The Historical Context of Medieval Scandinavia

Who were the Vikings?

“Viking” is a term used to describe a certain class of marauding Scandinavian warrior from the eighth through the eleventh century. When discussing the entire culture of the Northern Germanic peoples of the early Middle Ages, however, and especially in terms of the languages and literatures of these peoples, it would be more accurate to use the term “Norse”. During the Middle Ages and beyond it therefore might be useful to speak of “German” peoples in middle Europe and of “Norse” peoples in Scandinavia and the North Atlantic. The mythologies of these peoples were very closely related, however; indeed, as we shall see, just as the West Germanic and North Germanic languages contain many clearly identifiably related elements of their common ancestral tongue, the mythologies of the medieval Germans and Norse contain a wealth of analogous features: This is nowhere more clear than in the epic literature of both cultures, which in part relate variations of the same ancient tale of a dragon slayer, a hero called “Sigurd” by the Norse and “Siegfried” by the Germans. The Viking World ultimately stretched in a wide arc from Constantinople in the southeast to Newfoundland in the northwest. In the Varangian Guard, the elite troops of the Byzantine emperor, eastern Vikings found honor, glory and riches; from their island homes in the icy north Atlantic, hardy western Norse settlers pushed to Greenland and from there to coastal Canada. Mostly Swedish Vikings, called “Rus”, founded trading posts and eventually cities in what would become Russia, while Vikings from Norway and especially Denmark conquered territory throughout Britain and Ireland, exacted tribute from the French king, and even took the English crown.

The Literary Context of Medieval Scandinavia
The settlement of Iceland played a particularly crucial role in the development of Norse literature and hence with the recording of Norse versions of ancient Germanic myths and legends, as well as with the development of a uniquely Icelandic Saga Tradition which blends old mythic elements with medieval Icelandic concerns and sensibilities. Scandinavian settlement of Iceland began in 870; according to Icelandic accounts, this exodus was largely fueled by Norwegians chafing under the centralization of authority in their homeland by King Harald Fairhair. By 930 the collection of relatively autonomous farmers in Iceland had established the Althing, or national assembly, a form of representative government that provided the island’s only real legislative and judicial authority until Iceland came under the direct sway of the Norwegian crown in the 1260s. The Althing embraced Christianity in 1000, but although paganism was discouraged in public, it certainly was practiced by some in private. Even well after the old beliefs were long dead, interest in Icelandic genealogy, the stories of old, and accounts of the ancient Norse heroes and gods (who were themselves often rendered as gifted humans) were extremely popular in Iceland, and since many godar (powerful farmers, a type of Chieftain, for want of a better term) sent sons to be trained as priests, it might well seem inevitable that Icelandic scribes and their patrons would take an interest in preserving the ancient oral tales in medieval written forms.

**The Sources of Norse Mythology**

Norse literature and the Saga tradition provide us with one of the most colorful, varied, and well documented treasure troves of mythic material from the Middle Ages. It is important to note from the onset, however, that the written material survives in manuscripts that were recorded long, long after the Age of Migration and well after the conversion to Christianity. It was within
the unique mythic and literary hothouse of Iceland, as unlikely as that place may seem to one unfamiliar with the Icelandic national obsession with heritage, that the Germanic myths reached their fullest flower and achieved their most lasting bloom.

Most, although not all, of the sources of Norse myth are Icelandic in origin. One of the most vital of these founts is Snorri Sturluson’s *Prose Edda*, which was written around 1220. Snorri was an extremely important politician, landholder, and poet, and was the scion of a very noteworthy Icelandic family. Snorri’s contributions to Iceland’s literary record have guaranteed him a poet’s immortality, but his more worldly concerns ended with his assassination in his own home in September of 1241. The *Prose Edda* comprises a handbook for poets, as it were, and is made up of four parts, the first of which is a prologue. The second part of the *Prose Edda* is *Gylfaginning*, or “the beguiling of Gylfi”, a tale wherein Gylfi, a king from Sweden, attempts to make his way to the home of the gods to question them; although Gylfi is fooled by the phantasm of a hall that the gods erect for his visit, the answers he gains provide a primer of sorts for a Norse poet of the Christian Age who needs details about the mythic past of his pagan ancestors. Snorri’s narrative technique is more than simply a clever plot device; it effectively places the author at a significant remove from the heathen content of the work. The third part of the *Prose Edda* is *Skaldskaparmal*, a sort of handbook of poetic phrases. The fourth part of the *Prose Edda* is *Hattatal*, a list of the various forms which made up what is called Skaldic verse, or Norse courtly poetry.

