

Völsunga saga
Legendary history and textual analysis

One of the main problems dominating the discussion of the Völsunga saga is that the greatest part of the lays in the Poetic Edda have been assimilated into this saga.¹ This fact has led research work to analyse Völsunga saga more or less in view of either finding evidence of legendary history or of deducing complete, respectively parts, of lost eddic poems.² Therefore, possibilities of recognising the characteristic value of this Saga were almost all neglected.

The most important presupposition for doing justice to this work is that one should not forget that in mediaeval times adaptations of subject matters were not only frequent, but almost always the rule. Yet in the least number of cases does the taking over of the fable mean that the sense of the source has been adapted as well. Additions, omissions and shortenings, specific grouping and ordering of the source material, by which quite different accents can be set, show that an author tries to create a new unity within a new poetic work. This fact may be easily verified, if one compares the different versions of the Nibelungs' legend or the well known epics of Chrestien and Hartmann with the Erexsaga. If the lays of the Codex Reginus, the order of which has been more or less preserved in the Völsunga saga, appear within a new context, then it should be a signal for the analysing person that he should free himself from the meaning of those single lays, and that he should determine the new concept that is comprised within those different sources. It is well known that a lot of changes can be detected in Völsunga saga, so that it is superfluous to name them once again. The reasons for these alterations, however, are most surely to be sought in the fact, that the author intended to form a new entity.³

Apart from estimating Völsunga saga as a compilation,⁴ there has existed the view that this Saga gives an aitiological

account of the origin of the Norwegian royal ancestry, by going back to the progenitor Othin in order to legitimize this family⁵ (such attempts to lead back the ancestral line to mythological figures or persons of antiquity are common in mediaeval times). This aspect, however, involves seeing Völsunga saga and Ragnars saga as a unity. Yet this view has not been individually interpretatively pursued, since it was mostly veiled by the comparison with the Poetic Edda.

Here, an attempt will be made to show that the story of the Völsungs' family extends from the narration of Völsunga saga proper to Ragnars saga loðbrókar.⁶ For reasons of space this analysis will restrict itself to the Völsunga saga proper, because this saga renders the basis for the interpretation of Ragnars saga, so that a short survey of Ragnars saga must suffice to make the point clear. This study hopes to show, that Völsunga saga may not only be viewed as a compilation,⁷ but as an independent poetic work with its own meaning and intention.⁸

Völsunga saga tells the story of several generations of a family. Therefore it is the genealogical aspect which predominantly unites all parts of the transmitted sources. The whole plot of Völsunga saga proper can be divided into three parts. The proportion of these narrative parts shows that the central section consists roughly of as many chapters as the beginning and the end of the Saga together, so that we can register a relation of 9 : 22 : 10 chapters.

The first part is dominated by the history of the original members of the family, which are Sigi, an alleged son of Othin, Rerir, Völsung, Sigmund and two of his sons (Sinfjötli and Helgi).⁹ The central part tells the story about the family member Sigurd. As a result of this generation, we can register a descending and an ascending line. The descending line, constituting the third part of the narration, is represented by the widow Gudrun and her branch of the family. This last section can be subdivided into the parts which demonstrate the loss of

the material and spiritual inheritance of Sigurd and the repetition of the failure of Sigurd, elucidated through his daughter. With the destruction of this genealogical branch of the family, the Völsunga saga proper ends. Yet the ascending line, whose roots likewise go back to the Sigurd part of the story, is told in the Ragnars saga, which would constitute the fourth part of the complete genealogical history.

These parts are linked together by three main aspects which receive different accentuation in each section.

In the first part all three aspects are found likewise, inasmuch as here all members of the family harbour the same ideals:

a) gaining of royal power, preserving it or regaining it;
b) taking care of the succession within the royal family; and
c) taking revenge for injustice done to members of the family. All generations up until Sigmund endeavour to keep the power within the hands of their family. All the descendants from Sigi, be it Rerir, Völsung or Sigmund try their best to preserve land and kingdom, even if for a time their realm has been usurped by someone else. With regard to the esteem of the members of this family, a climax takes place which reaches its peak in the first part of the Sigurd story.

