

# “TO SURF THROUGH THE SHARED RICHES OF THE STORY HOARD”: THE oAGORA OF THE SIGURÐR STORY

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IN THE CONTEXT of medieval epic literature, in which so many of the works that have occupied or edified scholars are represented by a single manuscript and/or a few fragments, the epic accounts of the hero Sigurðr present an embarrassment of riches. Not only do we find substantial poetic and prose versions of his story—or stories—from Snorri Sturluson’s *Skaldskaparmál* précis (c. 1240) to the rich array of interrelated poetic and prose accounts in the *Poetic Edda* (Codex Regius [Reykjavík, Árni Magnússon Institute, GKS 2365 4to]; ca. 1270), to the masterful thirteenth-century *Völsunga saga* and *Ragnars saga*, to the curious, antiquarian prose and poetic account of *Norna Gestir þáttur*, which appears in the leaves of the late fourteenth-century *Flateyjarbók* (Reykjavík, Árni Magnússon Institute, GKS 1005 fol.), but we also find important and detailed visual depictions from as early as the eleventh century and genealogies that tie the hero Sigurðr to the royal lines of both Denmark and Norway.<sup>1</sup>

In the manner of book culture—that system of communicative rules and norms that John Miles Foley called the “textual Agora” or “tAgora”<sup>2</sup>—we can use these works to (re-)construct a single unified epic, of which each extant version is a more or a less faithful reflection. This allows us to imagine the situation lying behind these versions as a concrete array of circulating manuscripts composed, copied, recopied, and recombined in the hands and halls of learned scribes. Tracing the circulation and interrelation of such texts has been the work of scholars over the past two centuries and is chronicled and tabulated in the “Heldenlieder” volumes (4–7) of the monumental series of reference works *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, edited by Klaus von See and others.

Alternatively, we can choose to see these extant visual and textual renderings of Sigurðr and his supposed contemporaries as records of a once vibrant oral Agora (“oAgora”), a multiplicity of “pathways” in and about the life and times of the hero Sigurðr and his actual or putative kin that “reveal the oAgora communication as a kinetic, emergent, in-the-making process.”<sup>3</sup> In the following discussion, I draw on Foley’s *Oral Tradition and the Internet: Pathways of the Mind* to interpret the Sigurðr materials as instances of a willingness—inherent in the very nature of oral tradition—“to surf the shared riches of the story-hoard and shape a performance that is intelligible to and enjoyable for performer and audience alike.”<sup>4</sup>

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1 Blindheim, *Sigurds saga*; Edlund, “Drakdödare”; and Nordanskog, *Föreställd Hedendom*. For a discussion of British Isles images of the epic, see McKinnell, “Sigmundur/Sigurðr Story,” 59–66.

2 See Foley, *Oral Tradition and the Internet*, 255–62, on the “eAgora,” “oAgora,” and “tAgora.”

3 Foley, *Oral Tradition and the Internet*, 182.

4 Foley, *Oral Tradition and the Internet*, 181.

To see oral tradition lurking behind the details of the Sigurðr materials is, of course, nothing new. Alexander Richey used these materials to discuss the Homeric Question already in 1875,<sup>5</sup> and many other scholars have followed suit, examining the stories of Sigurðr as well as the cognate accounts of Siegfried in the *Nibelungenlied*. Matthias Teichert's *Von der Heldensage zum Heroenmythos* looks at the "mythologizing" of the Sigurðr story both in medieval and post-medieval works into the present day,<sup>6</sup> and the annotated bibliography by Florian Kragl and others, *Nibelungenlied und Nibelungensage: Kommentierte Bibliographie 1945–2012*, provides an excellent introduction to the vast scholarship extant to date. In the area of Old Norse studies, the above-mentioned volumes edited by von See represent an excellent foundation for any examination.

Nor is it novel to examine the workings of oral tradition as a distinctive mode of communication unlike that of literate book making, reading, and exchange. Such, of course, is central to the rich scholarly enterprise that has occupied many of the contributors to this volume and which is associated particularly with the names of Milman Parry, Albert Bates Lord, Walter J. Ong, and John Miles Foley. In *Oral Tradition and the Internet*, however, Foley invites us to use the technological and cognitive revolution of the internet as a new vantage point for examining the specific effects of communicative technologies on the materials we study and on our perceptions of them. If, Foley argues, we see all communication with the normative expectations of book culture—the tAgora—then oral or oral-derived epic texts will inevitably appear defective, disordered, or derelict since they differ in fundamental ways from works produced more fully and more authentically within the tAgora. If, on the other hand, we come to see communication with the default assumptions of the internet—the electronic Agora (eAgora)—then we may view the relative fluidity and multiplicity of pathways within oral traditions—the oAgora—not as aberrant, but as somehow familiar, as instances of what Foley terms homologies between the oAgora and the eAgora.<sup>7</sup> With that new set of communicative norms in mind, the fixity of the book text—its totalizing, singular control of the reader's experience, its inability to accommodate the shifting interests or meandering (surfing) tendencies of its audience, and its illusory assertion of completeness—becomes perceived as aberrant and impoverished, despite the heightened status that the tAgora has enjoyed in Western societies.

For the reader unfamiliar with the findings of oral tradition scholarship to date, Foley's study prods and pries, aiming at defamiliarizing the book in order to valorize the oral performance. For the reader already familiar with this extensive body of scholarship, however, the study's key accomplishment is to underscore how we are shaped by our technological norms. Even if the reader chooses (as I did) to read *Oral Tradition and the Internet* in hard copy rather than in the online form in which Foley originally conceived it and which became available soon after his untimely death,<sup>8</sup> the study thwarts expectations of book order, allowing its argument to emerge not in a fixed sequence

5 Richey, "Homeric Question."

6 Teichert, *Heldensage*.

7 Foley, *Oral Tradition and the Internet*, 7–8.

8 [www.muse.jhu.edu/book/21552](http://www.muse.jhu.edu/book/21552).

dictated by the author, but rather in a series of kernel points, arranged in arbitrary (specifically, alphabetical) order and interlinked through parenthetical cross-references that mimic the links found in the online version and that invite the reader to "surf" through the study in whatever order, partial or complete, that the reader may choose. The tacit goal of Foley's physical text is to make the reader feel it would have been better to experience the study online—that is, to see, perhaps for the first time since being indoctrinated into the totalizing ways of the tAgora, the limitations of the communicative framework built on the book. Only when those limitations are clear to us, Foley suggests, can we come to appreciate the norms of the oAgora or the eAgora.

In order to explore the implications of Foley's study on our understandings of the materials surrounding the figure of Sigurðr, I follow Foley's lead in presenting a catalogue of Sigurðr narratives and depictions in alphabetical rather than purportedly chronological order. My catalogue is not exhaustive, but it will supply a good basis for the discussion that follows, in which I suggest some of the webs of association (think of them as user link paths) that criss-cross the Sigurðr story, linking it to other themes of interest to the story's tellers and audiences, like the roles of heroic men and women, the duties of kinship, the pain of betrayal, the fellowship of Óðinn, the fellowship of Christ, the lineages of kings, the geography of the world, and the work and functions of poets and poems.