Another of the major sources of Norse myth is the *Elder Edda*, also called the *Poetic Edda*, which includes more than 30 poems and was committed to writing around 1270, although the content obviously reflects pagan mythic material of a much earlier date. The *Poetic Edda*
provides an overview of the Cosmology of the Norse mythological system, complete with descriptions of the Creation, of Yggdrasill the World Tree, and of Ragnarok, the apocalyptic Norse Doom of the Gods. In between the beginning and the end of Creation are the adventures of the gods, and the poems of the Poetic Edda describe several of these, including battles with the giants, who, as forces representing chaos, are harbingers of the great final battle yet to come. Hero myths are represented in the Poetic Edda by portions of two heroic cycles: three poems concern the hero Helgi and his wooing of the Valkyrie Sigrun, while several more recount episodes from the story of Sigurd the dragonslayer.

A number of medieval historical works are sources of Norse mythology, including Saxo Grammaticus’ Gesta Danorum, the work of Adam of Bremen as well as that of the Arab commentator Ibn Fadlan, and the Landnamabok, the Icelandic history of the settlement period. Finally, a number of the Icelandic Sagas, mostly from the 13th century, also provide us with gripping and fascinating mythic, legendary, and folkloric elements, many of which clearly have their roots in ancient Germanic beliefs. Saga (the plural is sogur) is a Norse word which refers to a type of prose narrative notable for its succinct, straightforward style; sagas seem very concerned with recording every available detail of a given story, and are famous for projecting an appearance of historical substance, whether or not the events of a given story can be verified; indeed, a long-standing critical debate has concerned how far sagas can be trusted as historical documents. The mythic material in sagas may include references to the Norse gods, allusions rich in heroic archetypes, and descriptions of supernatural powers, events, or creatures. There are a number of sagas concerned with the history of Norway and with the settlement of Iceland and beyond, as well as a set of heroic sagas that deal most explicitly with the adventures and quests of heroes.
The most famous and pertinent examples of the historical sagas include *Heimskringla*, which purports to be a history of the kings of Norway from the mists of time until 1177, as well as the *Islendinga sogur*, the “sagas of the Icelanders,” a specific set of about forty Icelandic prose literary works written about events in Iceland during the “Saga Age.” This age is roughly concurrent with what is often termed the “Viking Age,” and stretches from the time of the first Norse settlement of the island in the late ninth century AD until around the time of the conversion of Iceland to Christianity. The heroic tradition includes the *fornaldar sogur*, or the “legendary heroic sagas,” as well as various heroic episodes from other sagas. Heroic sagas often reflect epic Germanic concerns with genealogy and sometimes contain references to ancient mythic traditions; the *fornaldar sogur* are distinct from the *Islendinga sogur* in that the former purport to detail characters and adventures from periods well before the Settlement of Iceland. The most relevant heroic sagas discussed in this chapter include the *Saga of the Volsungs*, which contains the story of Sigurd the dragonslayer, and the *Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, which plays host to a horde of mythic elements, including a notable analogue to the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*.

**Dragons in the Medieval World**

Magical serpents, sometimes giant, often winged, usually wily, and always powerful, inhabit mythologies as disparate and distant as the Classical Chinese and the ancient Central American; Medieval Europe provided a fertile breeding ground for myths of dragons and their slayers, and the Germanic north in particular was a hotbed of such activity. Indeed, the allure of this theme was so popular that the Cappadocian Saint George was embraced as far away from his home as
England on the basis of his victory over a blood-thirsty drake, shunting aside many a home-grown contender for the office of patron saint. Saint George’s story, however, which evokes a Christian theme of the victory of conversion over idolatry, is best treated under the rubric of The Fighting Saint Hero, dozens of whom were likewise associated with struggles against demonic draconic foes. Moreover, the Mythology of the Middle Ages inherited a vast compendium of magical reptilian creatures of all sorts, from fabulous snakes to tremendous sea-serpents to winged flying dragons from a variety of classical sources that ranged from outright fables to geographical treatises. Many, many Medieval works, from travelogues to bestiaries, likewise reflected a wide assortment of such creatures.

