



The Legendary Saga of the Volsungs

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Stories that are passed down through oral and written traditions are created by societies to give meaning to, and reinforce the beliefs, rules and habits of a particular culture. For Germanic culture, The Saga of the Volsungs reflected the societal traditions of the people, as well as their attention to mythology. In the Saga, Sigurd of the Volsung

bloodline becomes a respected and heroic figure through the trials and adventures of his life. While many of his encounters are fantastic, they are also deeply rooted in the values and belief structures of the Germanic people. Tacitus, a Roman, gives his account of the actions and traditions of early Germanic peoples in Germania. His narration remarks upon the importance of the blood line, the roles of women and also the ways in which Germans viewed death. In Snorri Sturluson's The Prose Edda, a compilation of Norse mythology, Snorri Sturluson touches on these subjects and includes the perception of fate, as well as the role of shape changing. Each of these themes presented in Germania and The Prose Edda aid in the formation of the legendary saga, The Saga of the Volsungs.

Lineage is a meaningful part of the Germanic culture. It provides a sense of identity, as it is believed that qualities and characteristics are passed down through generations. In the Volsung bloodline, each member is capable of, and expected to achieve greatness. As Sigmund, Sigurd's father, lay wounded on the battlefield, his wife asked if she should attend to his injuries so that he may avenge her father. He replied to her, "That is intended for another. You are carrying a son. Raise him well and carefully, for he will be an excellent boy, the foremost of our line" (The Saga of the Volsungs 54). Even before his birth, Sigurd's greatness was predicted because the strength and courage of his lineage would be passed down through his father.

Regin, a man that acted as Sigurd's foster father, was part of a family associated with sordid deeds. Regin often questioned Sigurd's adherence to the qualities of his previous family members. He first accuses him of being too much like a servant, saying that "it is strange that you want to be the stable boy of kings or to go about like a

vagrant” (The Saga of the Volsungs 56). Next, Regin claims that he is unlike his fathers because he is without gold, ““you have too little wealth. It vexes me that you run around like a messenger boy” (The Saga of the Volsungs 56). Most severe, Regin attacks Sigurd’s character directly by saying, ““although you are of the Volsung stock, you do not appear to have the spirit of that kin, which is figured the foremost in every form of distinction” (The Saga of the Volsungs 57). It is an insult to Sigurd to be accused of not living up to the expectations of his family line.

Sigurd finally asks Regin why he continues to expect so much from a boy just out of childhood. Regin responds by telling him the story of his own lineage, in which his brother, Otr, is killed by three of the gods, Odin, Loki and Hoenir. To compensate Regin’s family, they present them with gold stolen from the Dwarf, Andvari. Regin’s other brother, Fafnir, kills their father, hides the body (a very serious crime), and guards the treasure. Regin is eager for Sigurd to become a great and courageous fighter, because he wants him to kill Fafnir and regain the treasure. Only after slaying Fafnir, does Sigurd realize that Regin is as equally treacherous as his brethren. Sigurd tastes the blood of Fafnir, and suddenly “could understand the speech of birds” (The Saga of the Volsungs 66). The birds reveal that Regin is going to betray Sigurd, and that he would be wise to kill him and keep Fafnir’s heart for himself.

Tacitus notes that there is very little integration of foreign people into the Germanic culture. He wrote, “As to the Germans themselves, I think it probable that they are indigenous and that very little foreign blood has been introduced by either invasions or by friendly dealings with neighboring peoples” (Tacitus 101). This could be part of the reason why the bloodline is so important to the culture, as well as to the characters in the

story. With little outside interference, it is possible to trace and recall family members. The bonds between family members are so strong, that when alliances between families are formed, they are reinforced through marriage, and by the birth of children. The strength of the alliance is compared to direct kinship. In the Saga of the Volsungs, they “swore a pact of brotherhood, as if they were brothers born of the same parents” (The Saga of the Volsungs 79). Lineage is equally meaningful, because it is the determining factor in choosing leaders. Tacitus writes that, “They [the Germanic people] choose their kings for their noble birth” (Tacitus 107). The bloodline is meaningful to the Vikings because it has an influence over the way that their society is conducted.

