

Modern Language Association

On the Original Form of the Legend of Sigfrid

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Source: *PMLA*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (1897), pp. 461-474

Published by: Modern Language Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/456343>

Accessed: 16/10/2009 07:30

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PUBLICATIONS
OF THE
MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA,
1897.

VOL. XII, 4.

NEW SERIES, VOL. V, 4.

XI.—ON THE ORIGINAL FORM OF THE LEGEND
OF SIGFRID.

To the researches of Lachmann and Müllenhoff we owe the knowledge that the *Nibelungensaga* which appears in the *Nibelungenlied* as an organic and an artistic unity is in reality a composition of two elements: of the Sigfridsaga and the legend of the Burgundians. While it is a well established fact that the latter saga preserved certain reminiscences of the historical annihilation of the Burgundians by Attila in 437, no account can be found in history which might, in a like manner, explain the origin of the Sigfridsaga. It was Lachmann who, for this reason, first advanced the opinion that the legend of Sigfrid was of mythological origin, and this mythological explanation of our legend is, in some form or other, now held by most scholars.

I wish to state at once that I do not share the belief in an original Sigfrid myth, which is said to embody the old Baldr-myth, according to Lachmann, and which is interpreted by others as an allegorical representation of the victory of spring over winter, or of similar natural phenomena. Aside from the fact that the allegory is the product of later artistic poetry, the product of times when the creative power of poetry is on

the decline, there is in Germanic mythology not the slightest trace of a god or a demigod Sigfrid, and the mythological interpretation of the legend of Sigfrid is based entirely on the *Eddas* and other Old Norse versions of our legend.

As long as it remained undisputed that we possessed in these Norse sources a tradition of our legend much older and authentic than that preserved in the *Nibelungenlied* and the *Seufridlied* the soundness of the mythological interpretation could not easily be attacked, for in the older *Edda* and in the *Völsungasaga* we are told that Sigfrid was a descendant of Odin, and that Brynhild was a Valkyrie whom he had rescued by riding through a wall of flames from a deathly sleep into which she had been thrown by Odin. Was this not a most satisfactory explanation of the real relations between Sigfrid and Brynhild, relations which the German *Nibelungenlied* left entirely unexplained? Moreover, the authenticity of the Norse version of the *Nibelungensaga* received further support by the fact that, in the account of the legend of the Burgundians, the historical truth seemed to be preserved far more faithfully than in the *Nibelungenlied*. While in the latter poem Kriemhild is killed by Hildebrand, Attila surviving the final catastrophe, in the Norse version Kriemhild (or Gudrun as she is called there) kills Attila, thus corresponding closely with the account of Attila's death given by Jordanis, according to which Attila died at his wedding night by the side of a woman named Ildico. The followers of the mythological interpretation consequentially are arguing that, owing to the greater authenticity of the Norse version in the case of Attila's death, a similar authenticity of these versions had necessarily to be assumed also in the case of the legend of Sigfrid, and a critical discussion of the latter could be carried on only upon the basis of the Norse versions.

The general belief in this dogma was, however, severely shaken by the publication of Sophus Bugge's famous *Studien über die Entstehung der nordischen Götter- und Heldensage*. Though, altogether too hasty in its conclusions, this book

nevertheless started a more critical investigation of Old Norse mythology with the most beneficial results to this science. While Jacob Grimm and his followers had accepted the mythological accounts in the *Eddas* as the most authentic sources of German mythology, it has now become one of the first principles in the scientific discussion of mythological problems, to regard with utmost distrust in the Norse accounts that which cannot be verified by German sources or by Latin or Greek writers. There is no doubt that a number of original German myths underwent, in the poetry of the skalds, such essential changes as to impress on them the stamp of pure Norse productions. A most striking example of this fact is furnished by the myth of Wodan. Originally being an attribute of the great god Tivaz, and known and worshipped only by northgermanic tribes, Wodan gradually becomes the central figure of the Old Norse Olympus, and a number of qualities and accomplishments are attributed to him of which the old German war-god never dreamed. It is my opinion that the legend of Sigfrid underwent a similar change in the poetry of the skalds, and it will be one of the objects of this paper to show how this change, probably under the influence of the myth of Wodan, gradually took place.