The common image of a “typical” Medieval dragon is that of a reptilian creature, usually viciously clawed and magically armored, with great bat-like wings, a formidable tail, and fiery volcanic breath. Dragons were in general emblems of voracious gluttony and avarice in the Medieval world, as well as linked through Biblical allusion to Satan and to visions of fiery apocalypse. Indeed, such figurative relationships were even more widespread than a modern reader of the Bible might be prone to expect, due in part to the fact that quite a number of Medieval translations of Hebrew terms for Biblical monsters and creatures were rendered “dragon,” which led to concrete associations of the term, for example, with the sin of pride and thus with Satan, as well as with desert places and thus with desolation and destruction. In addition, dragons play roles in key episodes of various Medieval Welsh, English, and French texts of significant mythic importance, most notably in several Arthurian works, and the evolution of the dragons residing in these locales derives in some significant measure from Celtic folkloric traditions concurrent with and perhaps mutually influenced by their Germanic counterparts. The dragons which are denizens of Germanic Mythology, then, as well as a number
of their various magical serpentine cousins, may have represented a particularly potent and volatile breed descended from a combination of ancient indigenous oral sources, literary materials from the Classical records, Near and Middle Eastern traditions most notably transmitted through the Bible and related religious texts, and contemporary Medieval sources both learned and folkloric; of the last of these, various Celtic motifs might be thought to be of particular prominence.

References to dragons abound in Germanic literature, and may be found therein as early as the 8th century. The traditions of the dragon and of the Dragon-Slayer Hero were widespread throughout the northern world, and tales from these traditions abounded, especially in heroic material, surviving in such primary texts as the Old English Beowulf, the Old Norse Volsungasaga, and the Middle High German Nibelungenlied. Even quasi-historical accounts of dragons exist, however, as in the description of the year 793, in which the Vikings sacked the monastery at Lindisfarne, in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle; the record attributes fiery lights in the sky as evidence of airborne dragons, which are clearly thought to be harbingers of doom and cataclysmic destruction. It has been suggested that this association of fiery devastation, dragons, and death was buttressed by ancient pagan crematory rites, which might further reinforce the relationship among dragons, death in general, and barrows in particular. These myths and legends hearken back to very ancient tales and themes, some of which may be as old as the Germanic peoples themselves; this is not to suggest that the Medieval versions of these myths were not influenced by other traditions, however, and indeed, the very name dragon, from the Latin draco, indicates the classical origin of the word, which, like certain medieval images of winged serpents, seems to have been influenced by Roman versions. This classical root is thought to be derived from an ancient Indo-European term having to do with vision, which might
explain in part why such creatures are so often imbued with attributes such as super-acute eyesight, magical foresight, and a penchant for objects which glitter and sparkle.