By adopting this format I do not mean to present the versions below as wholly independent works produced without knowledge of or reference to each other. Nor do I mean to deny the possibility that a copy of one text in manuscript form may have served as the direct or indirect source of another text. Instead, by displacing and setting aside these questions, I hope to simulate, albeit faintly, the synchronic ways in which a medieval audience may have experienced various renderings or recountings of the Sigurðr story.

## Catalogue<sup>9</sup>

### *Beowulf*

The epic *Beowulf* portrays the world of heroic pre-Christian Scandinavians from an Anglo-Saxon and Christian perspective.<sup>10</sup> The epic survives in a single manuscript, London, British Library, MS Cotton Vitellius A.xv, dated by many to the early eleventh century, but theories abound regarding the age of the epic itself, with suggested dates of origin from the ninth to the early eleventh centuries.<sup>11</sup>

In the first part of the poem, the narrator describes the Geatish hero Beowulf's successful wrestling with and defeat of a monstrous night-prowler named Grendel who had long terrorized the court of the Danish king Hrothgar. Beowulf grapples with the monster in the deep of the night and manages to wrench off Grendel's arm and shoulder,

<sup>9</sup> Boldface has been used to indicate texts/ideas that have their own catalogue entry in this essay.

<sup>10</sup> Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, *Klaeber's Beowulf*. For a reading of the *Beowulf* passage in relation to the Sigurðr story, see McKinnell, "Sigmundur/Sigurðr Story," 50–57.

<sup>11</sup> See the articles collected in Chase, *Dating of Beowulf*.

leading the monster to retreat and die. In the aftermath of this remarkable triumph, men loudly celebrate the hero's mettle and the narrator describes a singer of Hrothgar's court who begins to praise Beowulf in poetry. The poetic recitation soon, however, turns to the hero Sigemund's feats. Sigemund is the son of Wæls (a name similar to the Norse *Volsung*) and is accompanied by a faithful retainer, a nephew named Fitela, reminiscent of the Norse *Sinfjötli*.

In this version, it is Sigemund who kills the dragon, not *Sigurðr*. The epic events parallel those that will befall the hero Beowulf in his old age, when he is compelled to fight a dragon that is terrorizing his kingdom without help from any of his men but for his young kinsman *Wiglaf*. Although the exact details of the *Beowulf* account are unclear, it is evident that the singer in the narrative uses a song of Sigemund both to entertain the king's retainers and to draw an explicit parallel between the brave deeds of Beowulf and those of the dragon-slayer of the past. The fact that Beowulf's Geatland and the Gautland of other versions of the *Sigurðr* story are essentially the same must have added further resonance and logic to the poet's choice of song.

### *Eiríksmál*

The praise poem/dramatized conversation composed in honour of the death of *Eiríkr Bloodaxe* (d. 954) depicts *Eiríkr*, the sometime king of Norway and of Northumbria, arriving at **Óðinn's** Valhalla, where the delighted god bids the warriors *Sigmundur* and *Sinfjötli* to leave their seats and greet the new arrival.<sup>12</sup> No mention is made of *Sigurðr*. The poem appears in the history of Norwegian kings, *Nóregs konunga tal*, as it appears in the Icelandic manuscript *Fagrskinna*, dated to ca. 1220 and surviving today only in copies.

The poem plays a punctuating role in the account of the transfer of Norway from the warlike King *Eiríkr Bloodaxe* to his kinder, younger brother King *Hákon*. The young (Christian) prince *Hákon* returns to Norway at the urging of his foster father King *Æthelstan* of England. There he is elected king, ousting his older brother *Eiríkr*, who eventually emigrates to England with his disagreeable wife *Gunnhildr*. *Æthelstan* makes *Eiríkr* his vassal king of Northumbria and causes him to be baptized. Dissatisfied with the size of his new kingdom, *Eiríkr* begins to raid neighbouring realms and is eventually killed by another vassal king. It is in response to his death that *Gunnhildr* commissions the poem, which depicts *Eiríkr* as enjoying a pagan rather than a Christian afterlife. *Gunnhildr* is often depicted in the sagas as a conniving and headstrong queen, associated with magic, *Sámi*, and pagan ways.<sup>13</sup>

### *Gesta Danorum*

The Danish cleric *Saxo Grammaticus* wrote his *Gesta Danorum* in the early thirteenth century.<sup>14</sup> Book 9 of the Latin text contains the story of *Regner*, a rendering of the

<sup>12</sup> Guðni Jónsson, *Eiríksmál*.

<sup>13</sup> See DuBois, "Ethnomemory."

<sup>14</sup> H. Davidson and Fisher, *Saxo Grammaticus*.

Ragnarr Loðbrók of *Ragnars saga* and *Þáttr af Ragnars sonum*. In the narrative, Regner becomes king of Sjøælland while still a boy, marries the valkyrie Lathgertha, then divorces her for Princess Thora, daughter of King Heroth of Sweden. He kills the menacing serpents protecting Thora and laying waste to the countryside, as in *Ragnars saga*. His son Sivard makes a deal with a mysterious tall man (**Óðinn**) who requests the souls of the men Sivard defeats in battle. In exchange, the man cures Sivard's grievous wound and blows dust into his eyes, giving him irises like snakes, a detail related to the story of Sigurðr ormr í auga (who has sharp or snake-like eyes) as recounted in both *Ragnars saga* and *Þáttr af Ragnars sonum*. Saxo's book details the military exploits of Regner and his sons in various kingdoms surrounding Denmark. After Regner resists and reverses the efforts of Christianisers, God punishes him by letting him be captured by King Ælla and dying in a snake pit. The text makes no mention of Áslaugr and thus does not tie the illustrious line of Regner and his sons to the wider Sigurðr story.

### Grípisspá

The poem *Grípisspá* appears in the Codex Regius or *Poetic Edda*, where it is the first poem in the compilation to detail the adventures of Sigurðr.<sup>15</sup> In it, a young and promising Sigurðr, already equipped with his horse Grani, comes to visit his uncle Grípir to hear tell of his future. Grípir assures Sigurðr that he will have a glorious life, predicting that Sigurðr will kill the dragon Fafnir and his brother Regin, and that he will bring the treasure to the hall of the Gjukungar and then awaken a sleeping valkyrie by cutting her armour. At the hall of Heimir, Sigurðr will meet Brynhildr (who is apparently distinct from the awakened valkyrie), whose charms will completely overpower Sigurðr. Nonetheless, through the trickery of Queen Grimhildr of the Gjukungar, Sigurðr will marry Guðrún and eventually woo Brynhildr for Gunnar. After a double wedding, Sigurðr will remember his earlier vows to Brynhildr but will be unable to change the situation. Brynhildr will plot revenge, making false claims against Sigurðr and leading Gunnar and his brother to murder Sigurðr. Sigurðr himself recoils at his future deeds, but Grípir reassures Sigurðr that he will be remembered for his acts of valour, not his fated indiscretions.

### Háttatal

Snorri mentions in his *Háttatal* a verse form invented by the late-tenth-century Icelandic skald "Veili" (Þorvaldr veili) while stranded on a skerry after a shipwreck. Quoting a verse depicting a warrior sailing from the western seas to Vagsbrú (a bridge in Trondheim), the narrator states that Veili composed a lay without a refrain based on the "saga of Sigurðr."<sup>16</sup> If the verse quoted relates to Sigurðr (and it may not), it is one of the few depictions of the hero traveling by ship and perhaps reflects a particularly Icelandic way of seeing a hero who is usually depicted traveling over land by horseback. Significantly, the poet is said to have composed his poem by musing on the Sigurðr story dwelling in his mind.