Thus it is said of Rerir after he has revenged his father:¹⁰

Nú eignaz hann lönd ok ríki ok fé, geriz hann nú meiri fyrir sér en faðir hans. (1, 56-57)

Or of Völsung:

Hann var konungr yfir Húnalandi eptir feðr sinn; hann var snemma mikill ok sterkr ok árþjófisfullr um þat, er mannaun þótti í ok karlmennska; hann geriz inn mestí hermaðr ok sigrséll í orrostum þeim, sem hann átti í herforum. (2, 16-20)

Since Othin has given this family the chance to become sovereigns, the four first generations try to show themselves worthy of this distinction.

In order to guarantee the continuation, especially the women are ready to make many sacrifices for this royal family.

Thus the wife of Rerir lets their unborn child, Völsung, be cut out of her womb, so that the son may live. Völsung erects a so-called "children's tree" in the midst of his splendid hall, his centre of royal power, whereby symbolically kingship and descendancy may be seen as a unity. It is into this trunk that Othin pierces his sword, which alone Sigmund, the son of Völsung, can draw out. This indicates that Othin has already determined Sigmund to be the one to carry on the family tradition. For he alone has the necessary strength to possess the sword, the means of power *par excellence*, as well as the symbol of kingship.

When the family is threatened with dying out, because the father has been slain and all the sons are captured by the enemy, their own sister suggests a plan of action which appears even to Siggeir as most cruel:

"Ör ertu ok örvita, er þú biðr brøðrum þínum meira bóls, er þeir sé hoggnir, en þó skal þat veita þér, þvat þess letr þykkí mér, er þeir þola verra ok háfa lengri kvöl til bana." (5, 50-53)

But the only reason she does this is to give at least one of her brothers a chance of surviving. To keep her family capable of acting, she lets her own children be killed, since they do not possess the true spirit of the Völsungs. Finally she begets a son with her twin-brother. By this act of incest she hopes to maintain the true disposition of the Völsungs. This is confirmed when she gives proof of his sturdiness by sewing the sleeve on to Sinfjötli's skin:

Hon fló hann þá af kyrtlinum, svá at skinnit fylgði ermunum; hon kvað honum mundu sárt við verða; hann segir: "Litit mundi slíkt sárt þykkja Völsungi." (7,29-32)

The Völsungs of these generations are also characterized by an unconditional aid to the members of their family, inasmuch as they never miss an occasion to revenge the injustice done to their kin. Sigi is killed by his own brother-in-law, whom he most trusted. When Rerir again has his realm firmly under control, his vengeance for his father extends to the last man who participated in the murder. Sigmund and Signy, the last sur-

vivors of the Vǫlsungs' family, have only one thing in mind, and that is vengeance on Siggeir for the death of their father and brothers. In this case it is irrelevant that Siggeir is the husband of Signy, because he does not belong to her own kinship. The true disposition of the Vǫlsungs is exemplified by Sigmund's way of thinking about Sinfjötli:

Sigmundi þykkir hann mjök í þétt Vǫlsunga, ok þó hyggir hann, at hann sé son Siggeirs konungs, ok hyggir hann hafa illsku feðr síns, en kapp Vǫlsunga, ok þtalar hann eigi mjök frændrðkinn mann,... (8, 4-7)

All actions are subordinated in order to achieve this end, even if it includes enduring great hardships. Consequently, Signy sacrifices herself in order to protect her family by avoiding counterrevenge.

Revenge never remains an end in itself, since the realm and therewith kingship can be regained and maintained by the acts of retaliation. Therefore, for example, it is said of Sigmund after the successful revenge:

Þeir frændr fá sér líf ok skipa, ok heldr Sigmundr til þéttleifþar sinnar ok rekr ór landi þann konung, er þar haffi í sex eptir Vǫlsung konung. Sigmundr geriz nú ríkr konungr ok ágættr, vitr ok stórraðr. (8, 128-132)

Despite stating all these positive characteristics of the Vǫlsungs, Sigmund, being a member of the fourth generation, is deprived of the royal sanctity. The first part ends by telling the story of how this came about. When Sigmund's wife takes revenge on Sinfjötli, even though she had received compensation for the death of her brother by Sigmund, Sigmund risks the life of his son inconsiderately, although it was only with his son's help that he had been able to regain royal power. From the time that they lived their wolfish life, Sigmund knows that unlike himself, Sinfjötli is unable to digest poison. Twice Sigmund empties the bugle of poisoned ale. The third time - being considerably drunk - he gives the thoughtless advice: "Lát grön sía, sonr!" (10,29) The son therefore drinks the ale and is immediately killed. Afterwards Sigmund is forced to fight a great battle, because Lyngvi envies him his wife. There it

happens that his sword, given to him by Othin, breaks into two pieces. From that moment on, victory is no longer on his side and he is slain by the enemies.

