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Vǫlsunga saga

The Saga of the Volsungs

The Icelandic Text
According to MS Nks 1824 b, 4°

With an English Translation,
Introduction and Notes
by Kaaren Grimstad

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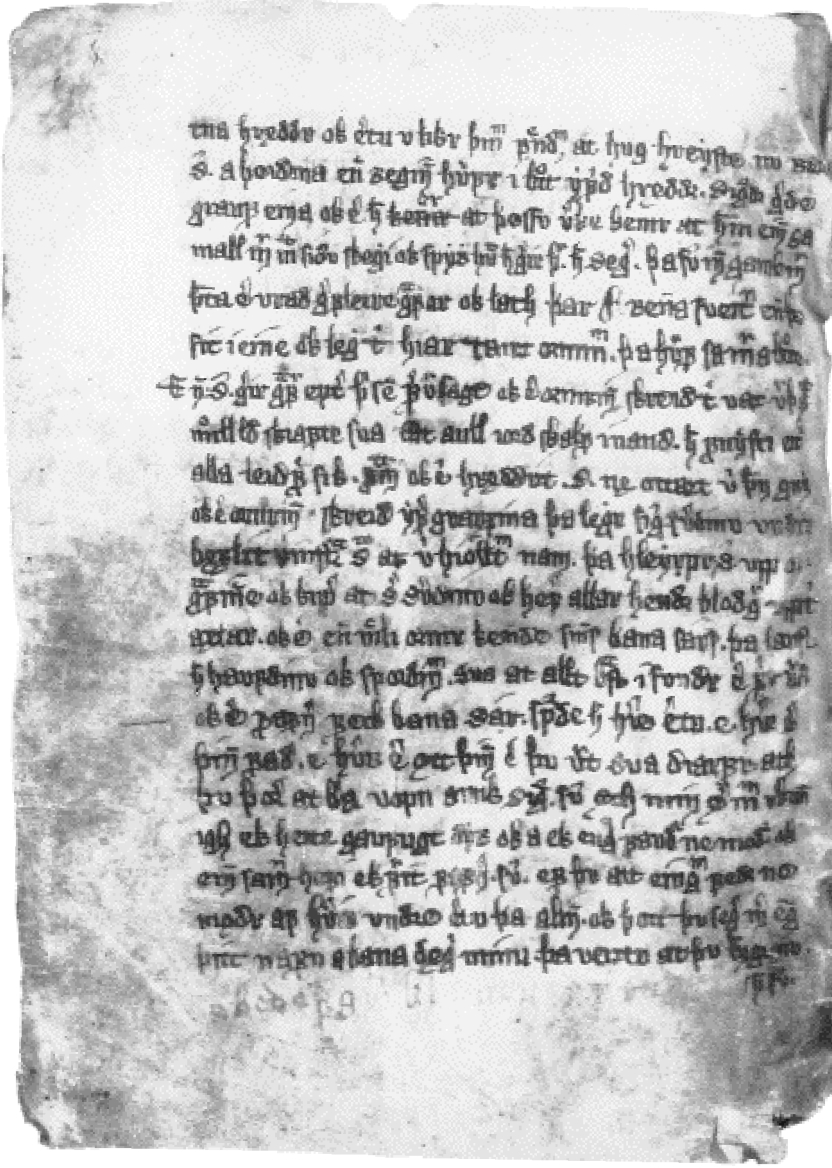

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To the memory of my friend and colleague
Haukur Böðvarsson
10 March 1932 – 3 June 1986

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Contents

Abbreviations and symbols

AT	Antti Aarne, *The Types of the Folktale*
Atlakv.	Atlakviða
Atlam.	Atlamál
Bugge	Sophus Bugge, ed. *Völsunga saga*
FFC	Folklore Fellows Communications
Finch	R. G. Finch, ed. and trans. *Völsunga saga: The Saga of the Volsungs*
Guðrk. II	Guðrúnarkviða ǫnnur
MO	Magnus Olsen, ed. *Vǫlsunga saga ok Ragnars saga loðbrókar*
Reginsm.	Reginsmál
Sigrdm.	Sigrdrífumál
ÖT	Örnólfur Thorsson, ed. *Völsunga saga og Ragnars saga loðbrókar*

Preface

This book is the product of my long-standing fascination with the story and characters of *Vǫlsunga saga*. From early in my teaching career the saga has held a featured spot in my courses. As I discussed the text with each successive group of students, I became increasingly absorbed by the power and drama of the narrative and came to realize that I needed to express my enthusiasm in a scholarly study. Thus was a research project born, and, as is often the case with research projects, this one grew successively larger rather than smaller, from a modest essay to a translation with an introduction and finally to a diplomatic edition with an accompanying translation.