<sup>15</sup> Guðni Jónsson, *Grípisspá*.

<sup>16</sup> Snorri Sturlson, *Háttatal*, 18.

*Hylestad Portal*

Figure 1. Sigurðr licks his thumb while roasting the heart of Fafnir in the presence of the sleeping Regin. Hylestad Portal. Photo by Thomas A. DuBois.

The stave church of the village of Hylestad in the Norwegian district of Setesdal possessed a grand portal that survived even after the demolition of the church in 1664. That portal, dated to ca. 1200, is today on display at the Oslo Historical Museum. Although the crown of the portal is missing, the rest remains intact, and

is an important rendering of the Sigurðr story in a specifically Christian context.

The portal divides the Sigurðr story into two halves: a right-hand side, depicting moments of triumph and hope, and a left-hand, sinister side, depicting the betrayals and dangers of the world. The right-hand side depicts, from bottom to top, the smith Regin forging the sword Gram, assisted by Sigurðr, the conferral of the sword to Sigurðr, and the battle of Sigurðr with the dragon Fafnir. The left-hand side depicts more ominous events: the roasting of the dragon's heart and Sigurðr's tasting of the dragon's blood (which conferred knowledge of the language of birds), the horse Grani carrying the cursed treasure, Sigurðr's murder of his conniving foster father Regin, and Gunnar playing a harp with his toes in the snake pit. We do not know what figure(s) existed on the crown of the portal or whether other depictions of the Sigurðr story existed on other portals or artwork in the church.

*Kilmorie Cross slab*

A tenth-century cross slab in the village of Kilmorie, Wigtownshire, Scotland, located on the north coast of Stranraer, depicts a resolute crucified Christ standing atop another figure interpreted as possibly Sigurðr.<sup>17</sup> The lower figure is depicted frontally, with his hands clasped in front of him, with two birds to his right side and a set of tongs to his left. The tongs are reminiscent of those depicted in the **Ramsund slab**, where Sigurðr is depicted using them to roast Fafnir's heart, turning away to suck his thumb, an act that equips him with the ability to understand the speech of birds, as recounted in the *Prose Edda*, *Poetic Edda*, and *Völsunga saga* accounts, and depicted as well in the **Hylestad portal** and **Manx Andreas cross**. The reverse side of the slab is also decorated, depicting an incised Latin cross above interlacing serpentine scrolls. The slab was housed in

<sup>17</sup> Graham-Campbell and Batey, *Vikings in Scotland*, 108, 251–52.

the Kilmorie chapel until the early eighteenth century, when it was moved to the Kilcolm church, where it was used as the lintel over the church's west door. When that church was demolished in 1821, the slab was removed to the gardens of Corsewall House, where it stands today as a valued exemplar of local medieval art.<sup>18</sup>

### *Krákumál*

Like *Vǫlsunga saga* and *Ragnars saga*, the skaldic poem *Krákumál* is contained in a single vellum manuscript (Copenhagen, Royal Library, Ny kgl. Saml. 1824b 4to.) dating from around 1400.<sup>19</sup> It follows immediately after *Ragnars saga* in the manuscript and retells some of the events of Ragnarr's life in some twenty-nine stanzas of verse, each beginning with the line "Hjoggum vér með hjörvi" (We hewed with sword).

The poem is told in first-person narration as Ragnarr recounts his adventures from his first winning of Þóra, naming enemies and recounting battles in a wide range of places including some mentioned in *Ragnars saga*, but elsewhere as well, including Ireland and Scotland. The speaker closes with images of his impending arrival in Valhalla, where he will enjoy eternal feasting on the bench in the hall of Baldr's father (that is, *Óðinn*), while his sons by Áslaugr avenge his death. The poem underscores the Óðinnic nature of Ragnarr and his sons, emphasizing their intent to spend the afterlife in Valhalla, a notion paralleled by *Eiríksmál* and details of *Vǫlsunga saga* and *Ragnars saga*.

### *Leiðarvísir*

Sometime between 1149 and 1154, the Icelandic abbot Nikulás made a pilgrimage from Iceland to the Holy Land. On his return, he prepared a detailed itinerarium, noting the sites he visited and the distances (in terms of days travelled) between them. Alongside various cathedrals and churches visited en route to Rome, Nikulás notes several places associated with the Sigurðr story. Near the village of Kiliandr (Killianstädten?), on the route between Padeborn and Mainz, he notes the existence of a site called "Gnitaheiðr, er Sigurðr var at Fabni" (Gnitaheiðr, where Sigurðr went up against Fafnir).<sup>20</sup> Proceeding southward to Switzerland, he comes to the village of "Fivizuborg" (Vévey), which, he notes, the sons of Ragnarr Loðbrók once attacked and which is therefore smaller now than it once was.<sup>21</sup> Crossing the Alps into Italy, he comes to a cave near Santo Stefano di Magra and Luni which is the site "kallar sumir menn ormgard er Gunnar var i settr" (which some men call the snake pit where Gunnar was placed).<sup>22</sup>

18 Canmore, "Kirkholm, Corse Wall House, Cross-Slab."

19 Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, *Krákumál*.

20 Werlauff, *Leiðarvísir*, 16.

21 Werlauff, *Leiðarvísir*, 18.

22 Werlauff, *Leiðarvísir*, 20.

*Manx cross depictions*

Figure 2. Andreas cross.  
Image by Gavin Archer and  
Louise Archer.

A number of tenth-century inscribed crosses on the Isle of Man have been interpreted to depict scenes associated with the Sigurðr story.<sup>23</sup> The stones prominently display Latin crosses with interlacing serpentine scroll decoration and figures reminiscent of **Óðinn**, Þórr, boars, deer, and valkyries. They bear Norse runic inscriptions that indicate the Norse or occasionally Celtic names of persons (mostly men) who erected the stones in honour of kin or companions. A cross erected in Jurby depicts a man slaying a dragon, and also sucking his thumb, possibly to be identified with Sigurðr. Similar is a cross at Melew. A cross at Andreas (figure 2 above) contains several scenes almost indisputably associated with Sigurðr, including his roasting of Fafnir's heart and sucking his thumb, with a horse (Grani) and bird behind, clearly parallel to depictions on the **Hylestad portal** and **Ramsund slab**. Another cross erected by Mal-lomchon for his foster mother Malworrey in Michael depicts a man playing a large harp, flanked by a smaller figure, reminiscent of Heimir and Áslaugr in *Ragnars saga*.<sup>24</sup>

*Norna Gest's þátr*

The story of Norna Gestr appears in the expanded *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar* of the *Flateyjarbók* manuscript (GKS 1005 fol.), completed sometime before 1387.<sup>25</sup> In the tale, King Ólafur Tryggvason, the late-tenth-century Norwegian king who worked to Christianize Norway as well as Iceland, is visited by a mysterious elderly man, "Gestr." The visitor reveals his incredible age, a product of a dispute between the Norns at the time of his birth. He is accomplished at playing the harp and reciting epic poems, and entertains the court one evening with renditions of two (unquoted) poems, *Gunnarslagr* and *Guðrúnarbrögð*, apparently pertaining to the Sigurðr story.