One curiosity regarding the bloodline is the seamless integration of animals and monsters into the family tree. In Regin’s tale of Otr’s Ransom, his brother Otr is in fact, an otter. In his story, he says that his brother “had the likeness of an otter during the day and was always in the river bringing up fish in his mouth” (The Saga of the Volsungs 57). Fafnir takes on the shape of a serpent when he protects the treasure of the dwarves. Regin and his father, however, are presumed to be human. This family parallels the strange offspring of Loki in The Prose Edda: “Loki had three children. One was the Fenriswolf, the second was the Midgard Serpent and the third was Hel” (Sturluson 39). The gods knew that the children would become powerful and bring about misfortune. They threw the Midgard Serpent into the sea, Hel into Niflheim to rule over the underworld, and bound Fenriswolf in a fetter. Both families encounter misfortune, although Loki’s children are able to exact revenge before their deaths.

Animal children are not the only connection between man and beast. Some characters in the Volsung Saga possess the ability to change their shape into that of

another person or an animal. Andvari the dwarf was caught by Loki, who stole his gold to pay atonement to Regin's family: "He was in the shape of a pike and caught food there for himself, for there were many fish in the falls" (The Saga of the Volsungs 58). As well as the dwarf, Loki himself has the ability to change shapes. He often uses this power to his advantage when he is performing evil deeds. In The Prose Edda, Frigg, the wife of Odin, protects her son Baldr by casting a spell that will keep all of the elements of nature from injuring him. To discover a way to kill Baldr, Loki changes his form into that of a woman, and asks Frigg if there is any existing thing that has not sworn the oath to not harm Baldr. Sturluson writes, "After changing himself into the likeness of a woman, he went to Frigg at Fensalir" (Sturluson 65). Beguiled by Loki, Frigg reveals that a shoot of mistletoe was too young to take the oath. Loki finds the shoot and gives it to Hod, the blind, to throw at Baldr. Baldr dies, and Loki receives punishment by the gods.

Sigurd uses his shape changing abilities to aid King Gunnar, his host, who wishes for the hand of Brynhild. She has vowed to marry only the most honorable and courageous man. To test this, the man must pass through a sea of flames. Gunnar attempts to go through, but his horse will not pass through the fire. He borrows Sigurd's horse, but is still unable to move. Using magic, "Sigurd and Gunnar exchanged shapes, as Grimhild had taught them" (The Saga of the Volsungs 80). Sigurd, in the image of Gunnar, was able to go through the flames and meet Brynhild on the other side. This magic was prompted by Grimhild, the mother of Gudrun.

Women in Germanic culture are often thought to have magical powers; especially the power of prophecy. Gudrun's mother possessed these powers: "Gjuki was married to Grimhild, a woman well versed in magic" (The Saga of the Volsungs 75). Grimhild

realizes that Sigurd is a man of great valor, and wants him to marry her daughter. She uses her magic to make him forget about his love for Brynhild, and to fall in love with Gudrun. Granted the gift of prophecy, Brynhild becomes aware of Grimhild's deceit and wishes to punish herself because by marrying Gunnar and not Sigurd, she is an oath-breaker. This event is foreshadowed in Sigurd's initial meeting with Brynhild, when he requests to hear her wisdom. She says to him, "Let us drink together and may the gods grant us a fair day, that you may gain profit and renown from my wisdom, and that you will later remember what we speak of" (The Saga of the Volsungs 67). The cursed drink that Grimhild prepares, however, causes Sigurd to forget Brynhild, and her wisdom.