At once the question arises, which was the original form of the legend that was transformed by the skalds? I believe it is contained in the oldest account of the legend of Sigfrid which we possess, and which, though generally known, has strangely enough not yet been made the starting point for the critical investigation of our saga. I mean the account in *Beowulf*, v. 885 ff. (Heyne-Socin):

Sigemunde gesprung
 äfter deað-däge dôm unlýtél,
 syððan wíges heard wýrm ácwealde,
 hordes hyrde; hê under hârne stân,
 äðelínges bearn, âna genêðde
 frêcne dæde; ne wás him Fitela mid.
 Hwæðre him gesælde þát þát swurd þurhwôd
 wrätlicne wýrm, þát hit on wealle ätstôd,

dryhtlic iren; draca morðre swealt.
 Häfde áglæca elne gegongen,
 þát hé beáh-hordes brúcan mōste
 selfes dōme: sæ-bát gehlōd,
 bār on bearm scipes beorhte frätwa,
 Wālses eafera; wýrm hát gemealt.
 Sê wás wreccena wide mærost
 ofer wer-beóde, wigendra hleo
 ellen-dædum: hé þás áron þáh.

All commentators of *Beowulf* agree that Sigfrid and not Sigmund is the hero of whom this passage speaks. We hear that this hero gained no little glory (*dóm unlytél*) for killing the great dragon, the keeper of the hord (*hordes hyrde*). He performed this deed alone, under the grey stone (*under hárne stán*), stabbing the dragon with his sword so that the latter stood in the wall. Having thus gained the hord, the son of Walis (*Wælses eafera*) loads it on a vessel (*sæ-bát gehlōd*). The dragon melts in the heat (*wýrm hát gemealt*). No hero in the wide world can equal him in fame.

The account of our legend agrees in its essential features with the story told in the *Lied vom hürnen Seyfrid*, a poem dating in its oldest parts back to the twelfth century, though we have it only in a print of the sixteenth century. According to this song the dragon too "ist auf einem stein gesessen," he is killed with a special sword, the *dryhtlic iren* of the *Beowulf*, and he begins to melt just as in *Beowulf*, "erst ward das horen weychen, das es ab von im randt."

It is instructive to see how this simple account, the narrative of the great deed of the hero, was changed in the *Edda*. Neither in the Anglo-Saxon version of our legend nor in the German poem can we detect the slightest trace of mythology. To introduce the mythological element was reserved for the Norse writers. In the first place we are treated to a history of the treasure which is guarded by the dragon. Accordingly we are told how Loki, the devil of Norse mythology, upon the command of Wodan and Hönir, obtained the treasure by his cunning from a pike, or rather a dwarf, who pronounces a

curse upon the gold which he was forced to give up. Like the fateful fork in Müllner's tragedy, *Die verhängnisvolle Gabel*, the treasure immediately works mischief on its possessor. Hreidmar, who obtained it first from the gods, is killed by his son, Fafnir, who, in the form of a dragon, lies upon the gold on the *Gnitaheide*, crawling down only occasionally when he needs a drink of water.

It will be seen that the dragon, too, has undergone a change in this version of our legend. He is no longer the monster of the *Beowulf* or the later *Seyfridlied*, the awe-inspiring creation of popular imagination. He has a father who, by his pronounced talent for business, obtained the treasure from the gods; he has a brother by the name of Regin who inherited the smartness of the family, and later on advises Sigfrid to kill Fafnir: in fact Fafnir is no longer a dragon at all. Evolution has worked wonders with him. He looks like a dragon, but he talks like a gentleman. When Sigfrid has stabbed him through the heart, he says (Hildebrand, p. 193):

Sveinn ok sveinn!
 hverjum ertu sveini um borinn?
 hverra ertu manna mögr?
 er þú á Fáfni rautt
 þínn inn frána mæki,
 stöndumk til hiarta hiðrr.