A wager with other men in the court leads Gestr to recount his past, in which he tells how he became a retainer of Sigurðr in his youth. He describes Sigurðr, his heroic brothers, his dealings with Regin, the defeat of Fafnir, and Sigurðr's marriage to Guðrún. He

<sup>23</sup> Cumming, *Runic and Other Monumental Remains*; and Kermode, *Traces of the Norse Mythology*. For some photographic depictions, see **Manx Crosses** and Picture Stones at [www.vikingage.org/wiki/index.php?title=Picture\\_stones\\_from\\_the\\_Isle\\_of\\_Man](http://www.vikingage.org/wiki/index.php?title=Picture_stones_from_the_Isle_of_Man).

<sup>24</sup> Kermode, *Traces of the Norse Mythology*, Plate V.

<sup>25</sup> G. Hardman, *Norna Gest's þátr*.

tells of how Sigurðr was befriended by a mysterious poetic stranger Hnikarr, apparently **Óðinn**, and recounts Sigurðr’s triumph over the legendary warrior Starkaðr Stórverks-son, dislodging two of his teeth, which are now on display at a Danish church. Gestr identifies a ring in the king’s possession as once having belonged to Sigurðr and displays some remarkably long hairs taken from Grani’s tail. Ólafr asks Gestr how Sigurðr died, and Gestr notes the existence of conflicting German and Norse accounts of the murder. Ólafr also asks about Brynhildr’s reaction to the death, and Gestr relates her suicide and burning on the pyre, quoting verse from the *Poetic Edda’s Helreið Brynhildar*. Gestr also mentions accompanying the sons of Ragnarr Loðbrók on their plundering of Vífilsborg (Vévey, Switzerland). Throughout the narrative, Olafr and his court display familiarity with the recounted events, but are edified by hearing Gestr’s eyewitness accounts. Gestr eventually receives baptism and dies peacefully.

### Näs baptismal font



Figure 3. Näs baptismal font.  
Photo by Thomas A. DuBois

Stockholm’s Historical Museum preserves the baptismal font of Näs Church, Jämtland, dated to around 1200. The font is carved from a single large tree stump, its outer surface decorated with lavish and sophisticated carvings. Inhabited vine scroll is populated with serpents, winged dragons, and beings that appear half human/half dragon. Most striking, however, is the inclusion of a bound

figure, beset with serpents and playing a harp with his toes. The figure has generally been interpreted as a depiction of Gunnar at the end of his life, cast into a snake pit by his enemies and charming all but one deadly snake with his playing.<sup>26</sup>

### Poetic Edda account

The *Poetic Edda* refers to a compendium of poems preserved in the Codex Regius, an Icelandic manuscript dated to around 1270.<sup>27</sup> Beginning with mythological poems, the compendium eventually turns to poetry about great warriors and, often, about their queens, valkyrie consorts, and daughters. Poems are introduced or interrupted by prose sections, in which the compiler gives details regarding the figures mentioned and offers

26 Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, “Gunnarr and the Snake Pit.”

27 Guðni Jónsson, *Eddukvæði*; Snorri Sturluson, *Poetic Edda*.

comments on the events described. Two of the poems in the compilation are discussed separately in this catalogue: *Grípisspá* and *Sigurðarkviða in skamma*.

The collection's prodigious array of poems related to the Sigurðr story contain first heroic poems about heroes named Helgi (one of whom is Sigurðr's brother), then poems about Sigurðr and his dealings with Regin, Fafnir, Guðrún, Sigrdrífa/Brynhildr, Gunnar, and the Gjukungar. After Sigurðr's death, the poems follow the life of Guðrún into her next marriage with Atli and subsequent marriage with Jonakr. The fates of all Guðrún's children by each of these husbands are detailed, including Svanhildr's murder by King Jormunrekkr and Guðrún's efforts to make sure that the murder is avenged, an act that takes the lives of her final three sons. Taken as a whole, the *Poetic Edda* compilation emphasizes the genealogical ties of the various characters, accounting for the fates of all the Gjukungar, Budlingar, and Vǫlsungar, except for Áslaugr, who is not mentioned.

**Óðinn** recurs in several of the initial poems, helping link these heroic poems to the mythological material earlier in the compilation in which he plays a central role. Women's roles are examined in considerable detail.

#### *Prose Edda Account*

Snorri's account of the Sigurðr story appears in *Skáldskaparmál*, a manual for poets compiled as part of the *Prose Edda*.<sup>28</sup> It is dated to ca. 1220; Snorri is known to have died in 1241. Some scholars suggest that references to the Sigurðr story may be later interpolations,<sup>29</sup> written in the aftermath of the *Poetic Edda* and the *Vǫlsunga saga*. The text contains a frame story in which a certain Ægir or Hlér comes to visit the Æsir. He is placed beside the poet Bragi during the evening's feast and Bragi spends the night detailing for the guest the different metaphors used in poetry and their relation to key events in the history of the gods. The story of Sigurðr arises when Bragi is explaining why gold is also called "Otrgjöld" (ottar payment).<sup>30</sup> That term launches Bragi into the tale of Loki's acquisition of the cursed treasure while traveling with **Óðinn**, followed by Sigurðr's dealings with Regin, Fafnir, Guðrún, Gunnar, and Brynhildr. Sigurðr's murder is detailed, as is Guðrún's subsequent marriages and the deaths of her brothers and children. Only one offspring survives: a daughter of Sigurðr named Áslaugr, whose mother is unspecified but who is said to have been raised in the home of Heimir of Hlymdales, becoming the ancestress of illustrious family lines. Finally, Snorri's narrator notes that most poets have made use of these materials and furnishes an example composed by Bragi the Old, an ekphrastic rendering of the scenes of the death of Jormunrekkr and the sons of Jonakr appearing on a shield that Bragi has received from Ragnarr Loðbrók, the heroic husband of Áslaugr.<sup>31</sup> Snorri's narrator recounts his tale entirely in prose, making no quotation of any poems until the very end of the account.

<sup>28</sup> Snorri Sturlson, *The Prose Edda*.

<sup>29</sup> Snorri Sturlson, *Háttatal*, xi.

<sup>30</sup> Snorri Sturlson, *The Prose Edda*, 45.

<sup>31</sup> Snorri Sturlson, *The Prose Edda*, 50.

*Ragnars saga Loðbrókar*

*Ragnars saga Loðbrókar* appears in a manuscript, Ny kgl. Saml. 1824b 4to, dating from around 1400, with myriad imitations and echoes in medieval sources from Iceland, England, Denmark, and France.<sup>32</sup> The saga follows immediately after *Völsunga saga*, picking up with the aftermath of the death of Guðrún’s last sons.

Brynhildr’s foster father Heimir fears for the life of Áslaugr, Sigurðr and Brynhildr’s daughter. He has a large harp constructed, in which he hides the girl and a quantity of treasure and clothes. An elderly farmer and his wife murder him for his money, discover the hidden child, and determine to raise her as their own. They shave her head and rub her with tar, naming her Kráka (crow). Meanwhile, Ragnarr, heroic son of King Sigurðr Hring of Denmark, wins the hand of the noble Þóra by killing the serpent that guards her. She bears him valiant sons. After her death, Ragnarr marries Kráka, whose royal parentage becomes revealed only later. She, too, bears Ragnarr noble sons, and under the title Randalín, fights alongside them in Sweden, where they avenge the death of Ragnarr’s previous sons. The sons then travel to the continent and raid in various places, including Vífilsborg (Vévey, Switzerland).

