The saga's account, however, is far from historically accurate. Among the many discrepancies is the absence of Aetius, the Roman general who commanded the Hunnish mercenaries. Furthermore, the political reasons for the war are lost; events are portrayed as springing from intrafamily feuds, motivated by greed and jealousy among blood relations and in-laws. A major chronological difference is that the historical Attila did not participate in the war against the Burgundians in 436; at that time he was on the middle

Danube negotiating with the Romans. It is not difficult to understand, however, that a storyteller would want to embellish his tale with a character as intriguing as Attila.

The Hunnish king's association with the Burgundians was perhaps an early step in the development of the legend. Certainly the connection of Attila with wealth is well founded. Vast quantities of gold and valuables flowed into his coffers, and large numbers of slaves became his property. As his treasure grew, so did his greed. In 443 the Eastern Roman emperor Theodosius bought peace from Attila at the price of 432,000 solidi, about two tons of gold. Payments of this magnitude brought wealth to the subject tribes serving Attila, enabling large quantities of precious metals to circulate through the northern lands, including Scandinavia. Such exorbitant tributes, along with booty and payments acquired by other tribesmen, provided material for flamboyant jewelry and ornaments.

The saga's account of King Atli's death at a woman's hand also has a foundation in history. The earliest and most reliable report of Attila's death was written by the Greek historian Priscus, who had visited the Huns as a member of a diplomatic mission a few years before Attila died. Priscus's work survives only in fragments, but he is cited at length by the sixth-century Gothic historian Jordanes in his *History of the Goths*:

> He [Attila] near the time of his death, as the historian Priscus tells, married a very beautiful girl named Ildico, after countless other wives, as was the custom of his people. At his wedding he overindulged in gaiety and lay down on his back, heavy with wine and sleep. A gush of blood, which normally would have run down out of his nose, was hindered from its usual channels; it flowed on a fatal course into his throat and killed him. Thus drunkenness brought a scandalous end to a king famed in battle. On the next day, when a good portion of the day had passed, the king's servants suspected something tragic and, after a great clamor, smashed down the doors. They discovered Attila dead without any wounds. His death was caused by an effusive nosebleed, and the girl, her head hanging low, cried under her veil.

Jordanes, who makes an effort to establish the accidental nature of Attila's death, may have been aware of other versions of the story in which Ildico kills Attila, since a contemporary chronicle says that Attila died at the hands of a woman. The woman involved was evidently Germanic; Ildico seems to be a diminutive of the female proper name Hild, which in the form of the suffix *-hild* is a common element in other Germanic female names. For example, the woman in the *Nibelungenlied* who plays the role similar to Gudrun's in *The Saga of the Volsungs* is named Kriemhild.

The saga's Gothic King Jormunrek, like Gunnar and Atli, is based on a historical figure known to the Romans as Ermenrichus, who in the fourth century ruled the vast Ostrogothic empire on the steppes. The contemporary Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus, in his *History,* claims that Ermenrichus killed himself rather than contend with attacks by the Huns:

> Accompanied by their allies, the Huns burst with a sudden attack into the wide districts of Ermenrichus. Ermenrichus, a very warlike king who terrified nearby peoples because of his many boldly executed deeds, was hit hard by the force of this sudden attack. For a long time, however, he tried to remain strong and resolute. Nevertheless, rumor spread, exaggerating the looming disasters, and he settled his fear of these major crises by his voluntary death.

By the sixth century the legend of Ermenrichus had developed beyond these sparse facts into a recognizable version of the story told in *The Saga of the Volsungs.* Among other new details Jordanes, in his *History of the Goths,* tells of a woman named Sunilda, wife of a leader of a people subject to the Goths. Jordanes mentions the vengeance of her brothers Sarus and Ammius and Hermanaric's death in old age:

> Hermanaric, king of the Goths, as we have reported above, was conqueror of many tribes. Nevertheless, while he was apprehending the approach of the Huns, the treacherous tribe of the Rosomoni, who among others then owed him allegiance, seized the opportunity to turn on him. The king, shaken with rage, ordered a certain chieftain's wife of the above-mentioned