Even the signature Old Norse term *dreki*, denoting the great dragon-prowed longships of the Viking Age, betrays elements of this heritage, and in the sagas the common term for flying serpents is *flugdreki*. Although *flugdreki* were fearsome and to be avoided, the figureheads of *dreki* seemed to impart a more sympathetic magic, ostensibly both protecting and imparting ferocity upon those who sailed with them. Interestingly, the most usual native Germanic names for members of this family of monsters do not suggest flying creatures, and indeed more often evoke a slithering, earth-bound form of great serpent-monster, commonly called *ormr* in Old Norse or *wyrm* in Old English, meaning “serpent” and cognate with the modern term “worm.” These names suggest that Germanic dragons represent an extremely ancient conception of the Great Serpent Monster born of earth and darkness that plays a crucial, and often antagonistic, role in many Creation Myths; indeed, the very serpent in the Garden of Eden might well have flowed from a similar mythic well-spring. The images evoked by these terms are consistent with the greatest dragons of the Germanic Heroic Myths. Indeed, both Sigurd and Beowulf defeat enemies that crawl upon or live within the earth, and furthermore, Sigurd’s very attack upon Fafnir is predicated upon the assumptions that Fafnir’s heavy body will cross over the ditch wherein the hero lies in wait, and that the great weight bearing down upon the hero’s sword will do much of the work for him. The compound *linnormr* in Old Norse, sometimes shortened to *linnr*, meant a marvelous, magical serpent and has survived in Modern German *lindwurm*, meaning “dragon.”
It is interesting to note that the tension in Northern Mythology between the dragon as protective totem and the dragon as emblem of destruction is played out in many Scandinavian stave-churches, which are ornamented with curving figures of dragons much akin to those on the dreki of old. Such figures also appear on various rune-stones and monumental slabs throughout the North Atlantic Viking world. Indeed, it is notable that even the most evil and ferocious of dragons could impart power to and protective charms upon those who properly harnessed their magic, as both Sigurd and Siegfried found to their profit. Some Norse descriptions of dragons suggest that dragons are hatched and reared rather like fledgling birds, while others, notably those of Fafnir, make it clear that particularly evil, powerful, and acquisitive men may transform into such monsters, illustrating again the vast currency of shape-shifting in Norse Mythology.

Greed is the catalyst for Fafnir’s transformation, of course, and while hardly limited to Germanic dragon-lore, the themes of dragon-gold, the lust such treasure incites, and the curses associated with such hoards all hold a special place in the Norse mythic imagination. The dragon in Beowulf is the jealous guardian of an ancient burial mound filled with treasure, and this association seems to be more than simply literary: The great Sutton Hoo ship burial, which is often cited for the material analogues it provides to Beowulf’s narrative details, actually contains a shield fitting worked into the image of a dragon with huge, dagger-like teeth, folded wings swept back along its narrowing body, and a forked tail. Presumably this dragon was intended to protect the bearer of the shield on his journey to the next world, and dragons do seem to have been associated in the northern imagination with death, the afterlife, and crematory and burial rites.

In addition to Fafnir of the Sigurd cycle and the great dragon of Beowulf, the Germanic tradition provides a number of other great serpent-monsters, including Jormungandr the Midgard Serpent, which is dragon-like in many respects and which also might be termed the mother of all
Germanic sea-monsters; similar creatures also appear as *nicors*, in, for example, *Beowulf*, whose cousins are called *nykrs*, or “water-trolls,” in Old Norse. Many mythologies relate such creatures with miraculous fluids and with boundaries between order and chaos: While the blood of Fafnir, to cite an obvious example, is illustrative of the former association, the Midgard Serpent is an excellent example of the frontier-genre serpent. Moreover, Germanic concepts of monstrous sea-creatures are sometimes rooted in such distant existing animals as crocodiles and hippopotami, which were legendary in the far north and thus ripe for mythical appropriation. Aside from Fafnir and Jormungandr, perhaps the most notable named dragon in the Norse tradition is *Nidhoggr*, the monster which gnaws upon the root of the world tree and which is associated with death, destruction, and visions of eternal punishment. If Fafnir provides the great Germanic example of how a man may be transformed by his very greed, and if the dragon in *Beowulf* helps to clarify how this greed is associated with the burial mound, and hence with death, it is in the figure of *Nidhoggr* that these folkloric and mythic strands from epic and saga literature are woven together into the very cosmos of Norse mythology.