Ragnarr raids in England, where he is captured by King Ælla. Like Gunnar, he dies in a snake pit. His sons come to avenge him, using a ruse to gain a grant of land, identified with London. His son Ívarr becomes ruler of Northumbria, while Hvítserkr becomes a famous raider in the east. Sigurðr ormr í auga establishes himself in Norway, where his daughter Ragnhildr becomes the mother of King Haraldr Fairhair.<sup>33</sup> Ragnarr’s sons thus tie royal Norse lines to Sigurðr and Brynhildr.

*Ramsund slab*

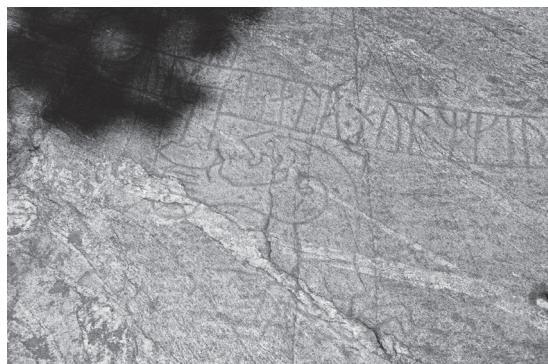


Figure 4. Ramsund slab engraving, originally in Montelius, *Sveriges hednatid*: dramatic image of Sigurd stabbing a text. Photo by Thomas A. DuBois.

The runic inscription at Ramsund, in Södermanland, Sweden, dated to the early eleventh century, represents the best known of a number of memorial stones connected with the Sigurðr story. It is closely paralleled by the Gök stone (not included in this catalogue), also located in Södermanland. The inscription and depiction of scenes, sponsored by a woman named

**32** Van Dyke, *Ragnars saga Loðbrókar*; McTurk, *Studies in Ragnars saga Loðbrókar*; Rowe, *Development of Flateyjarbók*; and Rowe, *Vikings in the West*.

**33** Finlay, “Chronology, Genealogy, and Conversion,” 49.

Sigríðr, is executed on a large granite slab rising from the landscape near the site of a medieval bridge dated to around 1040, on a road that connected Lake Mälaren with the town of Eskilstuna, some ten kilometres to the southeast.<sup>34</sup> It was there that the English-born St Eskil, a companion of St Sigfríðr, set up his first missionary outpost in the region in the early eleventh century. St Eskil, as well as his supporters and detractors, are likely to have crossed this bridge at times, perhaps on the way to Eskilstuna and Strängnäs, the eventual bishop's seat.<sup>35</sup> Sigríðr and her kinsmen must have been among the region's first and most prominent Christians. The stone's inscription identifies Sigríðr as the sponsor of the bridge and mentions her male kin, one of whom is named Sigröðr. The images depict Sigurðr in the act of slaying the serpent, a tree with birds and a horse (Grani), Sigurðr roasting the dragon's heart and sucking his thumb, a beheaded Regin, and an animal interpreted as Otr.

#### *Sigurðarkviða in skamma*

*Sigurðarkviða in skamma*, the *Short Lay of Sigurðr*, appears midway through the various poems collected and united in the *Poetic Edda*.<sup>36</sup> The poem tells the story of Sigurðr's life from the time immediately after killing the dragon Fafnir onward to his death. Sigurðr becomes friends with Gunnar and Högni, who offer him the hand of their sister Guðrún. Sigurðr accompanies his new allies on their wooing expedition to Brynhildr. Brynhildr, once married to Gunnar, pines for Sigurðr and eventually incites Gunnar to murder him. Guðrún awakens amid a pool of her husband's blood. Sigurðr comforts his distraught wife with his dying words, while Brynhildr laughs in triumph. Gunnar and Brynhildr argue, and Brynhildr recounts her brother Atli's pressuring her to marry against her will. Gunnar tries to comfort her so as to prevent her suicide, but his brother Högni welcomes her death as fitting. Brynhildr has a long speech as she dies, in which she predicts the subsequent lives of Gunnar, Guðrún, Oddrún (Brynhildr's sister, whom Gunnar will seek to marry), Atli, Jonakr, Svanhildr, and Jormunrekkr. She then requests to have her funeral pyre alongside Sigurðr's, with the same sword placed between them as in the courting bed long before.

#### *Sturlunga saga*

The Sigurðr story surfaces in the later Icelandic *Sturlunga saga* through the dreams of a young priest's wife, Jóreiðr, living at Miðjumdál. In unsettling dreams, Guðrún Gjukadóttir repeatedly appears to Jóreiðr to communicate prophecies concerning the fall of Eyjólfur Þorsteinsson (d. 1255). When Jóreiðr expresses anxiety at being visited by a pagan apparition, Guðrún retorts: "Engu skal þik þat skipta [...] hvárt ek em kristin eða heiðin, en vinr em ek vinar míns" (It should not be of concern to you [...] whether I am Christian or heathen, but that I am a friend to my friends).<sup>37</sup>

34 Jägerbrand, "Sigurdsristningen."

35 Delaney, *Dictionary of Saints*, 201.

36 Guðni Jónsson, *Sigurðarkviða in skamma*.

37 Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason, and Kristján Eldjárn, *Sturlunga Saga*, 1:521.

*Báttir af Ragnars sonum*

The *Báttir af Ragnars sonum* survives in a single manuscript, Hauksbók, now preserved in three parts (Reykjavík, Árni Magnússon Institute, AM 371 4to, Copenhagen, Arnarnagæan Institute, AM 544 4to, and Reykjavík, Árni Magnússon Institute, AM 675 4to), a compilation of geographic treatises, biblical commentary, sermons, mythological poetry, continental histories (of Troy and of Britain), and Norse sagas and *þættir* written by the Icelandic lawsayer Haukr Erlendsson (d. 1334) in the early fourteenth century.<sup>38</sup> The portion of the manuscript containing this tale is preserved in AM 544 4to.

The text recounts the adventures of Ragnarr Loðbrók and his sons, paralleling the details of *Ragnars saga Loðbrókar*. Ragnarr, prince of Denmark and Sweden, wins the hand of Þóra by killing her protective serpent. She bears him his first two sons. After the death of Þóra, Ragnarr marries Áslaug/Randalín, identified as the daughter of Sigurðr and Brynhildr. Their sons Ívarr, Björn, Hvítserkr, and Sigurðr ormr í auga avenge the death of Ragnarr's previous sons in Sweden alongside their mother. Ragnarr raids in England, where he is captured by King Ælla and put to death in a snake pit. His sons acquire land in England (the city of York) through a ruse, and avenge their father. Ívarr's illegitimate sons Yngvarr and Hústó attack and torture the ninth-century King St Edmund the martyr of East Anglia, taking his kingdom, a detail paralleled in many English sources.