This Jordan translates rather freely:

Ha Bengel, Bursche, von welchem Buben
 Aus böser Sippschaft bist du geboren,
 Dass du dein blinkendes Messer im Blute
 Fafners röttest? Ich fühl es am Herzen.

But the exquisite drollery of the situation, reminding one of the speaking of Balaam's ass, would be preserved far better if the monster's words were rendered by the German slang-phrase:

Junge, Junge, du scheinst nicht von schlechten Eltern zu sein.

And as soon as he has cooled down somewhat he begins to prophecy to Sigfrid, his slayer, in the most good-natured manner imaginable. Is this the same dragon that filled the hearts of primitive times with awe and caused the bard in *Beowulf* to extol Sigfrid for having slain him?

But we notice also a most remarkable change in Sigfrid. The *Edda* introduces him with a dialogue which he has with his uncle Gripir, and in which the latter, in the form of a prophecy, sketches a program for the future life of his nephew. I shall have to speak of this prophetic uncle later on, and will, therefore, now content myself with the remark that the orthodox believers in the mythological interpretation of our saga reject this poem as a later fabrication. Still Sigfrid is bound to carry out in his life the prophecies of his uncle. The first thing he needs is a good horse, and he obtains it from the stud of Hjalprek (der *Hilfreiche*), the father of his stepfather. It will be remembered that Wodan, too, possessed in Sleipnir a most remarkable horse of eight legs, and in the *Völsunga-saga*, which is chiefly a prose transcript of the *Edda*-poems, we are told that Sigfrid's horse, 'Grani,' was the offspring of Wodan's Sleipnir. At Hjalprek's stock-farm Sigfrid meets Regin (Rathgeber), the brother of Fafnir, the dragon, who tells him the story of the treasure, and advises him to kill Fafnir. Sigfrid, who knows from his uncle that this task is before him, goes with Regin to the Gnitahede, finds the trace which the dragon leaves when he crawls to the water, digs a ditch and waits in it for the dragon. As soon as the latter becomes thirsty and, creeping to the water, reaches the ditch, Sigfrid from below stabs him to the heart. I believe that killing a dragon is always a difficult undertaking, whatever method one may employ in order to accomplish it. But in comparing the old account in *Beowulf* with the narrative in the *Edda* it seems to me that it is far more hero-like to meet the monster, as Sigfrid does in *Beowulf*, face to face, and to stab him, so that the sword running through his body nails him, as it were, against the rocky wall, than to dig a

ditch, stab the unsuspecting beast cowardly from below, and jump out of the safe hiding-place when all danger is over. I need not say which of the two accounts I consider the older.

But a closer inspection of the *Edda*-poem, which contains the story of Sigfrid's fight with the dragon, reveals the fact that the object of the poem is not so much to describe this famous fight, as to give the dragon a chance of prophesying to Sigfrid. Indeed, this poem contains two prophecies. For as soon as the dragon is dead, Regin, his brother, appears on the scene and demands a share of the treasure. He tells Sigfrid to roast the heart of Fafnir, while he, Regin, takes a nap. Sigfrid faithfully obeys his command, and, while testing the meat, he burns his finger. In order to cool it he puts his finger in his mouth and suddenly, by getting some of Fafnir's heart-blood on his tongue, he understands, like Wodan, the language of the birds in the bushes around him. Immediately these good birds begin to advise Sigfrid and to predict his future. I do not deny the poetic beauty of this scene, especially when I remember the rapturous music by which it is accompanied in Wagner's opera. It is, moreover, an old Germanic legend that a few elect among men can understand the language of birds, and possibly the old legend of Sigfrid told of Sigfrid that he belonged to those few. But in the poem I am discussing the prophesying birds, which have their prototype in Odin's ravens, doubtlessly were introduced by the pronounced fondness for prophecies, which is evinced throughout the entire *Edda*. I doubt whether there is another hero to be found who has his fortune told as often as Sigfrid has. The Sigfrid of the *Edda* is no longer the impetuous, self-confident naïve youth of the *Beowulf* and the *Segfridlied*, bent on adventures, but a precocious boy, "sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought."