Thus within the fourth generation the Völsungs have lost land and sovereign authority for the time being. The hoard, the symbol of that power, falls into the hands of the Danish king Alf.

The second part tells the story of Sigurd,¹¹ the son of Sigmund, who has already been born far from his homeland. Embedded within this royal genealogy, this well known account undergoes a change in meaning.

Sigurd is characterized as the most outstanding Völsung who has lived so far. He is predestined not only to restore the family's esteem but also to excel it. An outstanding possibility to come into possession of the greatest wealth presents itself when Regin, his foster-father, tells him of the Fafnir's hoard. Since Sigurd has grown up with his step-father and in a realm which is not his own, he is forced to procure a basis of power by himself. Just this basis could be constituted by the Fafnir's hoard. Also the fact that Sigurd's mother gives him the two pieces of his father's sword is undoubtedly an indication that Sigurd is the one elected to continue the line and to regain power and glory for it. The reason she hands over the broken sword to him is that heroic deeds are expected from him. In this way all hopes are set on Sigurd.

Like a true Völsung, he succeeds in revenging his father on Lyngvi with the inherited sword. Yet Sigurd does not take over Lyngvi's realm.¹² He returns to the Danish king. At the instigation of Regin, he succeeds in taking possession of the greatest treasure that ever existed, the Fafnir's hoard.

According to the spirit of the Völsungs, Sigurd has revenged the injustice done to his family and has obtained immense power with the Fafnir's hoard. But contrary to the character of the Völsungs, he does not make himself king over a land of his own. So far, Sigurd has not taken advantage of the power he has

gained by winning the hoard, insomuch as making it the basis for becoming sovereign.

In connection with the vast treasure, however, Sigurd hears of a beautiful woman. The birds sing to him of Brynhild, the only woman who is the suitable partner for the most powerful and valiant man. Sigurd follows this counsel and goes to Brynhild. They swear to each other oaths that they were destined for one another and that they will marry:

"Engi finnz þér vitrari maðr; ok þess sver ek, at þik skal ek eiga, ok þu ert við mitt æði." Hon svarar: "Þik vil ek helst eiga, þótt ek kjósa um alla menn;" ok þetta bundu þau eifum með sér. (21, 29-32)

Thus all the prerequisites are provided that with Sigurd and Brynhild the Völsungs' family will aspire to the most powerful kingship.

However, the weak royal family of the Gjúkungs commits a fraud against Sigurd in order to incorporate Sigurd's power into their own.

Hugsar fyrir sér, at þat véri meiri gipta, at hann staðfestis þar ok ætti dóttur Gjúka konungs, ok sá, at engi mátti við hann jafnaz, sá ok, hvert traust at honum var, ok hafði ofr fjár, miklu meira, en menn vissi dæmi til. (26, 21-25)

The mother of the Gjúkungs, Grimhild, presents Sigurd with a drink of oblivion, so that he forgets his love to Brynhild, the woman for whom he is determined. In this way, the Gjúkungs succeed in integrating the powerful Sigurd into their own family by making him their brother-in-law. Now, instead of striving to retrieve his own realm, Sigurd renders services to strengthen the kingship of the Gjúkungs. When Grimhild advises his son Gunnar to court Brynhild, Sigurd readily declares his help to Gunnar. It is thereby decisive that Sigurd subjects his power to a deceit, of his own free will. The drink of oblivion has no doubt extinguished his love to Brynhild, but not his reasoning. His own sense should have enabled him to see that Gunnar is not capable of proving himself equal to Brynhild. Gunnar is unable to ride through the magic fire (*vafrlogi*). By deceiving

Brynhild, Gunnar as well as Sigurd violate her right to a marriage according to physical abilities, which is the basis for proving a person equal in rank. Thus Sigurd makes himself a participant in injustice. Although his behaviour in the wedding night is appropriate for a suitor's assistant, he openly lies to Brynhild. He pretends to be forced to lay the sword between them because otherwise he would meet his death. Here-with, the second proof is given that Sigurd knowingly participated in the fraud.

After the wedding of Gunnar and Brynhild, the drink loses its effect upon Sigurd.