> tribe named Sunhilda to be bound to wild horses on account of her husband's treachery. She was then torn asunder by the horses running at full gallop in opposite directions. After this killing, her brothers Sarus and Ammius avenged her death by thrusting a sword into Hermanaric's side. Stricken by his wound, Hermanaric lived out a sickly existence with an enfeebled body. Balamber, king of the Huns, made use of this illness and moved his battle-ready men into the territory of the Ostrogoths, from whom the Visigoths had already separated because of some disagreement between them. Meanwhile Hermanaric, unable to bear the pain of his wound and the distress of the Hunnish invasion, died full of days at the age of 110. Because of his death the Huns prevailed over those Goths who, as we have said, settled in the eastern region and are called Ostrogoths.

Jordanes's story appears, in part, historically accurate: it presents a reasonable chronology and with seeming correctness identifies the peoples involved. At the same time we can see the elements that are to be more fully developed in later legend. Sunilda is manifestly the prototype of Svanhild, Sigurd and Gudrun's daughter, who in the saga is killed by Jormunrek. Likewise the correspondences with Svanhild's brothers Sorli (Sarus) and Hamdir (Ammius) are reasonably clear. Although we will never know precisely what source Jordanes used for this story, it is tempting to postulate that he relied on a now lost heroic lay.

In the centuries that followed, the tale passed more thoroughly from history into legend. Spreading widely, it was known in some form in Anglo-Saxon England, where the tragedy of Ermenrichus (Eormanric) is one of the many referred to in the moving Anglo-Saxon lament *Deor*:

> We've heard of the she-wolf's heart
> of Eormanric; he ruled the folk
> of the Goths' kingdom. That was a
> cruel king!
> Many men sat bound in sorrow,
> expecting woe; often they wished
> that the kingdom be overcome.

One can only guess when and how Sigurd became connected with the other legendary elements of the story. Earlier sources yield some evidence that Sigurd may not originally have been the Volsung who slew the dragon. In the Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf,* the dragon slaying is attributed not to Sigurd, who goes unmentioned, but to Sigemund Waelsing (Volsung), the Anglo-Saxon equivalent of Sigurd's father Sigmund. The poem also mentions Sigemund's nephew Fitela whose name corresponds to the Scandinavian Sinfjotli, who is Sigmund's son by his sister and hence also his nephew:

> He told all that he had heard
> of the deeds of valor, far voyages
> and unknown struggles of Sigemund Waelsing,
> feuds and foul deeds; Fitela alone,
> and no other men, knew of this,
> from when Sigemund chose to speak of the deeds
> uncle to nephew, as they ever in battle
> were comrades in arms, each to the other—
> they killed great numbers of the giant race,
> slew them with swords. No scant glory
> developed for Sigemund after his death
> because the brave warrior killed the serpent
> guardian of the hoard.
>
> Under the gray stone
> the prince's [Waels's] son alone performed
> a fierce deed—Fitela was not with him.
> Even so, it happened that his sword hewed
> the ornate serpent; the noble weapon
> drove into the wall as the dragon died.
> With valor the warrior won the ring hoard,
> so that he might enjoy it at his own desire;
> The son of Waels loaded his watercraft,
> bore bright treasures to the ship's bosom.
> The serpent's own fires melted its flesh.

In this Anglo-Saxon version of the story Fitela is described only as Sigemund's nephew, whereas in the Icelandic saga Sinfjotli is both son and nephew to Sigmund. The motif of incest in *The Saga*

of the Volsungs, so important to the understanding of the relationship between Sigmund and Sinfjotli as father and son, may be a late addition to the legend. *Beowulf* refers to the progenitor of the race of heroes as Waels. In Scandinavia the name of Sigmund's father was the unusual compound, Volsung, possibly formed when the patronymic suffix *-ung* (present in the Anglo-Saxon form *Waelsing,* "Son of Waels") was interpreted as an integral part of the name.