The question arises, can we show whence this fondness of the prophetic element in our poems originates? It will be remembered that it was during the time of the Vikings, at the courts of their princes, when the skalds with poetic

imagination created the Walhalla and the entire mythological heaven which we find in the *Eddas*, and which for a long time was taken for the true Germanic Olympus. It was here that Wodan, the old wind and war-god, developed into a god of wisdom, prophecy and poetry. We are still in a position to observe this process of evolution in a number of poems of the older *Edda*. Thus we are told in the *Vǫluspǫ* and in the *Sigrdrífumǫl* that Wodan obtained his wisdom from Mimir, and in the *Hávamǫl* he himself relates how he came into the possession of the runic charms. When Baldr is troubled with bad dreams, and Wodan and the rest of the gods are at a loss about their meaning, then Wodan saddles his horse, rides down to hell, and under an assumed name asks the *Vǫlva*, a giantess, to interpret Baldr's dreams and predict his future. It seems to me beyond doubt that these poems, like the latter, became the model for the prophetic portions in the songs which treat of the legend of Sigfrid. I have already mentioned Gripir, the prophetic uncle of Sigfrid, who, at the beginning of Sigfrid's career, predicts the entire future of his nephew. The poem in which he does this is usually interpreted by the commentators as a versified table of contents of the entire cycle of the Sigfrid-poems. This interpretation is, in my opinion, entirely wrong, for in language and style this poem corresponds closely to the poem mentioned before in which Wodan seeks the prophetic information of the *Vǫlva*.

So close is the similarity of these poems that in certain portions they agree almost verbally :

þegiattu vǫlva!
þik vil ek fregna.

Wodan addresses the *Vǫlva* three times.

Segðu gegn konungr!
Segðu ítr konungr!
Segðu mér, ef þú veizt!

repeats Sigfrid when questioning Gripir.

A time which developed the myth of Wodan, the god of prophecy and wisdom, would naturally revel in a poetic style, filled with oracular and didactic elements. Hence the *Vǫluspá*, the greatest of the oracular poems, a prophecy concerning the beginning and the end of the world, placed in the mouth of a *Vǫlva*, i. e., one of the mysterious women who made a business of fortune-telling. Hence, also the great mass of didactic poetry containing words of wisdom and advise. We have a number of poems in which Wodan himself utters such words of wisdom, and as soon as Sigfrid has awakened Sigdrífa, she begins at once to give him advice, similar to that which Wodan is so fond of giving gratuitously.

Summing up what I have said thus far, my theory concerning the history of the legend of Sigfrid in the old Norse version, after a careful and a repeated study of the sources, is as follows :

The original form of the legend of Sigfrid as we find it in *Beowulf*, and as it must have been known among the Anglo-Saxons during the sixth and seventh centuries, migrated during the time of the Vikings from England to Norway. Here it arrived at a time when the Wodan-myth was the chief subject of poetry, and when this myth was undergoing the process of formation which we may still observe in the poems of the *Eddas*. The *Sigfridsaga*, being originally the story of an extraordinary human hero, whose wonderful deeds were praised in the songs of many German nations, participated in the process of formation of the Wodan-myth. The attempt at a transformation of the original legend into a myth similar to the Wodan-myth, and under the influence of the latter, may still be observed in the Sigfrid-poems of the *Edda*.¹ Sigfrid possesses a horse sired by Wodan's famous Sleipnir, and like Wodan he carries a wonderful sword. As Wodan obtained his wisdom and prophetic gift from Mimir from other

¹I call attention here to the Bragimyth which seems to furnish another instance of the transformation by the skalds of a human hero into a divine being.

dwarfs and from his two ravens, so Sigfrid is instructed, advised and prophesied by his uncle Gripir, by Regin, the dwarf-shaped brother of Fafnir, whose name itself means Rathgeber ('adviser'), by Fafnir and by the magpies. Like Wodan he is finally initiated into the secrets of the runic-charms by Sigdrífa, the Valkyrie.

