

Sigurðr, Freys vinr

(abstract)

Undoubtedly, the whole tradition linked to the character of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani tends to make the paragon of heroism out of him.

However a close reading of the Poetic Edda makes one acquainted with an amount of elements and features which do not seem to be easily compatible with or reducible to this general opinion.

The mental universe of the Old Germanic poetry seems to consider Óðinn as the god who specifically interferes with the life of heroes. In so far Sigurðr is no exception, both the Poetic Edda and the Völsunga Saga provide him with a genealogy and an impressive number of accessories and features which indissolubly bind him to the father of the gods. And just like so many others Sigurðr can easily be seen as a victim of Óðinn.

In spite of all his glory Sigurðr cannot be thought of as highly as Beowulf, for instance. Sigurðr is a dubious hero: His only achievement is the murder of Fáfnir, which very likely represents an initiation rite. Like the other initiation Sigurðr experiences (in the smithy), the killing of the dragon appears to have rather little to do with Óðinn but to refer all the more to telluric motives.

At the first stage of his career Sigurðr moves in the scenery of a cave and a pit related to gold and power and physical strength. All that could be epitomised by two animals: the dragon and the horse.

No need of a long demonstration to point out the prominent part taken by women in Sigurð's life: they lead his way, they initiate him in wisdom, love and death to such an extent that it would be quite impossible to imagine Sigurðr

without those female characters who have so much in common with the three principal hypostasises of the Great Goddess in Scandinavian mythology: Frigg, Skafi and Freyja.

With reference to this mythical background it is not as surprising as one might first feel when Sigurðarkviða hin skamma, st. 24, calls Sigurðr "Frey's vinr", even if this appellation remains a single case. Freyr and Sigurðr live in an atmosphere of love and richness, they share the same luck in maritime expeditions as well as the animals they usually are associated with, not to speak of specific forms of magic.

Every attempt to explain the hero's obviously heterogeneous nature will unavoidably lead to what could be called a "mental stratigraphy", a sketch of the evolution Sigurðr achieved. If Sigurðr seems to syncretise Aesir-features as well as Vanir-features it may be due to the fact that a conquering civilization assimilated an older one, modifying the criteria of heroism in keeping with the new mentality: each ideology re-utilizes the old hoard but works as a filter. The Christian church will be no exception and will transform Sigurðr into a fierce, courteous knight. Thus the character evolves in a more and more innocent victim of a cruel, tragic fate, gradually escaping the original myth to become a mediaeval literary type.