*Grimnismal* and *Gylfaginning* agree that *Nidhoggr*, “Hostile-Striker,” is one, presumably the greatest, of the vile serpents which lurk in the darkness far underground and gnaw upon the root of the World Tree; it is Snorri who informs us the messages passed between this worm and the great eagle in the canopy of the tree are insults, although we may well have assumed so. Although this role clearly identifies Nidhoggr as a destructive force which attacks the very root of all life, the seeress in *Voluspa* offers a more chilling description of this great dragon which clearly associates Nidhoggr with death, destruction, and the grave: As the doom of the world falls, Nidhoggr sucks the blood of corpses, feeding most especially upon oath-breakers, murderers, and adulterers. Then, in the very closing passage of the seeress’s dark and dismal
revelation of the end of the time of the gods, after the earth has reemerged from the cataclysm of Ragnarok, after gods and men have been reborn, just as the newly reemergent sun shines on a verdant and fertile new world, the shadow of death casts a pall over this resurgent life: Nidhogg, his wings laden with the corpses of the dead, flies from his lair in the bowels of the earth and shockingly reasserts the presence and the power of death even in the burgeoning moment when new life has burst forth.

**The Dragon-Slayer as Mythic Hero**

Dragon-Slayers abound in world mythology, and Classical and biblical texts bequeathed many such exemplars to the poets and scribes of the Middle Ages. The Dragon-Slayer is of course a subset of the Hero archetype, and his conflict with the great serpent represents one facet of the Hero’s battle with monsters; this facet, however, is often combined with a journey quest, and at times even a journey to the underworld. Indeed, it could be argued that some heroes emerge from the dragon’s lair reborn, sometimes through magical means, and thus might be said to represent the archetype of the rebirth, return, and apotheosis of the Hero. The Dragon-Slayer generally seeks to deliver a people from the rampages of the worm, to capture the serpent’s hoard, or both; in the Germanic tradition the acquisition of glory and everlasting reputation suborns even the accumulation of treasure, and good leaders distribute their wealth with an open hand: Thus the Hero is entirely antithetical to the dragon, which embodies greed, selfishness, wanton destruction, and infamy. While Saint George offers the most well-known example of the Dragon-Slayer saint of the Middle Ages, he is one of literally many dozens of holy men and women said to have undergone such combat. The Anglo-Saxon hero Beowulf offers perhaps the epitome of the Germanic Hero in his battle with the dragon in that he is selfless, generous, noble, and brave,
and he attacks the beast out of a worthy desire to save his people as well as to increase his own glory.

It is perhaps most fitting that the Norse version of the great epic of the Dragon-Slayer of Northern Europe springs from the loins of an adventure of the gods gone awry, a tale of ill-gotten treasure and cursed gold that could only be the result of the shenanigans of the Trickster Loki. In the myth of Otter’s Ransom, Loki shows his characteristic prowess in getting the gods out of a scrape of his own design; the Trickster also shows his true colors in the way that he is none too concerned with Odin’s request for a dainty bit of tainted treasure. Moreover, the malediction that the dwarf Andvari pronounces over the very ring Odin desires evokes a Germanic commonplace of cursed treasure, echoed, for example, in Beowulf, as well as in the Nibelungenlied. Moreover, this episode also illuminates the Germanic concern with compensation, or blood-money, in return for the life of a slain kinsman.

The Myth of Otter’s Ransom

One fine morning in early spring the gods Odin and Hoenir went for a ramble with the Trickster Loki. The gods came upon a river and ambled along its banks until they came to a waterfall; there was a pool at the base of the falls, and, sunning itself with its eyes closed and eating a fresh-caught salmon, they saw a fat, sleek otter. Loki thought he might try his skill at slaying the otter, which he did with one cast of a stone: He was very proud to have won both otter and salmon with a single throw, and the gods were delighted with their luck. They skinned the otter and continued on their way, hoping to offer a share of the food for their night’s lodging. Unfortunately for the gods, the house they came upon was that of Hreidmar, a wealthy and powerful man who was the father of three sons: Fafnir, the largest, fiercest, and greediest; Otter,
a shape-shifter and master angler, who kept his father well-supplied with fish; and Regin, the least powerful and honored of the brothers, but a fine smith. As soon as they saw the body and hide of their kinsman, Hreidmar and his brood set upon the gods, binding them and threatening them unless they agreed to pay a blood-price for Otter: The gods must cover Otter’s flayed skin with gold, leaving not so much as a whisker showing. The gods sent Loki to fulfill the terms of the ransom. The Trickster first sought the watery halls of Ran, and borrowed the net with which she collected the bodies of drowned men; then Loki returned to the waterfall by which he had slain Otter and dredged the pool for Andvari the Dwarf, who hid in its deeps in the form of a pike. Loki forced Andvari to show him his gold, which the Trickster took to pay the compensation owed to Hreidmar for his son’s life.