One of the most important laws of modern philology is the law of *Formübertragung* or analogy. A most decided case of such Formübertragung and assimilation we have, according to my opinion, in the case of the Sigfridsaga.¹ Accepting my point of view it will be the business of the critic to divest the Norse version of our legend of all its mythological embellishments and thus to establish as far as possible the original form of the saga.

I believe, moreover, that we are justified in performing this critical operation by a careful analysis of the *form* of the poems of the *Edda* that treat of the Sigfridsaga.

The great respect with which the poems of the *Edda* are treated as documents, especially valuable, of Germanic antiquity, is an inheritance of the eighteenth century. So great was the enthusiasm at their discovery that Klopstock introduced the Norse mythology into his poetry, and Herder, in a special essay, also advocated its substitution for Greek mythology. When, later on, the Romantics looked upon the folk-song as the unconscious poetic revelation of the Germanic folk-soul, the *Edda*-poems rose still more in the estimation of scholars. Men like Lachmann and the Grimms accepted them as folk-songs, and there is no doubt that Lachmann's "Liedertheorie," as well as his mythological interpretations of the legend of Sigfrid, gained no little support from the supposition, that in the *Edda*-poems there were preserved some of the old "Lieder," in the form of which the legend of Sigfrid was believed to have originally existed.

¹The change, which the original legend of Sigfrid underwent in the Norse versions, may well be compared to the change through the influence of chivalrous poetry of which the *Nibelungenlied* is the classic example.

Even at the present time this traditional view concerning the character of the *Edda*-poems is held in some shape or other by most scholars, and it will easily be seen how this view must necessarily influence the entire interpretation of the Sigfridsaga. For, if we really have in the Sigfrid-poems of the *Edda* the songs in which the legend was carried to the North, it necessarily follows that the entire contents of the songs, including the mythical embellishments, were also imported. I believe that the view I have referred to is only partially correct, and that it contains a prejudice which must be overcome. I propose to show that the very poems which have for their subject the original form of the Sigfridsaga, as I have tried to reestablish it, are the product of artificial meditation, composed with a distinct and conscious purpose. Even the perusal of a translation of these poems will convince the unprejudiced reader that the so-called Heldenlieder of the *Edda* must be divided into two groups: the poems written in the form of dialogue, and those composed in the style of epic narrative. Of course this difference in the style of the poems has not escaped the commentators, but, strange to say, it has never been made the subject of a closer investigation. In fact, only the opinion of Müllenhoff on this point is worth mentioning here. Being the most orthodox believer in the mythological origin of the Sigfridsaga and, being in consequence strongly convinced of the great age of the *Edda*-poems, he claims for both styles of poetry the descent from Indogermanic antiquity. Thus he says in his essay, "Die alte Dichtung von den Nibelungen," *Zeitschrift f. d. A.*, XXIII, 151: "zwei Formen der epischen Überlieferungen, prosaische Erzählung mit bedeutsamen Reden-Wechsel—oder Einzelreden—der handelnden Personen in poetischer Fassung und erzählende epische Lieder in vollständig durchgeführter strophischer Form finden wir im Norden neben einander im Gebrauch und keineswegs ist die Prosa der gemischten Form bloss eine Auflösung oder ein späterer Ersatz der gebundenen Rede." And in a passage in *Deutsche Altertumskunde*, v, 238,

he remarks, in speaking of one of the Wodan-poems: "Der Gedanke dies Wissen in einem Zweigespräch und Wettstreit darzustellen ist gewiss grossartig, er is auch besonders alterthümlich insofern er den didactischen Zweck der eristischen oder allgemeiner gesprochen, der katechetischen Poesie und damit ihren uralten Zusammenhang mit dem Gottesdienst und den religiösen Festfeiern noch aufs deutlichste zu erkennen gibt."