*Ok er lokit er þessi veitalu, minnir Sigurð allra eiða
við Brynhildi ok lætr þú vera kyrt. (27,80-81)*

Sigurd immediately becomes aware of the fact that the Gjúkungs have deceived him. As a true Volsung, Sigurd should have instantly taken revenge for this injustice done to him, especially since he has not only been deprived of continuing his family with Brynhild, the appropriate woman for him, but also of regaining royal power with this wife.

Earlier, when Regin wanted to deprive him of the hoard, Sigurd did not shrink back from immediate vengeance. Now in this situation, however, Sigurd does nothing. He abstains from vengeance, because in the meantime he himself has committed wrong, when he unjustifiably helped Gunnar to win Brynhild.

Sigurd, who had been predestined for reinstating the Volsungs to a ruling power, actually squanders the sanctity of kingship which has been bestowed on him (by the mended sword), in that he subordinates himself to another family. But it is exactly this kingship that is weak, so that Sigurd alone helps the Gjúkungs to great esteem which does not befit them.

It is left up to Brynhild, who is in character like the true Volsungs, to break open these interlinked circumstances and take revenge instead of Sigurd. In the *senna* she makes her position clear:

*"Þess skaltu gjalda, er þú átt Sigurð, ok ek ann þér
eigi hans at njóta né gullzins mikla... Ekki hefum vér*

launméli haft, ok þó hǫfum vit eiða svarit, ok vissu þér þat, at þér veltuþ mik, ok þess skal hefna... Sigurþr vð at Fáfni, ok er þat meira vert en alt ríki Gunnars konungs..." (28, 36-49)

The account in the *Vǫlsunga saga* shows that at the beginning, Brynhild is not quite sure about how to take revenge. At first she pours out her virulent wrath upon Gunnar, because she - according to the actual facts - consers him to be the initiator of the whole misfortune. She reproaches him with the words:

"... ok ertu engi konungr né kappi." (29,22)

and adds to them the facts:

"Ok þess strengþa ek heit heima at feþr míns, at ek munda þeim einum unna, er ágęstr vęri alinn, en þat er Sigurþr; nú erum vęr eiþrofa, er vęr eigum hann eigi, ok fyrir þetta skal ek ráþandi þíns dauþa." (29,22-26)

Brynhild is very conscious of her situation. She knows that Sigurd alone has all the power at his disposal, but that he surrendered his might to the Gjúkungs and their sovereign authority. Since Gunnar has made use of Sigurd's power, all her hate is turned against Gunnar, who has married her unjustly. Therefore Brynhild declares:

"Ekkí hǫfum vęr launþing haft né údðþir gert, ok annat er vart eþli, ok fúsari vęrim vęr at drepa yþr." (29,32-34)

The decisive change in Brynhild's attitude is brought about by the talk with Sigurd. Through this, Brynhild becomes aware that Sigurd does not intend to alter the *status quo* now reached, because he himself is involved in deceiving Brynhild. Although Sigurd now grasps the whole vexatious situation, and although he is capable of accurately balancing right and wrong, he at first pretends that he wants to preserve the state of injustice, since he claims, that Brynhild without doubt has the best husband. Sigurd thus tries to pass his fraud off for truth. When he does not succeed in this, he endeavours to convince Brynhild that the present situation is not all that bad. He wants her to adjust herself to this marriage and wants her to love both men, Gunnar, and himself:

"Lif þú ok unn Gunnari konungi ok mér." (29, 105-106)

Finally, when Sigurd realizes that Brynhild will not enter into a compromise, he confesses:

"Ek unna þér betr en mér, þótt ek yrða fyrir þeim svikum, ok má því nú ekki bregða. Þvíat ávalt, er ek gáða míns geðs, þá harmaði mik þat, er þú vart eigi mín kona. en að mér bar ek, sem ek máttu, þat er ek var í konungs-
hçll, ok unða ek því þó, at vér várum çll saman." (29, 110-114)

Sigurd now shows plainly that he loves Brynhild deeply. Yet he states that he by no means wants to alter the situation, which means that he is not willing to take revenge for the deceit done to Brynhild and himself. Though Brynhild acknowledges Sigurds avowals, she is still not willing to give in and to accept the present state of affairs.