The idea of translating *Vǫlsunga saga* was originally suggested to me as a collaborative project in the early 1980's by my Icelandic friend and colleague Haukur Böðvarsson. He drafted a translation of the saga, and it was our intention that I would make revisions and write an introduction. Unfortunately, Haukur's untimely death brought an end to our collaboration, and the prospects of publishing yet another English translation of the saga seemed dim. At this point Hans Fix proposed publishing the project in his series of bilingual editions. This entailed producing a new, diplomatic text of the medieval manuscript to accompany the translation. The finished product combines an Old Norse text prepared according to recent principles of text editing with a fresh translation, in which I have retained Haukur's fine renderings of the poetic stanzas.

I owe a debt of gratitude to the many people and institutions whose support has aided in the completion of this project. The staff at the Arnamagnæan Institute in Copenhagen generously made its resources and expertise available to me; in particular I wish to thank Elin Lindhardt Pedersen for providing me with a new set of photographs of the manuscript. Likewise, my colleagues at Stofnun Árna Magnússonar in Iceland extended their hospitality and professional resources to me many times over the course of this work. Of their staff members I would especially like to thank Stefán Karlsson for his invaluable assistance on questions regarding the manuscript, Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir for supplying me with the dates of Haukur's birth and death, and Ólöf Benediktsdóttir for her cheerful services as librarian. Support and inspiration have also come from other sources. These include all of my students at

the University of Minnesota who over the years have read, discussed, and written research papers on *Vǫlsunga saga*, and Holly Doyle, Kathy Lloyd, Lita Newdick, Ellen Sarkisian, and Peggy Schmertzler, a group of friends in Cambridge, Massachusetts who regularly meet to read Shakespeare, but who one summer volunteered to read my translation instead. To Bob and Holly Doyle and to my colleague Thomas Dubois I am also indebted for discussions on various topics relating to my introduction to the saga.

Finally, I would especially like to express my gratitude to each and every one of my friendly editors, who gave generously of their time to read and reread earlier versions of the introduction, translation, or Old Norse text, providing me with their constructive and insightful suggestions for improvements. They are Maria Bonner, Hans Fix, Fred Franklin, Kirsten Grimstad, Arsena Ianeva-Lockney, Steven A. Mitchell, and Cathy Parlin, whose skills in design gave form to the Genealogy Chart.

The Saga

I. The History of the Saga

Vǫlsunga saga (VS) is one of the foremost works of prose written in thirteenth-century Iceland. A highly dramatic rendering of tales about heroes from the remote Germanic past, the saga is the product of a period of more than a century of intense writing activity. This was a time when the Icelanders, who first acquired an alphabet for vernacular writing in the eleventh century and who already had a reputation among Scandinavians as redoubtable poets and storytellers, turned from oral narration to writing as the medium for recording history and culture. This activity encompassed the writing down of their own cultural documents as well as the translation of numerous works of both religious and secular nature from Latin and from Continental vernacular tradition. Through translation medieval Icelanders gained access to a wide range of contemporary European literature from learned Latin philosophical treatises to fashionable French courtly romances. Of the native cultural documents written by the Icelanders in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, best known to modern audiences are probably the sagas of Norwegian kings (*konungasögur*), the sagas of famous Icelanders from the early period of Icelandic history (*Íslendingasögur*), and the *Edda* of Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241), a remarkable treatise on Icelandic poetry which also contains the only surviving systematic account of Norse mythology encompassing the span from the creation to the destruction of the world. Here myth, legend, and history are combined in the fashion of learned medieval historiography, much influenced by Virgil's *Aeneid* and other versions of the fall of Troy.