While it is true that we have in the *Rigveda* specimens of such didactic poetry in dialogue form, we have no evidence whatever for the existence in Indogermanic antiquity of epic poetry in this dialogue form. And it is entirely an arbitrary assumption on the part of Kögel when he claims the existence of such poetry in his recently published *Literaturgeschichte*. Besides, this assumption shows a gross misunderstanding of the nature of epic poetry.

The oldest attested form of the Germanic epic is the epic narrative in the ballad or song form, a classic example of which is furnished by the *Hildebrandslied*, which, though written down at about 800, is in form and contents much older, and certainly in regard to age dates back further than any one of the *Edda*-poems. Nothing can be more instructive than a comparison of the *Hildebrandslied* with those Sigfrid-poems of the *Edda* which are written in dialogue form. To be sure there is very little description in the former, the greater part of the poem is filled with the dialogue between Hildebrand and his son Hadubrand, but, after the true epic fashion, it is *action* which this song unrolls before us, and even the speeches of the dialogue contribute toward the *progress of the action*, bringing it to a final climax. Quite different from this is the construction of the *Edda*-poems. Here we find condensed in a short prose account what should have formed the very soul of the poem, i. e., *the action*, and the prose account is followed by a dialogue which, as I said before, contains good advice and prophecies, but very little of what we would expect in an epic poem. What

a splendid subject for a ballad in the style of the *Hildebrandslied* must Sigfrid's fight with the dragon have been! Still we can feel, from the short account in *Beowulf*, how the old bards must have delighted in its narration. And what has the old Norse version made of this greatest of Sigfrid's deeds?

It is quite evident, in my opinion, that the Sigfrid-poems, written in the dialogue form, are not ballads of the old Germanic type, but are the production of later artificial poetry. Their dialogue form is due to the intention of their author to convey to the hearers or readers his *interpretation* of the Sigfridsaga as a myth, embodying, besides, the abstract Christian idea of the curse connected with the possession of the gold. For this purpose the author selected the single chief facts and events of the old legend, and treated them in the described dialogue manner. In the *Gripisspó*, the first of these poems, a general synopsis of the contents of the Sigfridsaga, is given in the form of a prophecy; in the *Reginismól* we hear the story of the treasure before it came into the possession of the dragon; in the *Fáfnismól* the killing of the dragon is made the occasion for further prophecies, and in the *Sigrdrífumól*, after waking the Valkyrie from her sleep, Sigfrid is instructed in the wisdom of the runic charms. Then follows a great gap in the manuscript, but from the transcript in the *Völsungasaga* of the lost poems, we can conclude that at least one more of these dialogue-poems existed. The last of these poems is the *Hellbreið* of Brunhild, the proper close of the whole series, which is evidently the work of one author.

In examining the whole group of these poems, I have come to the conclusion that we have before us an attempt—though a very primitive one—at a dramatization of the old legend of Sigfrid, a dramatization undertaken by the same author for purposes indicated and discussed by me in this paper. Whether we have in this primitive dramatic form—the dialogue interspersed with prose-narration—the influence of old Germanic plays as still shown in the dialogue between summer and

winter, or whether this form developed from the didactic dialogue between teacher and pupil, frequently used in old Norse documents, it is difficult to decide. With the year 1000 Christianity was introduced in Iceland, and it is quite probable that the beginnings of the Medieval drama, which date back to this time, may have exercised their influence upon the dramatic poems of the *Edda*. I shall attempt to trace this influence in a future paper.¹

JULIUS GOEBEL.

¹ A full and detailed account of the results of my researches, of which I could give only a rough sketch in the present paper, I hope, soon, to submit in a larger work on the history of the legend of Sigfrid.