Sigmund appears to be the original dragon slayer, and Sigurd's filial connection with the old hero is probably an expansion of the legend. This hypothesis gains additional credence through the absence of Sigurd's name from "The Lay of Eirik," one of the earliest Scandinavian poems referring to the Volsungs. The lay is a memorial poem for Eirik Bloodaxe, king of Norway and of Viking York. Composed after the death of this Norse prince in A.D. 954, the poem has Odin call Sigmund and Sinfjotli to greet Eirik on his arrival in Valhalla, Odin's hall for slain warriors:

> Sigmund and Sinfjotli: Rise up with speed
> and go to greet the warrior:
> Invite him in, if it be Eirik;
> I await his arrival.

Who, then, was Sigurd originally? To this difficult question we will probably never have a definitive answer. Certainly Sigurd was already a character of myth and legend when he was joined to the Volsungs. He may even have some basis in history, and in this regard two figures in particular have received attention. One is Arminius, a leader in the first century A.D. of the Cherusci, a Germanic tribe; the other is the sixth-century Frankish King Sigibert. In both instances the connection is highly conjectural.

In A.D. 9, in the Teutoburg Forest in northern Germany, Arminius lured the attacking Romans, led by Quintilius Varus, into a trap and wiped out three Roman legions. For years preceding this defeat the Roman Empire had been engaging in a costly but gradually successful conquest of Germania, and the three legions were the major part of Rome's mobile forces in the West. The Roman historian Suetonius reports that everyone on the Roman side was massacred—the legionnaires and the officers, the commander, the complete staff, and the auxiliary forces. So unsettling was the defeat

that when the news reached Rome, the emperor Augustus commanded that the city be patrolled at night to prevent an uprising. For months afterward Augustus suffered deep despair. He left his beard and hair uncut and, often striking his head against the door to his chamber, he would call out, "Varus, give me back my legions!"

The loss of his legions forced Augustus to abandon the hope of conquering Germania permanently. He fixed the border protecting Gaul and the already conquered south German provinces a short distance east of the Rhine. With small adjustments, the frontier between the Romans and the northern barbarians remained fixed for the next four centuries. The border posts finally fell before the migrating tribes in the early fifth century, or about the time of the clash between the Huns and the Burgundians.

For the Romans, the Varus episode, although grievous, was ultimately of less importance than the much larger conflict on the Danube border and the twin-frontier problem (Rhine-Danube) thereafter. Nevertheless, the Romans showed considerable interest in Arminius. Velleius Paterculus, a contemporary first-century writer, describes this barbarian leader (in his synopsis of Roman history) as "a young man of noble descent . . . , valorous and astute, with talents exceeding those of common barbarians. His name was Arminius, the son of Sigimerus, chief of the tribe, and he showed the fire in his soul, by his countenance, and in his eyes." If somewhat of a passing curiosity to the Romans, the Cheruscan leader remained a hero among the barbarians on the northern frontier. The Roman historian Tacitus reports (in his *Annals*) that unwritten songs and lays of Arminius were sung by tribesmen a century after his death.

The arguments for connecting Sigurd with Arminius stress in particular the genealogy of the war leader, most of whose male relatives bore names with the initial element *seg-* or *segi-* (victory), equivalent to Old Norse *sig-*. If Arminius was a Roman name or a Latinized Germanic title, this leader would probably also have had a native name beginning with *seg-*, as alliterating names were a common feature in Germanic families. Furthermore, the *-elda* element in the name of Arminius's wife is similar to the *-hild* element in the names of women connected with Sigurd in later versions.

However appealing this evidence, it should be remembered that these characteristics of nomenclature were common and may well be coincidental.

The Greek geographer Strabo gives more information about Arminius's family. In his geography from the first century A.D. Strabo describes the triumphal procession in Rome in A.D. 17 accorded to Germanicus, a member of the imperial family, who avenged Varus's defeat:

> But they [the tribesmen] all paid the price and gave the young Germanicus a victory celebration, in which their most distinguished men and women were led captive—namely, Segimundus, son of Segestes and leader of the Cherusci, and his sister Thusnelda, wife of Arminius. . . . But Segestes, the father-in-law of Arminius, set himself against the purpose of Arminius from the very beginning and, seizing an opportune time, deserted him; and he was present, and honored, at the triumph over those dear to him.