In his prologue to the *Edda* Snorri explains that the gods of Norse mythology were actually kings from Asia Minor, descendants of King Priam of Troy, who migrated to Scandinavia bringing their own belief system with them. So powerful and in every way exceptional were these immigrants per-

ceived to be that they were worshipped as gods by the native people who adopted their (Trojan/Asian) language and culture. As the immigrants moved northward towards Scandinavia, their leader Odin placed his sons as rulers over various Germanic lands. Finally they settled in Sweden, and Odin founded a dynasty there known as the Ynglings from whom subsequent kings of Sweden and eventually the kings of Norway were descended. Thus Snorri establishes a genealogical link between indigenous, historical kings and the divine ancestor Odin, a dynastic fiction that he also later employed in writing the monumental series of Norwegian royal biographies known as *Heimskringla* (ca. 1230). Snorri mentions that one of Odin's sons was named Siggi, and from him were descended the Volsungs who ruled over the kingdom known in Snorri's time as France. Such genealogical information was incorporated into the legends and stories about the Volsungs to which Snorri had access when he compiled his *Edda* (ca. 1225). As part of the same project linking myth to history and history to myth, an anonymous author some time in the middle of the thirteenth century took the heroic legends relating the deeds of the Volsungs and their tragic dealings with the Gjukungs and the Budlungs, legends that were already well known in oral (and quite likely also in written) poetic form, and retold them in written prose. The result of that creative effort is the work presented in this edition, the legendary history *Vǫlsunga saga*.

Although the composition of the saga itself is generally dated to the middle of the thirteenth century, the stories in Norse tradition about its cast of characters are certainly older. We know that the author composed the saga using earlier cycles of heroic poems that recounted the adventures and destinies of these characters because the prose text includes a number of poetic stanzas and even one nearly complete poem from the heroic poems recorded in a thirteenth-century collection of mythological and heroic poetry known as the *Poetic Edda*. Altogether, this collection contains eighteen poems and two short prose pieces covering the story told in the saga after the birth of Helgi. Of this material twelve of the existing poems and one of the prose pieces were clearly used as sources for the saga, most likely in a written manuscript. We must also add as source material the poem or poems relating the wooing and deception of Brynhild in the saga's central episode. The eight leaves containing this material were at some point removed from the main and most complete manuscript of the *Poetic Edda* and never recovered.

Within Norse tradition there is further literary testimony to the popularity of these legends. In the second section of his *Edda* ("Skáldskaparmál") Snorri presents a summary of the story, beginning with the tale of Otr's ransom and continuing to the deaths of Hamdir and Sorli (*Edda* 99-106). At the end of his account the narrator observes that "[m]ost poets have composed poetry based on these stories and have used various elements in them." The example he then cites is from a poem composed in honor of Ragnar Lodbrok, a Danish king of somewhat shadowy historicity who, according to tradition, married Aslaug, the daughter of Sigurd and Brynhild, and fathered a line of famous heroes (see below, II. The Saga as History). Other significant literary sources include the Norwegian *Þiðriks saga af Bern*, probably written in the middle of the thirteenth century, in which the story of the Volsungs is one of the heroic tales included in the legendary history of Theoderic the Great, Ostrogothic ruler of Italy (493-526), and ballads from the individual Nordic countries, all written down much later but most likely originating in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Within the corpus of Icelandic sagas there are intertextual connections with the story of the Volsungs and the Gjukungs, notably through the literary imitation of the story of Sigurd and Brynhild in *Laxdæla saga* and the allusion to Gudrun's allegiance to her brothers in *Gísla saga*.

The underlying source for this wealth of literary narratives in Scandinavia and Iceland was a stock of traditional oral legends surrounding historical figures from the Germanic migration period (fourth and fifth centuries AD), characters such as Attila the Hun, Ermanaric the Ostrogoth, and a Burgundian leader named Gundicarius. That this body of legends was also popular and widely known in medieval Germanic literary tradition outside of Scandinavia and Iceland can be concluded by the many retellings of or allusions to the story in German and Anglo-Saxon sources. Chief among these is the great Middle High German epic the *Nibelungenlied*, dating from the beginning of the thirteenth century. Here, as in the Norse version, legendary characters, who in historical fact lived at different times and would have had no connection to each other, are all placed on stage as contemporaries who form tragic alliances. However, despite some similarity in the characters and details of the plot, the German epic poem and the Norse saga tell quite different stories, due not only to variation in the oral tradition but also to audience tastes. The poet who composed the epic poem was writing for an audience at Austro-Bavarian courts; the author of the Icelandic saga for an audience of

large landholders (*stórbændr*) and their rural households. In Old English tradition there are references to the tale or its characters in *Beowulf* and the poems *Widsith* and *Waldere*. The ninth-century Latin poem *Waltharius* contains a comic version of King Atli's banquet, where, instead of being killed as in VS, the king and all his courtiers fall into a drunken sleep.