"Çfseinat hefir þú at segja, at þik angrar minn harmr, en nú fám vér enga líkn." (29, 116-118)

Both positions of action are now evident: Sigurd knows that he has been deceived by the Gjúkungs, but he remains inactive, since he himself has committed a crime. Brynhild, on the other hand, insists that she has taken an oath to marry only that man who is worthy of her. She is of the firm opinion that Sigurd has done her wrong - which is the truth - and that she could no longer live as the wife of two men ("Þvíat Sigurðr hefir mik vélt, 29, 147).

Now Brynhild takes revenge by initiating a fraud herself. She pretends that Sigurd has robbed her of her virginity. Gunnar is therefore lead to believe that Sigurd has broken his oath as a suitor's assistant (during the marriage *per procuracionem*) and as his relative. Brynhild, in order to annihilate Sigurd, sets actions in motion that can almost be considered as reflected revenge on Sigurd: just as Sigurd took part in deceiving her with respect to the "suitable" husband, so does she now deceive Sigurd with respect to her virginal purity, so that Sigurd falls victim to his own fraud. Having abused Brynhild's confidence that only the most powerful man could become her husband, Sigurd's downfall is brought about by Brynhild pretending that this marriage *per procuracionem* has

been abused.

Only after the death of Sigurd does Brynhild reveal the whole truth. She assures that Sigurd has by no means been unfaithful to Gunnar, although he could quite well have been treacherously disloyal to him. Brynhild has accomplished that Sigurd, who was destined to become her husband, may not belong to any other woman now. Having revenged the injury done to her, she commits suicide so that she can at least be united with Sigurd in the state of death.

The significance of this section for the Völsungs' family is that Sigurd, although he had all the capabilities required to bring about the supreme prestige for the reign of Völsungs' kings, he was not able to do so, because of his own failings. To the contrary, he even subordinates himself to the feeble ruling power of the Gjúkungs, in that he allows himself to be integrated into their family. Thus all his deeds do not serve the aim to establish his own sovereignty but to strengthen another weak kingship.

The last part of the Völsunga saga proper shows the descending line of that branch of the family which is the result of the union between Sigurd and Gudrun. Since this line is lacking the disposition of the Völsungs, it is going to be totally extinguished.

First of all, Gudrun is presented as Sigurd's widow. She attempts to preserve the glorious memories of her husband. The mother of the Gjúkungs recognizes the danger that Gudrun could take vengeance for Sigurd. For this reason Grimhild gives Gudrun a drink of oblivion in order to prevent her vengeance on her brothers. Thus one fraud generates another.

Sigurd's hoard and therewith the power of the Völsungs is now in the hands of weak kings. Since they are not equal to this power it is shown how Sigurd's inheritance is destroyed. Two kings, Gunnar and Atli, who are both equally incapable, quarrel with each other in order to gain this power. The Gjúkungs, who had hoped to acquire Sigurd's power through his

marriage to their sister, now become victims of such a fraud that reflects their own greedy ambitions.

Atli promises to make them regents of his kingdom:

"Nú vill hann gefa yfir vald yfir ríkinu, meðan þeir eru svá ungin, ok ann yfir best at njóta." (33, 62-63)

But in reality he wants Sigurd's hoard in order to deprive the Gjúkungs of this power. Since Atli is not loved by Gudrun - she considers him a weakling who can never measure up to her ideal personified by Sigurd - :

En aldri gerði hugr hennar við konum hléja, ok með litilli blífu var þeira samvasta. (32, 99-100)

he thinks that by acquiring the hoard, he could take over Sigurd's position and thereby win over Gudrun. Therefore, the fight over Sigurd's inheritance is not to be understood as merely materialistic, rather it is also spiritual. Gudrun is now in a similar situation to that of Brynhild. She was coupled with a man who could never equal her, in her eyes, after having been married to the most powerful man of all. Atli - like Gunnar - tries fraudulently to prove his strength to Gudrun, that he actually does not have. He strives after the hoard of the Gjúkungs and cannot gain it. Gunnar, on the other hand, who became the most powerful man as heir to the Sigurd hoard, does not consider himself powerful enough, and therefore finally falls victim to his own covetousness for power.

The fraud cost the Gjúkungs their lives and did not bring Atli the desired power and love. Thus Sigurd's inheritance can be of no use to anyone. Yet likewise, Sigurd's hoard cannot fall into the wrong hands. The materialistic basis of Völsungen power has now been extinguished but the spiritual disposition is - for the time being - be staged by Gudrun, being thus artificially maintained by Gudrun.