The dwarf tried to hold back a single ring—some say it would have allowed him to rebuild his fortune—but Loki spied it and forced Andvari to surrender it. As the dwarf disappeared back into his pool, however, he pronounced a curse upon the ring because of the Trickster’s greed: That ring would be the death of any owner, and the curse applied to whole hoard, as well. Loki returned to the house of Hreidmar well satisfied, and he covered the flayed skin of Otter with Andvari’s gold; the ring, however, was held back, as Odin took a fancy to it and Loki let the Allfather have it. Hreidmar claimed the ring, however, when he spotted a whisker poking up from the pile of gold, and thus Odin surrendered the last of Andvari’s treasure. As the gods were departing, Loki pronounced the curse of Andvari upon the gold, and as it was spoken, so it came to pass: Fafnir killed his own father Hreidmar to possess that hoard, and it was murder as the body was hidden; later Fafnir transformed into the greatest and vilest of dragons, and lay upon his ill-gotten treasure in the midst of the wilderness, sharing not the smallest bauble with anyone. Regin, denied his share of the compensation for Otter, and unable to avenge his father, sought
employment as a royal smith; eventually both Regin and Fafnir would die under the curse, as well. The primary sources for the myth of Otter’s Ransom include Skaldskaparmál in the Prose Edda, Chapter 14 of Volsungasaga, and some portions of Reginsmál from the Codex Regius.

**Sigurd: The Dragon-Slayer of the Norse**

The Norse saga of the Volsungs is a veritable treasure-trove of mythic, folkloric, and legendary materials, ranging from references to Odin’s dabbling in the affairs of kings and heroes to magic rings and cursed hordes to echoes of historical struggles among the Goths, the Burgundians, and even the Huns of Attila, who himself plays, in fact, a significant role in the saga. Drawing upon a wealth of Eddic material which preserved and refined the ancient oral traditions, the author of this saga brought together these various strands to weave the most popular and enduring epic of the North: Indeed, to this day scenes from the story of Sigurd hold positions of honor on many, many existing artworks throughout the Scandinavian lands and the islands of Britain, and quite often provide a pagan counterpoint to a Christian context. Adorning stone monuments and the wooden doorways of Stave Churches alike, these representations eloquently express the widespread and lasting popularity of this myth, and all the more so when one considers that it is very likely that many more such artifacts have been lost through the ravages of time, weather, fire, and war. Like the Middle High German Nibelungenlied, which also treats the subject of the great Germanic Hero within a complex matrix of oral history, folk traditions, and sweeping archetypes, Volsungasaga is about much more than a simple account of dragon-slaying: Many consider Sigurd to be the “Arthur of the North,” a legendary figure clothed in the trappings of myth and folklore who represents the great spirit, hope, and aspiration of the culture which
spawned him. Sigurd is the last and greatest of the Volsungs, a family seemingly cursed even as it is favored by Odin.

Miraculous conception, lycanthropy, and epic proportion are staples of this family line, and Sigurd, the son of King Sigmund and his much younger second wife Hjordis, exemplifies that heroic strain. In addition to his slaughter of the great worm Fafnir, Sigurd is the only man alive who can ride through a ring of fire, break the curse of Odin, and waken and win the heart of the Shield-Maiden Brynhild. Possessor of a refashioned ancestral sword as outsized in its proportion as is the hero himself, Sigurd is also a shape-shifter, gifted with foresight, and the most powerful warrior and finest figure of a man of his age. Moreover, through his victory over the great serpent, Sigurd gains even more remarkable powers, benefiting as he does from the fabled virtues of the dragon’s blood and heart—both of which he tastes. Still, these qualities avail him little in the end, and the curse of the treasure he wins from the sons of Hreidmar casts its long shadow upon Sigurd’s heroic light. Indeed, Sigurd’s tragic and inexorable journey towards his bloody fate recalls that of his forefathers and that of the family of Otter, as well as foreshadowing the fate of those who cause Sigurd’s own death. If anything, the central lesson of this hero’s journey seems to be the classic Germanic motif of unflinching heroism in the face of certain doom, a theme which Gunnar, who plotted Sigurd’s death, evokes just as clearly with the music he plays with his toes upon his harp in the snake-pit which claims his life as did Sigurd’s own stirring assertion of his unblemished honor while his life’s blood flowed from him. Furthermore, Sigurd the Dragon-Slayer wins neither deliverance for his people nor a treasure of any use to anyone; truly, Sigurd only kills the dragon as recompense to his foster-father Regin for the reforging of the sword Gram, and Regin himself has little opportunity to savor his
vengeance over his monstrous sibling before he himself joins Fafnir in the eternal brotherhood of death.