Turning to more recent times, we find that the tragic tale of the Volsungs has retained its appeal and fascination for artists and audiences alike. In the nineteenth century the story was recreated as a major cultural document by Richard Wagner in his cycle of epic music dramas *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (first complete performance 1876), inspired at least in part by the version he encountered in VS; and one of Ibsen's early plays, *Hærmændene på Helge - land* (1858), derives its plot from the central marriage conflict between Sigurd and Gunnar. In the twentieth century the story's powerful and lasting creative influence can be seen in the works of, among others, Thomas Mann and J. R. R. Tolkien.

The legends about the Volsungs and the Gjukungs did not just live in oral and written narrative form; in England and Scandinavia are found numerous wood and stone carvings of scenes from the story dating from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries. Especially popular were depictions of Gunnar in the snake pit and Sigurd slaying the dragon Fafnir. The latter scene was often carved on portals of Norwegian stave churches, where Sigurd served as a substitute for the great biblical dragon slayer St. Michael, perhaps because of his traditional genealogical connection with the Norwegian royal house (Byock 1990).

II. The Saga as History

What is evident from Snorri's particular synthesis of myth and history, which identifies the Norse gods as descendants of King Priam of Troy and ancestors in a direct line of the Scandinavian royal dynasties, a line that includes the Volsungs as kings of France, is that the heroes in this family were commonly granted the status of historical persons, forming what Margaret Clunies Ross calls "a meaningful and cohesive historical continuum" between the past and the present (*Reception* 85). The marriage between Sigurd's and Brynhild's daughter Aslaug and Ragnar Lodbrok, an important ancestor in the genealogy lists of Scandinavian royalty as well as of several

prominent Icelandic families of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, creates yet another integration of fiction and reality so characteristic of medieval Icelandic historiography. Consequently, we must consider the saga in its role as history.

Like the majority of Icelandic sagas, the plot of VS is structured chronologically. Through five generations it follows the lives of the male line of the family known as the Volsungs, beginning with King Volsung's grandfather, who is descended from Odin, and ending with his grandson Sigurd. After the deaths of Sigurd and his young son the story turns to follow the fortunes of his wife Gudrun and her brothers, who are the children of King Gjuki and known as the Gjukungs. A third family, the Budlungs, becomes linked through the main character Brynhild and her connection with Sigurd and through Gudrun's marriage to Brynhild's brother Atli (see the Genealogy Chart). As the narrative unfolds, the hero in each new generation displaces his predecessor, surpassing him in both quantity and quality of heroic adventures. In this way, the narrative expands little by little so that the reader comes to know successively more about each hero, culminating in the tragic tale of the principal character Sigurd, whose heroic adventures constitute the subject matter for the saga's longest episode.

The saga begins with a short chapter in which the lives and deaths of Sigi and Rerir are recounted. In chapter 2, with the introduction of King Volsung and his family, the saga moves into its first major episode. The events surrounding the marriage of his daughter Signy cause the death of Volsung and nine of his sons; the hero of this episode is the remaining son Sigmund, whose task is to avenge the killings of his father and brothers. This he accomplishes with the aid of his twin sister Signy, who in pursuit of this vengeance even commits incest with her brother to provide him with a son Sinfjotli, an accomplice of pure Volsung lineage. Sigmund's son by his second wife Hjordis is Sigurd, the famous slayer of the dragon Fafnir, whose encounters with Brynhild, the daughter of King Budli, and with Gunnar, Hogni, and Gudrun, the children of King Gjuki, form the central episode of the saga. As in the first episode marriage alliances are the cause of conflict. Sigurd has pledged himself to Brynhild, but forgets her after drinking a magic potion and marries Gudrun instead; disguised as Gunnar, he subsequently woos and wins Brynhild for Gunnar. The revelation of this deception brings about the deaths of Sigurd and his young son and Brynhild's suicide. At this juncture the story moves into its third major episode, which focuses on the Gjukungs and