*Thidreks saga*

The text of *Thidreks saga* reflects Norse knowledge of continental German traditions concerning the Sigurðr story and serves here not only as a text in itself but also as an illustration of the Sigurðr story as it exists in the *Nibelungenlied*, not covered in this catalogue. *Thidreks saga* has been generally dated to the mid-thirteenth century. A Norwegian parchment manuscript survives from the second half of the thirteenth century and is supplemented by two paper manuscripts from the seventeenth century.<sup>39</sup>

The saga's Sigurðr materials begin with the story of a King Sigmund of Tarlungaland (apparently the Frankish realm of the Carolingians).<sup>40</sup> He marries a Spanish princess Sisibe who eventually bears him a son called Sigfred. Due to court intrigues, Sisibe is killed and the son lost. He is raised by a deer and then found by the smith Mimir and his dragon brother Regin.<sup>41</sup> The boy eventually kills the brothers, gaining invincibility from rubbing himself with the dragon's blood. In the kingdom of Niflungaland, he befriends Gunnar and eventually marries Gunnar's sister Grimhildr. He helps win Brynhildr for Gunnar. Rivalry between Grimhildr and Brynhildr leads to his death: he is murdered by his in-laws during a boar hunt. Attila eventually marries Grimhildr, and Gunnar is eventually killed by Attila in the snake pit. His brothers Högni and Gernoz survive for a time but are eventually killed as well, as Grimhildr seeks revenge for her husband's

38 Tunstall, *Báttir af Ragnars Sonum*.

39 Haymes, *Saga of Thidrek*, xx–xxi.

40 Haymes, *Saga of Thidrek*, chap. 152–62, pp. 100–105.

41 Haymes, *Saga of Thidrek*, chap. 163–68, pp. 105–9.

death. King Thidrek kills Grimhildr with Attila's blessings. Högni's son Aldrian avenges his father's death by entrapping Attila in a mountain filled with the treasures of Högni, Gunnar, and Sigurðr/Sigfred. Aldrian journeys to Niflungaland, where he informs Brynhildr of his deeds and receives praise and authority over the kingdom from her.

### *Völsunga rímur*

The sixteenth-century manuscript Copenhagen, Arnamagnæan, AM 604 4to recounts many of the same details as the opening chapters of *Völsunga saga* in Icelandic *rímur* verse. The six poems of the collection recount the Trojan origins of the Æsir (a detail found in Snorri's Prologue to the *Prose Edda*) and the relation of **Óðinn** to the family line that becomes known as the Völsungar. The poems tell of Sigi's career and his murder of Breði. It continues into the life of Sigi's son Rerir, the latter's difficulties in begetting a son, and the assistance granted by Frigg and **Óðinn**. The life of Völsungr is detailed, along with his marriage to Hljóð, sent to him by **Óðinn**. The ill-fated marriage of Siggeirr and Signý is recounted, along with the arrival of a mysterious guest who leaves the sword that causes the enmity between Siggeirr and the Völsungar. The poems describe Sigmundr's survival of Siggeirr's treachery, the sex between Signý and Sigmundr, and the birth of Sinfjötli. They close with the return of Sigmundr to Húaland and the birth and early life of his sons Helgi and Hrómundr.

### *Völsunga saga*

The prose and poetic *Völsunga saga* is dated to between 1200 and 1270 although it exists today primarily in a single vellum manuscript (Ny kgl. Saml. 1824b 4to) from around 1400 which also contains *Ragnars saga* and *Krákumál*.<sup>42</sup> Numerous paper manuscripts exist as well.

The saga begins with a genealogical tale that links the Völsung family directly to **Óðinn**, following his line through Sigi, Rerir, and Völsungr. Völsungr's son Sigmundr comes into conflict with his future brother-in-law Siggeirr of Gautland over a sword brought to Sigmundr's court by a mysterious visitor (**Óðinn**). Siggeirr attempts to destroy the Völsungr line in revenge, but is foiled by his wife Signý, who sleeps with her brother Sigmundr to produce Sinfjötli and who assists her brother and son in their work of avenging the family's deaths. Sinfjötli is poisoned by Sigmundr's wife Borghildr, who has borne Sigmundr two sons, the elder of which is the heroic Helgi. Sigmundr's subsequent wife, Hjordís, posthumously bears him the son Sigurðr, who grows up in the court of King Hjalprekr, where he is fostered by Regin. **Óðinn** helps Sigurðr acquire the horse Grani, a descendent of **Óðinn**'s horse Sleipnir. Regin urges Sigurðr to kill the dragon Fafnir, recounting the downfall of the family of Hreiðmarr and reforging Sigmundr's sword into Gram. While roasting the heart of Fafnir and licking his thumb, Sigurðr becomes aware of Regin's treachery and kills him. He discovers and awakens Brynhildr and the two produce a child, Áslaugr. Sigurðr befriends Gunnar, is tricked into forgetting Brynhildr through a magic potion given to him by Guðrún's mother Grimhildr, and marries

<sup>42</sup> Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, *Völsunga saga*; and Byock, *Saga of the Völsungs*.

Guðrún. Rivalry between Guðrún and Brynhildr leads Sigurðr's brothers-in-law to murder him. Brynhildr dies alongside Sigurðr, while Guðrún goes on to marry Atli, who eventually causes the death of her brothers Gunnar and Högni. Guðrún avenges her brothers through murdering and cooking her sons by Atli and subsequently marries Jonakr, with whom she has further sons. When Svanhildr, daughter of Guðrún and Sigurðr, becomes the source of conflict between King Jormunrekkr and his son Randver, she is trampled to death by horses. Guðrún urges her sons Hamdir, Sqrli, and Erp to avenge their half-sister, and their deaths are recounted at the close of the saga.

## Analysis

In addressing the kinds of questions literate scholars tend to ask of the works they study, Foley writes

the presupposition that the work under discussion is static is the operating assumption, the ultimate tAgora bottom line. Someone constructed the thing, felt it had reached final form, and then made it available (under applicable rules, of course) as a fixed, immutable object for us to own (Owning versus Sharing) and then to interpret as we wish. Our interpretations will always vary, perhaps radically, but artifacts supported in the tAgora will not and cannot. And since we understand the work as contained wholly in the artifact, the work seems just as static as the object. Nothing curious or suspicious here; just business as usual in the tAgora. Now for the other side of the coin.<sup>43</sup>

Foley uses internet experience to help problematize the assumptions of stasis that, he argues, dominate the mind of a person trained in a culture that relies predominantly on texts. Medievalists have been more sympathetic than many modernists to approaches that would explore "the other side of the coin" alluded to by Foley above, since often the works medievalists study are ones that exist in a series of manuscript realizations that together can suggest a series of iterations. Often, medievalists have tended to view such evidence as a sequence of static texts rather than as contour lines in an emerging topographical map of the reception, repossessing, and repurposing of ideas occurring in what was essentially an oAgora managed or supplemented by writing. Working from the homology of the eAgora, the scholar following Foley is invited to see these variations in a rich and mutually contradictory array of extant works as various "pathways" through an imaginative topography, differing realizations of the potential of the story, shaped by the purposes and background knowledge of the people who wrote them down. Some trails through the "story hoard" will be direct and well-trodden, some circuitous and obscure. Foley's use of the oAgora/eAgora homology decentres the notion of a "correct version" implicit in tAgora thinking.