Out of vengeance for her brothers, and also because of her memories of Sigurd, Gudrun annihilates her and Atli's children, and together with Högni's son, provides for Atli's downfall. This train of thought is clear from what Gudrun says as she talks to Atli while he is dying:

"Ok var betri því vör þá, er ek var með Sigurði, drápum konunga ok réfum um eignir þeira ok gáfum grip þeim, er svá vildu, en höfðingjar gengu á hendr oss, ok létum þann ríkan, er svá vildi; síðan mistum vér hans, ok var þat lítt at bera ekkju nafn, en þat harmar mik mest, er ek kom til þín, en átt áþr inn ágætsta konung, ok aldri komtu svá ör orrostu, at eigi þérir þú inn minna hlut." (38, 67-73)

The destruction of the inheritance of Sigurd is brought to a close, when Gudrun is forced to see how the last descendant of this ruinous marriage is killed.

Since Svanhild is made out to be Sigurd's and Gudrun's daughter in the *Völsunga saga*, the subject matter of *Hamdismál* is also drawn into view of the entire genealogical context. Therefore, Svanhild's story too undergoes a change in meaning.

Bikki, the king's adviser, alleges that Svanhild and Jörmunrek's son, Randver, committed a courting fraud. Jörmunrek who believes his counsellor, gives the order, that his own son and later his bride Svanhild are to be killed. Like Brynhild, Svanhild succumbs to the pretence of false facts. Sigurd's own daughter now falls victim to a courting fraud. The death of Sigurd's child cannot even be avenged, because the half-brothers lost their right to restore justice in that they themselves committed an injustice. Since the brothers Hamdir and Sörli soiled the stones with the blood of their own half-brother, whom they killed on the stony way, they cannot take vengeance for their half-sister. They are rather killed exactly because of this act. That is why only stones can kill them. The parallels between the fate of father and daughter are obvious: Just like Sigurd robbed himself of the right to avenge the injustice done to him by the Gjúkungs in that he had taken part in deceiving Brynhild, so the half-brothers fail to avenge their half-sister.

The action of the descending line, which is totally destructive, is determined by events reflecting Sigurd's own faults and failures: Sigurd's failure to use the hoard in order to reinstate the *Völsungs* to a ruling power, brings about not only his own death, but that of other kings. Such immense power,

having fallen into the hands of men who are not worthy of it, cannot be used constructively. Thus the hoard gets lost in a similar way as it had been obtained from Sigurd. Sigurd's weakness to abstain from taking revenge after the deceit had become evident, is reflected in the fate of Svanhild, who is the last offspring of this portentous marriage.

Thus, the author of Völsunga saga proper has given his source material of the Edda a completely different meaning: Sigurd's way of acting and all his consequences have been used by the author in order to demonstrate what happens, when members of the Völsungs' family do not abide by their ideals (e.g. to gain royal power and to take revenge for injustice). In this way the second and ^{third} part form a negative contrast to the accounts told in the first and fourth part of the whole Saga.

An analysis of the function of Othin's character in this Saga will serve to support the contention that Völsunga saga constitutes a new poetic entity. Othin appears as the ancestral father of the family. He watches over the members of his family, is in continuous contact with them, and plays a judgemental role.¹³ Where he helps, the person acts in accordance with the divine powers and laws. Where Othin refuses to help, he condemns the person's behaviour. Othin sends the ancestral father Sigi the means to establish the reign. As the family is threatened with dying out, Othin helps again, so that Völsung can be born. He, too, pierces the sword into the "children's tree". With that, he gives one of the Völsungs, namely Sigmund, the chance to prove his supremacy among the descendants. A confirmation of this is also that only Sigmund survives the stocks, and he finally continues the reign. But when Othin is forced to fetch Sinfjötli to a ship, because Sigmund is carelessly driving him to death, he denies Sigmund the victory in a battle by lifting his spear, so that the sword, that he himself had given to the Völsungs, is smashed on it. For the present, Othin offers all his assistance to the next offspring.