Strabo's account thus suggests that Arminius, like Sigurd, was betrayed by in-laws.

Other elements in the theory connecting Arminius with Sigurd (Siegfried) are even more hypothetical. Some scholars have suggested a linkage between Sigurd and Arminius on the basis of associated animal imagery, interpreting among other things Sigurd's dragon as a symbolic representation of the dragon banners of the legions destroyed by Arminius. As fascinating as such conjectures may be, the basic fact remains that beyond the general motif of kin strife, the connection is just a supposition and a highly speculative one at that. Little actual correspondence exists between the life of Arminius, as described by Roman historians, and Sigurd's legendary adventures.

A second possibility for the historical origin of Sigurd is the Frankish King Sigibert (A.D. 535–575). As the Merovingian king of Metz, Sigibert ruled a territory that included much of what is today northeastern France, Belgium, and the region on the upper Rhine where the Burgundians lived before their destruction by the Huns in 437. Among Sigibert's subjects were many Burgundians. Sigibert's wife Brunhilda (d. 613) may be loosely identi-

fied with Brynhild in the saga. The marriage of Sigibert to this Visigothic princess is reported by the sixth-century Gallo-Roman bishop Gregory of Tours in his *History of the Franks*:

> When King Sigibert saw that his brothers were taking wives who were unworthy of them, even debasing themselves to the point of marrying their female slaves, he dispatched an embassy to Spain with abundant gifts for Brunhilda, daughter of King Athanagild. . . . Her father, not refusing him, sent her to the king with a large dowry. Sigibert assembled the elders and prepared a feast, taking Brunhilda with great joy and delight as wife.

Somewhat like Sigurd, Sigibert was destroyed by strife within his family. The Frankish king was murdered by the mistress of his brother. Brunhilda's subsequent attempts to take revenge within the royal family seriously weakened the Merovingian kingdom, just as Brynhild's revenge in the saga contributes to the fall of the Burgundians. Sigibert's story, as well as Arminius's, bears some resemblance to Sigurd's, but attempting to identify the dragon slayer with either of these two historical figures is not fully convincing. The similarities center mostly on common aspects of the Germanic naming practices and a social milieu where kin strife was frequent.

No one can say exactly when the process of combining the different historical, legendary, and mythic elements into a Volsung cycle began, but it was probably at an early date. By the ninth century the legends of the Gothic Jormunrek and those of the destruction of the Burgundians had already been linked in Scandinavia, where the ninth-century "Lay of Ragnar" by the poet Bragi the Old treats both subjects. Bragi's poem describes a shield on which a picture of the maiming of Jormunrek was either painted or carved and refers to the brothers Hamdir and Sorli from the Gothic section of the saga as "kinsmen of Gjuki," the Burgundian father of King Gunnar.

The "Lay of Ragnar" has other connections with the Volsung legend. The thirteenth-century Icelandic writer Snorri Sturluson identifies the central figure of the lay, whose gift inspired the poem in his honor, with Ragnar Hairy Breeches, a supposed ancestor of the Ynglings, Norway's royal family. Ragnar's son-in-law relation-

ship to Sigurd through his marriage to Sigurd's daughter Aslaug (mentioned earlier in connection with stave church carvings) is reflected in the sequence of texts in the vellum manuscript: *The Saga of the Volsungs* immediately precedes *The Saga of Ragnar Lodbrok*. Ragnar's saga, in turn, is followed by *Krákumál* (Lay of the Raven), Ragnar's death poem, in which Ragnar, thrown into the snake pit by the Anglo-Saxon King Ella, boasts that he will die laughing. The Volsung and Ragnar stories are further linked by internal textual references. It is likely that the *The Saga of the Volsungs* was purposely set first in the manuscript to serve as a prelude to the Ragnar material. The opening section of *Ragnar's saga* may originally have been the ending of *The Saga of the Volsungs*. Just where the division between these two sagas occurs in the manuscript is unclear. Together these narratives chronicle the ancestry of the Ynglings—the legendary line (through Sigurd and Ragnar) and the divine one (through Odin). Such links to Odin, or Wotan, were common among northern dynasties; by tracing their ancestry through Sigurd, later Norwegian kings availed themselves of one of the greatest heroes in northern lore. In so doing, they probably helped to preserve the story for us.