As Foley shows, textual thinking involves notions of completeness and stability, and in that mindset scholars have sought to find out what is *the* Sigurðr story. The *Poetic Edda* has tended to fare the best in such exercises, although scholars have also examined each of its poems in isolation and posited which are "earlier," "later," "jumbled," etc. The *Prose Edda* account and the *Völsunga saga* have been seen as

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<sup>43</sup> Foley, *Oral Tradition and the Internet*, 128.

somewhat less satisfactory, perhaps because they seem dependent on the seemingly most ancient poems of the *Poetic Edda*. Other works, like *Norna Gestis þátttr* or *Ragnars saga Loðbrókar*, have been discounted as “late” and therefore of less intrinsic interest. Material manifestations of the story have been left mostly to art historians to discuss. Briefer uses of the Sigurðr story—like those of the *Sturlunga saga*, *Háttatal*, and *Leiðarvísir* accounts discussed above—have been labelled “stray references,” and accorded little importance.

In the oAgora/eAgora homology, in contrast, the point of interest of the catalogue above becomes not so much which work or details came first and when, but rather what *pathways* users have taken over time through the array of details encompassed by the overarching Sigurðr story. Website analytics permit a manager to see which pages on a site have been visited most, and for precisely how long. They also let the manager see the web addresses for the sites each user visited immediately before coming to the website and immediately after leaving. This data affords a sense of the traffic through the site. Thinking of the eAgora/oAgora homology, we can explore the pathways “through” the Sigurðr story, as we can surmise these from the ways the story is incorporated into broader texts or manuscripts or deployed artistically. In so doing, we can notice that certain pathways, eight of which I describe below, arise as particularly prominent. In this case, I exercise my tAgora option of ordering these in a way I see best in terms of my argument, but I invite readers to proceed through them in any order.

### I. Male Heroes



Figure 5. Sigurðr slaying Fafnir. Hylestad portal. Photo by Thomas A. DuBois.

Of Sigurðr, the compiler of *Völsunga saga* writes:

Ok þa er talðir eru allir inir stærstu kappar ok inir ágæztu hQfðingjar; þá mun hann jafnan fremstr talðr, ok hans nafn gengr í öllum tungum fyrir norðan Grikklands haf, ok svá mun vera meðan verölden stendr.<sup>44</sup>

(When tallying up all the greatest champions and most famous noblemen, he will be counted the foremost,

and his name is familiar in all the languages north of the Mediterranean and shall remain so for as long as the world stands.)

Similar pronouncements are included in *Grípisspá*, *Norna Gestis þátttr*, and various poems of the *Poetic Edda*. Sigurðr, and by extension, his family, his friends, and his ene-

44 Finch, *Saga of the Volsungs*, 41.

mies are all superlative, larger than life, and they share a fame that was unrivalled in the Norse world and that endured for many, many centuries—indeed, down to today. Part of this fame has to do with details of battle and invincibility, but part also seems to derive from Sigurðr's (or Sigemund's or Ragnarr's) killing of a fierce dragon/serpent. The figure of the dragon may intertwine with associations of either **Óðinn** or **Christ** (see below), but it was also in and of itself an exciting and memorable narrative detail that an audience could enjoy: it moved the narrative into the realm of the marvellous, mighty, and memorable, a place where great men performed great deeds.

A product of this unrivalled fame is the remarkable way in which Sigurðr and his wider family and interactants become associated with other greats of medieval history. Gundaharius of the Burgundians (d. 437), Attila the Hun (d. 453), Ermenrichus of the Goths (d. 375), Theoderic the Great (d. 526), the legendary Ragnarr Loðbrokkr and Starkaðr, the English kings Athelstan, Ælla, Edmund, and Knud (Canute), and the Norwegian kings Haraldr Fairhair, Eiríkr Bloodaxe, and Hákon the Good are all drawn into the narrative, as contemporaries, predecessors, or successors of Sigurðr. Where in the eAgora association becomes expressed invisibly through surfer pathways or more visibly through user comments, blog posts, or embedded links, in the oAgora, association becomes expressed often through narrative inclusion and asserted lines of **kinship**. It is not surprising that numerous men of later times—including many kings—bore the name of Sigurðr, or that the name of Guðrún enjoyed similar popularity among women.

## 2. Female Heroes: Daughters, Lovers, Mothers, Sisters, Wives, and Woman Warriors

If the Sigurðr story is a narration of male heroic prowess, it also displays a striking degree of attention to its female characters, their feelings and experiences. The catalogue above hardly does justice to characters like Guðrún, Brynhildr, Signý, Oddrún, Áslaugr, and others. It is noteworthy that, in the *Poetic Edda*, for instance, Sigurðr disappears entirely from the "Sigurðr story" part-way through the compilation, while Guðrún figures as the character who links the various poems of the last portion of the collection together, tying them into the parallel explorations of **male heroism, betrayal, and lineage**. Female characters play central roles in many of the collection's poems as they do in narratives of many of the texts included in the above catalogue, enacting devotion, carrying out or inciting vengeance, and vying with each other in grimness, honour, and determination.

## 3. Betrayal

While men and women differ in their actions in the Sigurðr story, they are united in their frequent experience of betrayal, a theme that Torfi Tulinius views as central to *Vǫlsunga saga*, if not of the broader Sigurðr story.<sup>45</sup> Sigi is murdered by his envious brothers-in-law. Signý watches her husband capture and torture her brothers soon after their wedding. Hreiðmarr receives treasure and a ring infected with a deadly curse in compensation for his son's death. Sigurðr learns that his foster father is

<sup>45</sup> Tulinius, *Matter of the North*.



Figure 6. Sigurðr slays Regin. Hylestad Portal. Photo by Thomas A. DuBois.

planning to murder him and beheads him himself. Brynhildr witnesses her true love forget her very existence. Guðrún watches her brothers plot and carry out the murder of her husband. Atli eats the flesh of his murdered sons, served to him by his wife. Jormunrekkr watches his son steal his girlfriend and murders them both in revenge. Áslaugr/Kráka watches her adoptive parents murder her protector and disguise her as ugly. Ælla gives land as a peace offering that becomes the beachhead for an invasion. There is little kindness in the harsh world of the Sigurðr story, though there is great heroism and much tragedy and sorrow.

#### 4. Óðinn

In his introduction to his edition and translation of *Völsunga saga*, R. G. Finch writes: “Odin is clearly extraneous.”<sup>46</sup> His point may be correct if we are referring to some posited original text composed by a single mind in a single place. But it would be absurd to posit that Óðinn is not essential in the *Völsunga saga* version of the Sigurðr story, where Óðinn shows up time and time again as a mysterious, meddling, and managing presence. Nor does it make sense to discount Óðinn in the *Poetic Edda*, where poems of Óðinn and the other gods gradually give way to the heroic poems of the final part of the collection.<sup>47</sup> Over and over again Óðinn appears in the various works catalogued above, collecting men for his Valhalla and overseeing the fortunes of his spiritual or even genetic followers.

#### 5. Christ

If, of course, seeking an afterlife with **Óðinn** was viewed as popular among pagans, the Christian of later centuries sought with equal fervour an afterlife with Christ. Christian imagery or ideas recur in many items of the Sigurðr story catalogue included above, just as surely as do imagery and ideas of **Óðinn**. Many of the visual images left to us appear on Christian monuments, particularly ones from the British Isles, but also ones in Norway and Sweden. Gestr ends his long and storied life with a peaceful baptism. For the Icelandic Nikulás, visiting sites associated with the Sigurðr story appeared fully appropriate for a man on pilgrimage to Rome.