Tacitus examines the roles of women within the Germanic culture, and it is common for women to be regarded as holy, and to have the ability to see into the future. He notes that they "believe that there resides in women an element of holiness and a gift of prophecy; and so they do not scorn to ask their advice, or lightly disregard their replies" (Tacitus 108). In The Prose Edda, Odin's wife, Frigg, has the ability to know the fates of others. Sturluson writes, "She knows the fates of men, even though she pronounces no prophecies" (Sturluson 30). The belief in fate is what allows women to be the bearers of knowledge of the future.

Although Brynhild knew that she would be betrayed, she was unable to act because her fate was already set. She said, "I wondered at the man who entered my hall, and I thought I recognized your eyes, but I could not perceive clearly because of the veil that lay over my fate" (The Saga of the Volsungs 86-87). Destiny drives the actions of the Germanic people and they attempt to defend their futures, even though the outcome is inevitable. In Norse mythology, norns and valkyries decide the fates of men: "Out of this

hall come three maidens...These maidens shape men's lives. We call them the norns. There are yet more norns, those who come to each person at birth to decide the length of one's life, and these are related to the gods" (Sturluson 26). The Valkyries are the ones that decide if fallen men are deserving of going to Valhalla, the hall of the slain, or to Hel. "These women are called valkyries. They are sent by Odin to every battle, where they choose which men are to die and they determine who has the victory," writes Sturluson. (Sturluson 45). Being killed in battle is the greatest honor that a Viking can have.

When Sigurd's mother asked if she should heal Sigmund's wounds, he declines because it is more honorable to die in battle than to die a natural death. "But my wounds tire me and I will now visit our kinsmen who have gone on before" (The Saga of the Volsungs 54). It is believed that when one dies in battle, he is taken to Valhalla to become part of Odin's army: "He [Odin] is also called Father of the Slain, because all who fall in battle are his adopted sons" (Sturluson 30). As Tacitus saw, the Germanic people are prone to engage in dangerous or violent acts, because it is the way that they will achieve greater honor. According to Tacitus, "the Germans have no taste for peace; renown is more easily won among perils, and a large body of retainers cannot be kept together except by means of violence and war" (Tacitus 113). Vikings must be courageous, strong and unafraid of an honorable death, if they are to be granted access into Valhalla and the army of Odin.

There is evidence within the text itself, as well as in other assets of the culture, that suggest The Saga of the Volsungs was a story integral to Germanic society even before it was written down in the 13<sup>th</sup> century manuscript. For instance, Gudrun is

married to King Atli after Sigurd's death. King Atli is the same as Attila the Hun, whose reign fell within the 400s CE. There is also visual evidence on the Church door of the Hylestad Stave Church in Setesdal, Norway (see image 1). The door is carved with images of Sigurd with Regin forging the sword, fighting the dragon Fafnir, and roasting his heart. It is interesting that the door of a Church would be decorated with scenes from a story deeply embedded with ancient Norse mythology. Perhaps this represented an end to the mythological era, or that the image of the man versus the serpent can easily be transformed into a Christian context. It also cements the idea that the Volsung saga was an important story to Scandinavians. The door was created in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century, proving that the myth was central to the Germanic people before the manuscript was created.

The author of The Saga of the Volsungs is unknown, which suggests that the story was born out of the oral tradition. Stories that are passed down through generations are infused with the beliefs, values and traditions of the culture. Norse mythology is prevalent within the story, and parallels can be drawn between the visions of the gods in The Prose Edda and the families within the saga. The fantastic elements and the belief in fate are common themes to both stories. The observations of Tacitus regarding the Germanic culture, reveals more about the role of women, the importance of family and lineage, as well as the rights of honor and the cultural perspective on death. The Saga of the Volsungs was central to the culture of the Germanic people even before the written manuscript is created, and continues today to explain early Viking society.

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Figure 1.



(VRC.hws.edu)

The Saga of the Volsungs. Trans. Jesse L. Byock. New York: Penguin Books, 1990.

Tacitus, Cornelius. The Agricola and The Germania. Trans. H. Mattingly. New York:  
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