relates the tale of Gudrun's disastrous marriage to King Atli, brother of Brynhild, an alliance that leads to the deaths of Gunnar and Hogni through Atli's treachery. Like Signy before her, Gudrun avenges the deaths of her brothers by slaying her husband. In the saga's final act Gudrun marries again and has three sons, Hamdir, Sorli, and Erp. Svanhild, her daughter with Sigurd, also lives with her and attracts the attention of the mighty King Jormunrek, who sends his son and a counselor to woo her on his behalf. As we might expect by this time, the betrothal ends disastrously: the son and Svanhild fall in love on the way home to Jormunrek's kingdom; the king is told about this by the counselor and orders them both executed. Gudrun's sons set out to avenge the death of their half-sister and meet their deaths in the attempt. Although the saga does not resolve the fate of Gudrun, nearly all other members of these great families have vanished, and the saga ends on an apocalyptic note.

According to the literary historical classification system established by modern scholars, VS belongs to the category known as mythical-heroic sagas (*fornaldarsögur*). These sagas recreate the remote world of the legendary past, of Icelandic prehistory, as conceived by medieval saga writers. The characters in the saga are not Icelanders, but rather the Germanic ancestors of Icelanders. The geographical setting is generally unspecified, although from the few references we have, we can imagine a broad sweep of Germanic territory from Denmark in the north to Burgundy in the south. For example, the Volsungs rule over a kingdom called Hunland, and Sigurd is called the "Hunnish" king; Sigurd's mother Hjordis marries the son of King Hjalprek of Denmark, where Sigurd is born; King Gjuki rules "lands south of the river Rhine" (chap. 26); Gudrun flees north to Denmark after Sigurd has been slain; people identified as Langobards, Franks, and Saxons are encountered by Gunnar and Hogni in the hall of King Half when they seek reconciliation with Gudrun. The time of the action is "once upon a time," that is, some time prior to the settlement of Iceland (ca. 870), the Christianization of Iceland (ca. 1000), or the reign of any of several Norwegian kings, all of which are standard time references in Icelandic historiography. The saga also makes extensive use of mythological and folkloric elements: e.g., the god Odin appears in human form, men turn into wolves, Sigurd kills a dragon. Because of features such as these, typical of the mythical-heroic sagas in general, a modern audience will experience VS as a fantasy adventure story, pure fiction with no conceivable connection to anything we might call history.

To a medieval Icelander, however, the legendary heroes of the mythical-heroic sagas were not necessarily considered fictitious. As the case of the Volsungs demonstrates, they might well appear as glorious ancestors in the genealogical lists of prestigious Icelandic families on either the paternal or maternal side, since family lines were bilateral – that is, reckoned back to a common ancestor through both male and female kin. Seen from this perspective, a critical character in the saga is Aslaug, the last remaining Volsung, mentioned only in passing in chapter 29 when Brynhild asks her foster father Heimir to raise her. As second wife of Ragnar Lodbrok and mother of his heroic sons, Aslaug plays a major role in *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, a mythical-heroic saga about Ragnar and his family, to which VS constitutes a prelude in its only medieval source, the manuscript Ny kgl. saml. 1824 b, 4^{o}. Through Aslaug's sons and her husband Ragnar, politically influential families of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries – among others, the Sturlungs and the Oddaverjar, a powerful family living at the estate of Oddi – claimed relationship with the Volsungs and the peerless dragon-slayer Sigurd. In fact it is probable that individual and family interest in genealogy played a crucial role in the preservation and writing down of the tales of ancestors in saga form. Seen in this context, the mythical-heroic sagas and sagas of early Icelanders may be said to constitute "the historiography of the Icelandic descent group" (Clunies Ross, *Reception* 93).

The treatment of legendary history in VS can also be compared to accounts of Greek and Roman history found in the heroic epics of Homer and Virgil. The subject matter is a world of beginnings and heroic times, of forefathers and the founding of families. The founder of the Volsung family is none other than Odin, the chief god of Norse mythology; he is reputed to be the father of Sigi, and he also takes an active role in the magical conception of Volsung by providing the apple that makes the king fertile. As unpredictable as Zeus in Homer's epics or Jupiter in the *Aeneid*, he can be regarded as one of the forces steering the course of events in the saga; his appearance at critical moments in the guise of a venerable, bearded man signals a change either for the better or for the worse in the fortunes of a given character. The sources for the story lie in the distant heroic past, in legends told orally for generations about important figures like Sigurd, Gunnar, Hogni, Atli, and Jormunrek, whose lives and deaths comprise such a critical part of Germanic tradition. With the advent of literacy, committing these oral legends – or the poems in which form the legends were first cast – to writing can be seen as a way of preserving the tradi-