Sigurd can assert his royal position in that Othin selects the best horse for him. It is Othin who helps Sigurd carry out his vengeance for his father successfully. For it is only because of Othin that the storm settles, as Sigurd is on the sea to avenge himself on Lyngvi. As Sigurd tries to acquire the hoard, Othin also saves him from Regin's fraud. After all the help which Othin has bestowed upon Sigurd it is so much the more remarkable that Othin does not appear again in the Sigurd story thereafter. That implies that he no longer is willing to support Sigurd and the events resulting from his actions. Not until the end, when Jörmunrek is mutilated and defenseless, does Othin appear as the adviser who gives the decisive indication, so that the brothers Hamdir and Sörli can be killed. Here, at the last stage of this inappropriate marriage, Othin¹⁴ appears as a supernatural judge, so to speak, and denies the brothers the chance to stand up for the rights of their relatives, in that he lets their attempt at revenge fail. Thus, just as Othin established the family in the beginning, he obliterates this family line that is incapable of ruling at the end.

Only the child of the predestined union between Sigurd and Brynhild, namely Aslaug,¹⁵ is capable of preserving the race of the Völsungs' family and the spirit living within it.

In contrast of the descending branch of the family, the establishment of a new, ascending branch is presented in the Ragnars saga,¹⁶ which, with that, belongs inseparably to the whole story. The parallels between this fourth part of the Saga and the Völsunga saga proper are not to be overlooked. A few main themes that make the continuity of both parts clear may be shortly mentioned here.

Like Sigi, Aslaug begins her ascent from the existence of an outsider. Before she marries Ragnar, he succeeds in killing a dragon and thereby proves his outstanding abilities, like Sigurd. Aslaug becomes the center focus of the family in her marriage with Ragnar. The firstborn son, Ivar, possesses such wisdom that is equal to that of Brynhild. All of the sons are powerful warriors and stand up for each other unconditionally.

As the marriage between Ragnar and Aslaug threatens to break up because of King Eystein, Aslaug is able to save the marriage by doing justice to her origin which has not been revealed yet and by announcing the birth of a son, who will be born with a mark that shows the direct relation to Sigurd. Thus Sigurd, the son of Aslaug, is born and carries the nickname "Worm in the eye". Just this son is going to be the founder of the Norwegian royal family. He is the ancestor of Harald inn hárfagri.

The last part clearly shows that the sanctity of kingship perpetuates from the union between Sigurd and Brynhild. This marriage and not the one with Gudrun could have prevented the Völsungs from losing their esteem. Therefore, the whole disposition in this fourth part corresponds to the first part of the Völsunga saga. For like there too, the expansion of power, the taking of revenge for the injustice done to the family, and the caring for the continuance of the adequate marriage, which alone assures ^{the} continuation of the true character of the Völsungs, are in the foreground.

In summary, the Völsunga saga proper demonstrates the success and failure of a royal family. The Ragnars saga, however, shows that Sigurd's failure is compensated by Aslaug, in that she, who originates from the predestined union with Brynhild, establishes the foundation for the Norwegian kingship. The error of the marriage to Gudrun is thereby made clear, because no redeeming powers for the Völsungs' family were brought about through this union.

If this view of one of the Fornaldarsögur turns out to be right, characteristics of this type of Saga stated so far should be thought over again.¹⁷