Richard Wagner and The Saga of the Volsungs

Knowledge of *The Saga of the Volsungs* is of special value to Richard Wagner admirers, since the Norse material it contains was a primary source for the composer's cycle of music dramas, the *Ring of the Nibelung*. This nineteenth-century version of the Volsung-Nibelung legend is probably the one best known to the modern reader. As he had earlier depicted the courtly world and its ethic in great detail in *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin,* Wagner, in composing the Ring cycle, made less use than is normally assumed of the version of the story found in the South German *Nibelungenlied,* which is essentially a courtly epic. Instead he turned to the more pagan material and attitudes that he found in the Scandinavian sources, especially in Eddic poetry and in *The Saga of the Volsungs*. He explored this mythic world in the Ring cycle as a way of ex-

pressing his reflections on his own period and countrymen, intending the *Ring* to be a commentary on the industrial and political revolutions of the nineteenth century. Wagner himself had revolutionary yearnings; he was exiled for his participation in the revolution of 1848.

Not only was Wagner directly inspired by his own reading of *The Saga of the Volsungs* in H. von der Hagen's 1815 German translation, but the composer was also influenced by the treatment of the saga in Wilhelm Grimm's *Deutscher Heldensage.* Wagner appears to have been especially struck by Grimm's interpretation of the sibling marriage in the Norse material, and reading Grimm helped Wagner to form his views about the central importance of *The Saga of the Volsungs* and Eddic poetry. In adapting the Norse material to his own uses, as elsewhere in writing his librettos, Wagner took many liberties with his medieval sources, abridging, changing, condensing, and combining them freely and imaginatively. The dwarf Alberich, in the opening scene of the *Rhinegold,* the prelude to the cycle, is taken from the *Nibelungenlied,* where he is the treasurer of the Nibelung dynasty. The setting in watery depths comes from the Scandinavian tradition and is reflected in the account of the dragon Fafnir found in the saga and in Eddic poetry. The Rhine maidens are borrowed from German folklore. The company of gods and the story of the establishment of Walhalla (Valhalla) were freely adapted by Wagner from the *Prose Edda* of the thirteenth-century Icelander, Snorri Sturluson.

In the *Valkyrie,* the first of the music dramas that form the main body of the cycle, Wagner relied heavily on the version of the legends found in *The Saga of the Volsungs.* Unlike the music drama, the saga meanders through many generations of Volsungs before reaching Sigurd. In the saga, Sigurd's half brother Sinfjotli is of incestuous birth; Wagner transfers this motif, and the dramatic story that surrounds it, to his principal hero, Siegfried (Sigurd). The wisdom imparted to the hero by the valkyrie Brünnhilde (the Norse Brynhild), whom Wagner makes a daughter of Wotan, is an important element in Siegfried's maturation process and one that is most fully described in the Norse material. The fourth and final music drama, the *Twilight of the Gods,* reflects Wagner's familiarity with the plot structure of the *Nibelungenlied.* In this section of the cycle,

The epic Viking Age stories that inspired J. R. R. Tolkien and Wagner's *Ring* cycle

Written in thirteenth-century Iceland but based on ancient Norse poetry cycles, *The Saga of the Volsungs* combines mythology, legend and sheer human drama. It tells of the cursed treasure of the Rhine, a sword reforged and a magic ring of power, and at its heart are the heroic deeds of Sigurd the dragon slayer, who acquires magical knowledge from one of Odin's Valkyries. One of the great books of world literature, the saga is an unforgettable tale of princely jealousy, unrequited love, greed, vengeance and the downfall of a dynasty.

PENGUIN CLASSICS

Translated with an Introduction by Jesse L. Byock

Cover: Detail of a woodcarving showing Sigurd the Volsung cleaving the anvil upon which Regis has just forged his sword, 12th century, from the doorway of Hylestad Church, Setesdal, Norway. Historical Museum. Oslo. Norway. Photo Prisma Archivo/Alamy Stock Photo

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