tional wisdom and historical knowledge contained in the tales. A written saga could always be read aloud to the audience, thereby retaining some features of oral performance and maintaining the community's collective memory of its origins and history. As in other heroic traditions, the legendary Norse heroes were perceived as far superior in strength and courage to ordinary mortals: without flinching Sinfjotli withstands having his skin flayed from his arms; Sigurd slays a dragon and rides through a wall of flame; Hogni laughs as his heart is cut from his breast. It was important for the contemporary Icelandic audience to remember not only the names and genealogical links, but also the deeds of these heroes and the nature of their conflicts as ideals of behavior. Especially significant in a society in which blood feud played a critical role was the way in which a man confronted death, and the saga presents a number of performance models of the hero face-to-face with death. Who, for example, can forget the unparalleled courage and extraordinary death scenes of Gunnar and Hogni? Model performances such as these clearly helped to reinforce codes of conduct described time and again in the sagas, whether in the sagas of Icelanders living in the early days of the society or in the contemporary sagas about twelfth- and thirteenth-century Iceland. In every instance story was used to relate history, and the past was continually recreated as story.

III. Structure of the Saga

The previous discussion suggests some of the ways in which VS would be viewed as history by its contemporary audience, although a modern audience will experience it as a fabulous adventure story, especially when compared to the more realistic sagas of Icelanders or sagas of Norwegian kings. With its sources in eddic heroic poetry well known to us, VS has always been regarded as a classic mythical-heroic saga. In his book *Heroic Sagas and Ballads*, Stephen A. Mitchell proposes the following definition of the genre: "Old Icelandic prose narratives based on traditional heroic themes, whose numerous fabulous episodes and motifs create an atmosphere of unreality" (27). With this definition in mind, let us examine some of the structural aspects of the narrative to see how the storyteller weaves his web of fabulous episodes and motifs in order to articulate the heroic themes to his audience. We will begin with the narrative's larger episodic structures and then consider smaller structural elements.

A. Episodes

A helpful way to begin a discussion of the structure of the saga is to survey the plot as it unfolds in a series of chronological episodes. In the introduction to his bilingual edition R. G. Finch has divided the story into five sections (xiii-xv).

1) Chapters 1-12 contain the stories of Sigurd's ancestors Sigi, Rerir, Volsung, the twins Sigmund and Signy, their son Sinfjotli, and Helgi, son of Sigmund. The section concludes with King Sigmund's death.
2) Chapters 13-25 recount the stories of Sigurd's birth, of Sigurd's foster father Regin the smith and his family, of how Sigurd avenges his father's death and then kills the dragon Fafnir, of Sigurd's meeting with the valkyrie Brynhild, and of their exchange of vows.
3) Chapters 26-33 relate the lengthy story of Sigurd's marriage to Gudrun and Brynhild's marriage to Gunnar, of how Brynhild discovers that she has been deceived and married to the wrong man, and of the consequences of that deception, namely the slaying of Sigurd and Brynhild's suicide.
4) Chapters 33-40 recount the story of how Gudrun marries Brynhild's brother Atli (thus continuing the connection between the Gjukungs and the Budlungs), of how he treacherously kills her brothers Gunnar and Hogni, and of how she gets revenge by killing their children and murdering him.
5) Chapters 41-44 present the story of Gudrun's last marriage, of the death of her daughter Svanhild at the hands of Svanhild's intended husband Jormunrek, and of the deaths of Hamdir and Sorli, Gudrun's sons from her last marriage, in an attempt to avenge the killing of their half-sister.

Viewing the action of the plot in this way, it appears that VS also falls into two parts, each rising to a dramatic peak with the deaths of the major protagonists. Sections 1-3 tell the story of the Volsungs proper and focus on the hero Sigurd, whose biography can be subdivided into two episodes, that of his youthful adventures and that of his adventures as husband of Gudrun and brother-in-law to Gunnar and Hogni. The treacherous slaying of Sigurd and Brynhild's suicide comprise the dramatic peak of this first part. Sections 4-5 feature the Gjukungs with the primary focus on Gudrun and the tragic events surrounding her last two marriages, the dramatic highpoint being the heroic deaths of Gunnar and Hogni and Gudrun's revenge on Atli.