Notes

- ¹ B.Symons: Untersuchungen ueber die sogenannte Völsunga Saga. PBB 3, 1876, pp.199-303.
- ² Roswitha Wisniewski: Die Darstellung des Niflungenunterganges in der Thidrekssaga. Eine quellenkritische Untersuchung. Tübingen 1961, especially pp. 265-286. Klaus von See: Die Werbung um Brünhild. ZfdA 88, 1957-1958, pp.1-20. K.von See: Freierprobe und Königinnenzank in der Sigfridsage. ZfdA 89, 1959, pp. 163-172. Per Wieselgren: Quellenstudien zur Völsungasaga. Acta et Commentationes Universitatis Tartuensis 34-38, 1935-36, Doropat (Tartu) 1935. P. Wieselgren: Völsungasaga und Liederlücke. ANF 50, 1934, pp. 70-89. Andreas Heusler: Die Lieder der Lücke im Codex Regius der Edda. Publication honouring Hermann Paul. Strassburg 1922, pp. 1-98. Gustav Neckel: Zur Völsunga saga und den Eddaliedern der Lücke. ZfdPh 37, 1905, pp.19-29. Felix Scheidweiler: Zu den Eddaliedern der Lücke. ZfdPh 44, 1912, pp. 320-329. R.C. Boer: Über die Quellen von C. 26-29 der Völsunga Saga. ZfdPh 35, 1903, pp. 464-483.
- ³ Tendencies towards this attitude are stated by R.G. Finch: "There can be no doubt that the compiler is transforming, and with surprising thoroughness, his poetic sources into a plain prose narrative." (p.328) "The following considerations will serve to support the contention that he is in fact surprisingly consistent and logical in his handling of the material." (p.347) R.G. Finch: The treatment of Poetic Sources by the compiler of 'Völsunga Saga'. Saga-Book XVI, 1962-1965, pp.315-353.
- ⁴ It is striking that critical studies on Völsunga saga have hardly been published recently. Instead, a number of new editions and translations have come out.
- ⁵ e.g. Ilse Bauer: Völsunga saga. KLL VII. Zürich 1965, column 768-770. M. Olsen (ed.): Völsunga saga og Ragnars saga loðbrókar. SUGNL 36, Kopenhagen 1906-1908, pp.LXXVI-LXXVII.
- ⁶ The historical point of view, whether Ragnars saga has formed the basis for the conception of Völsunga saga, will be excluded here.
- ⁷ The opposite view is represented especially in literary history, e.g. Klaus von See: "...die Völsunga saga, ... eine Prosadarstellung des Nibelungenstoffes, dem klassischen isländischen Sagastil verhaftet, aber doch nur ein epigonenhaftes Kompilationsprodukt, das kaum die bevorzugte Rolle verdient, die es in der Forschung des 19. Jhs.... spielte." Germanische Heldensage. Frankfurt 1971, p.19. Jan de Vries: "Die Völsunga saga ist eine Prosaparaphrase der in der Eddasammlung erhaltenen Heldenlieder." Altnordische Literaturgeschichte. Vol.II, 2nd new ed. Berlin 1967, p.467.
- ⁸ "There can be little doubt that the compiler has very largely achieved his object, for he has created from his various sources

a unified prose narrative that lacks neither a certain vigour, nor yet considerable consistency. Throughout this study the term 'compiler' has been used. Should it not perhaps yield to 'author'? R.G. Finch: *The treatment of Poetic Sources by the compiler of 'Völsunga Saga'*. *Saga-Book XVI, 1962-65*, pp. 315-353, quotation p.353.

- 9 A mythological view of the beginning of *Völsunga saga* is represented by Siegfried Gutenbrunner: *Heldenleben und Helden-dichtung. Eine Nachlese zu Otto Höflers Rökbuch. ZfdPh 73, 1954*, pp. 365-406, especially pp. 398-405.
- 10 Quotations follow the edition by Wilhelm Ranisch. Berlin 1908.
- 11 For aspects of legendary history see Andreas Heusler: *Altnordische Dichtung und Prosa von Jung Sigurd*. (1919) Again in: *Kleine Schriften. Vol. I, Berlin 1969*, pp.26-64.
- 12 The rather episodic story of Helgi on the other hand shows, how a son of Sigmund takes possession of a realm: *Þat ríki tók Helgi konungr ok dvalfǫz þar lengi ok fekk Sigrúnar ok gerþiz frégr konungr ok ágêtr*. (10,101-103)
- 13 In the same way does Othin watch over Harald hilditǫnn.
- 14 For genetic aspects see Caroline Brady: *Óðinn and the Norse Jǫrmunrekr-Legend. PMLA 55, 1940*, pp.910-930 and Klaus von See: *Die Sage von Hamdir und Sörli. Publication honouring Gottfried Weber. Bad Homburg, Berlin, Zürich 1967*, pp.47-75.
- 15 For the historical genesis of this figure see Helmut de Boor: *Die faerøischen Dvørgamoylieder. Arkiv 36, 1920*, pp. 207-299, especially p.293 and Jan de Vries: *Die westnordische Tradition der Sage von Ragnar Lodbrok. ZfdPh 53, 1928*, pp. 257-302, especially pp.286 f.
- 16 Jan de Vries: *Die historischen Grundlagen der Ragnarssaga Lóðbrókar. ANF 39, 1923*, pp.244-274. Jan de Vries: *Die Wikingersaga. GRM 15, 1927*, pp.81-100. J.de Vries: *Die Entwicklung der Sage von den Lodbrokssøhnen in den historischen Quellen. ANF 44, 1928*, pp.117-163.
- 17 E.g. Kurt Schier: *Fornaldarsögur. KLL III, Zürich 1965*, column 128-136. Anne Holtmark: *Heroic Poetry and Legendary Sagas. BONIS 1966*, pp.9-12.