<sup>46</sup> Finch, *Saga of the Volsungs*, xxx.

<sup>47</sup> Kaplan, *Thou Fearful Guest*.



Figure 7. Gunnar plays the harp in the snake pit. Hylestad Portal. Photo by Thomas A. DuBois.

### 6. Kinship, Kingship, and Lineage

In a world in which kinship was the basis of society, where reciting one’s parentage was a precondition of speaking at assemblies, the Sigurðr story explores with endless fascination the question of lineages, of family lines, and of fates

that carry on from generation to generation. The notion of a Vǫlsungr genealogy organizes and motivates both the collection of poems in the *Poetic Edda* and their prose rendering in *Vǫlsunga saga*. The ranks of the Vǫlsungar swell through a proliferation of the sons of Sigmundur, with the relatively distinct stories of Helgi, Sinfjǫtli, and Sigurðr each anchored to the broader Sigurðr story through details of kinship. Rival or intersecting lineages—that of the sons and daughters of Hreiðmarr, as well as the sons and daughters of Gjúki and of Buðli—are followed across generations as families rise in fortune and fall. Through the figure of Áslaugr, the Sigurðr lineage continues into later generations, as detailed in *Ragnars saga Loðbrókar* and the *Páttr af Ragnars sonum*. *Ragnars saga Loðbrókar* and Snorri’s *Prose Edda* account make it plain that the Vǫlsungar descended directly from Óðinn and that the greatest of the Vǫlsungar—Sigurðr the dragon slayer—became, through his daughter Áslaugr, the great-great-grandfather of Haraldr Fairhair and, thereby, ancestor of the great dynasty of Norwegian kings.<sup>48</sup> In other Norse texts, the Danish king Hǫrða-Knútr is also said to be the grandson of Ragnar’s son Sigurðr ormr í auga, and thereby the great-great-grandson of Sigurðr.<sup>49</sup> Icelanders, too, participated in such lineage-finding: the Icelandic author of the *Íslendingabók*, Ari Þorgilsson, also claimed to be related to the Ragnarr lineage. His royal Swedish ancestor Ingjaldr was purportedly the son of the daughter of Sigurðr ormr í auga, making Ingjaldr also the great-great-grandson of Sigurðr.<sup>50</sup>

### 7. Geography

In a world where places were visited mostly through storytelling and only occasionally through actual physical experience, the Sigurðr story abounds in far-off settings, great kingdoms, and foreign courts. In some accounts, travel by water is described. Mostly, however, the abundant travel of heroes and heroines unfolds over land, across continental Europe, with locations specified in the Rhineland, Swedish Gautland, Norway,

48 Finlay, “Chronology, Genealogy, and Conversion,” 49.

49 Rowe, *Development of Flateyjarbók*, 2.

50 Finlay, “Chronology, Genealogy, and Conversion,” 48.

Denmark, England, Switzerland, and occasionally Italy. In the more German-focused *Thidreks saga*, too, continental realms are specified, including various parts of modern-day Germany, Spain, Poland, and the kingdom of the Carolingian Franks. The *Þáttr af Ragnars sonum* appears in *Hauksbók*, where it accompanies continental geographic treatises. As in the Prologue to Snorri's *Prose Edda*, the *Vǫlsunga rímur* verses link the Sigurðr story and the coming of the Æsir to the history of Troy and the migration of that city's aristocrats to the north of Europe. For the Icelandic pilgrim Nikulás of *Leiðarvísir*, part of the interest in travelling across Europe en route to Rome and the Holy Land was to glimpse places of importance in the Sigurðr story.

### 8. Poets and Poems

The texts catalogued above frequently call attention to the provenance of poems or accounts. The *Beowulf*-narrator assures the audience that no one can have known the deeds of Sigemund other than his nephew Fitela and that the songs performed must therefore derive directly from that source. In *Norna Gest's þáttr*, Norna Gestr performs old poems of the Sigurðr story unknown by others and presumably deriving from the very court of Sigurðr, where Gestr lived and worked long in the past. Both *Krákumál* and *Eiríksmál* adopt a first-person narrator to tie the words of the poems unambiguously with the heroic figures described in their lines. Snorri's *Háttatal* tells of a poet "Veili" (Porvaldr veili) who composes a Sigurðr poem while stranded on a skerry,<sup>51</sup> and his *Prose Edda* account of the Sigurðr story notes that "flest skáld" (most poets) of note have composed works based on the story.<sup>52</sup> He closes his account by quoting a piece of a poem composed by Bragi the Old, recounting the deaths of Guðrún's last sons, based on a shield which Bragi is said to have received from Ragnarr Loðbrók, son-in-law of Sigurðr. Such references draw poets and poetry into the heroic *lineage* and associations of the Sigurðr story, increasing its Óðinnic qualities while reminding audiences that poetry represents a powerful link between the heroic past and the present, a notion abundantly exploited by Christian skaldic poets and Icelandic literati of later times, as Guðrún Nordal has noted.<sup>53</sup>

## Conclusions

The power of looking at the narratives and images above as pathways through a story-board is that it avoids the impulse to flatten and unite these varied materials into a single narrative in the manner characteristic of the tAgora. In the worldview of the tAgora, a text is composed and completed. In contrast, by imagining the relationship between these works as independent visits of varying duration to a Sigurðr website, we can allow ourselves to take more interest in the "user agendas" of the visits. Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál* reflects a writer who wants to catalogue useful poetic terms for gold

51 Snorri Sturlson, *Háttatal*, chap. 35.

52 Snorri Sturlson, *Skáldskaparmál* 1, 50.

53 Nordal, *Tools of Literacy*.

and school would-be poets on the rich mythological backgrounds of many epithets and kennings. Since Sigurðr and his contemporaries are referenced in many such terms, it makes sense for him to retell a version of the Sigurðr story. On the other hand, the abbot Nikulás wants to explain to his readers the paths and sites of interest awaiting the intrepid pilgrim. These two writers' user agendas differ and entail visits of differing length to the Sigurðr site, but neither is more "right" than the other—they make use of the site as they see fit.

In the intellectual system of the eAgora, we accept that some sites, such as the Sigurðr site, prove more popular than others. Part of that prominence means that the site becomes linked to other sites in the medieval mind: the site for stave churches, the site for male and female heroic actions, the sites for conflicts of duty and honour and betrayal, the site for the Norwegian nobility, the site for **Óðinn** and for **Christ**, and so on. At the same time, its *lack* of links to other sites can prove telling: few, if any, links seem to connect the site to the god Thor, or to other animals of importance outside of the aristocratic/Óðinnic sphere, for example dogs, cattle, sheep, sea mammals.<sup>54</sup> Female characters are important in the story, but few links tie these in any way to the female saints or the Virgin Mary, despite the Christian links described above. Foley's eAgora/oAgora homology lets us notice both linkages and disconnections, and appreciate the Sigurðr story not as a single narrative but as a narrative space, traversed and explored in different ways over the course of many centuries, down to the present.

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54 DuBois, "Diet and Deities."