An alternate episodic model highlights the marriages of the three main female characters, Signy, Brynhild, and Gudrun, as the plot's structural framework. The episodes relating the stories of these extraordinary women and their men constitute the main body of the narrative; within these episodes there is both symmetry and variation of motifs and themes, allowing us to compare and contrast the situations of the three women. Framed by the stories of Signy and of Gudrun's later marriage, the peak of the drama occurs in the central episode relating the disastrous alliances of Brynhild and Gudrun to Gunnar and Sigurd. Here the narrative becomes thick with dialogues between the various parties, and the author presents us with close-ups revealing a considerable amount of psychological depth (see below, V. Character Portrayal). The women's reactions to each other and to the men to whom they are related either by blood or marriage constitute the focal point of authorial and audience interest in each of the three major episodes in the saga. One cannot speak of Sigmund without calling to mind his incestuous union with his twin sister Signy, nor think of Sigurd without mentioning his alliances with Brynhild and Gudrun, nor mention the brothers Gunnar and Hogni or King Atli without remembering the revenge of Gudrun.

As in other Icelandic sagas and in much medieval literature in general, the narrative structure of VS reveals features that we associate with oral composition, a vestige of a time before writing became the preferred mode of transmitting knowledge. For example, we can point to the way the saga progresses chronologically in fairly short episodes; to the stock character roles (hero, villain, heroine, etc.) and character types; to the formulaic repetition of structural patterns and themes; and to the characteristic use of certain numbers in repetition, especially three or multiples of three (for example, Regin tries three times to forge a sword for Sigurd, Sinfjotli undergoes three tests of valor, Sigurd listens to the advice of six nuthatches). These features strongly evoke the style of such traditional oral narratives as myths, legends, and folktales, whose highly formulaic structure renders them easy to remember and tell while allowing the audience to anticipate the narrative development and thereby to participate in the performance. In telling his tale the saga author employs a rich repertoire of traditional narrative devices, known as motifs, ranging from smaller elements, such as magic potions or transformation, to potentially larger structures like quests. The following section presents a selection of the motifs used in VS.

B. Motifs

Motifs, which can be defined as narratable building blocks, are among the most common and familiar elements in traditional narratives, for they provide the storyteller with enormous flexibility in telling his tale. Because motifs depend on a set of expectations shared by the storyteller and his audience, through their repetition, subversion, and variation he can alert his audience to significant parallels and contrasts in theme, situation, and character portrayal; by amplifying them with additional narrative material he can vary the length of his tale. Prevalent motifs in VS include food and drink, tests, transformations, mythological lore, dreams and prophecies, and quests.

1. Food and Drink

Because eating and drinking are such basic human activities, they offer considerable potential for dramatic twists and turns in the traditional plot. Although in the real world the consumption of food or drink normally has beneficial consequences, in the world of folklore and myth it is more likely to cause harm than good. In this respect VS proves no exception, for its banquets and other social gatherings more often occasion treachery than conviviality (see below, IV. B. Hospitality).

Let us begin by considering drink. Offering drink is a standard part of a welcoming ritual, a gesture of hospitality and goodwill, but it may also be associated with leave-taking, especially when the parting is expected to be final. In the spirit of welcome Brynhild twice offers Sigurd drink, the first time in chapter 21, in order that he may remember their conversation on the mountain, and the second time in chapter 25, when they swear public vows to marry each other. In both cases the drink is clearly meant to enhance Sigurd's memory. Drinking prior to departure on a dangerous journey occurs in chapter 37, when the Gjukungs set off to visit King Atli, and in chapter 43, when Gudrun sends her last two sons to attack King Jormunrek.

Instead of enhancing memory, a magic drink may be concocted to produce amnesia. This is the purpose of the brew served by the witch Queen Grimhild on two occasions: the first time to cause Sigurd to forget Brynhild so that he will marry Gudrun and become allied to their family (chap. 28); and the second time to erase Gudrun's memory of the ill will she bears her family so that she will marry Brynhild's brother King Atli (chap. 34). In the latter instance the narrator provides us with a recipe for the potion together