Regin the smith, brother to Otter and Fafnir and son of Hreidmar, was Sigurd’s foster-father, and thus was charged with educating the young hero in languages and in runes, in chess and in hunting, and in other noble pursuits. All this Regin did, but he also tried to sow seeds of discontent in the lad, and wished thereby to tempt him with the promise of Fafnir’s almost immeasurable wealth. It was Regin who recounted the tale of Otter’s Ransom to Sigurd, which he did to explain why we felt so strongly that Sigurd should challenge the dragon. In the end Sigurd agreed to slay Fafnir on the condition that Regin should forge for him a marvelous sword. Regin thus crafted a blade for Sigurd, but the hero doubted its virtue and proved its flaw by shattering the sword upon Regin’s anvil. Set the task of creating a better weapon, Regin grumbled at Sigurd’s pickiness but promised him that the next sword would be better. Upon testing the second blade, however, Sigurd found it as unsatisfactory as the first, and noted that such an untrustworthy smith was cut from the same cloth as his unsavory forebears.

Sigurd then visited his mother, and asked if it were true that she held for him a mighty heirloom from his father, the shards of the great sword Gram which had been shattered against the very spear of Odin when the One-eyed God had chosen to revoke his favor so that he might claim King Sigmund for Valhalla. The aged king thus had fallen on the field of his last battle, and had thereby escaped an ignominious death in his bed. Sigurd’s mother was pleased to pass the remnants of Gram on to her son, thinking that he was likely to win great honor and glory with such a weapon in his hand. Sigurd took these shards to Regin and admonished him to make from them a blade worthy of its lineage. Regin became angry at this demand, thinking as he did that
Sigurd was too critical of his smithing. Nonetheless Regin refashioned the great sword Gram, and when he took it from the forge it seemed to those watching as though the flames in which it was reborn danced around its edges. The smith handed the blade to its owner, noting gruffly that if this sword were to shatter he was no smith at all. This time when Sigurd brought the weapon down upon the anvil, its blade cut through to the very ground, and the metal was so strong that no imperfection could be found in the sword. The edge of the blade was so sharp that it sliced a strand of wool in half, although it was only the force of a stream which brought the wool against the blade. Regin now demanded repayment in the form of blood vengeance against his brother Fafnir the dragon, which Sigurd promised to attempt as soon as he had avenged his own father’s death.

When Sigurd had accomplished his vengeance upon the enemies of his father, Regin was quick to remind his foster-son of his oath to slay Fafnir, a quest that the hero was not loathe to attempt. Soon thereafter Regin led Sigurd upon the Gnitaheath, the haunt of the great worm. When Sigurd saw the giant cliff from which the dragon lowered itself to drink, he knew that his foster-father had lied when he claimed that his brother took the form of an ordinary serpent. Regin scoffed at the young man’s reservations, however, and instructed Sigurd to dig a ditch perpendicular to the track that the serpent had worn in the ground. Lying in this ditch, Regin advised, Sigurd would be perfectly situated to thrust up into the body of the monster, killing it as it crawled forth to slake its thirst. When Sigurd asked how he would fare in that shallow trench from the shower of dragon blood he was bound to rain down upon himself as the result of executing such a strategy, Regin scoffed again, remarking that Sigurd seemed rather unlike his sires, and that the timid were unlikely to prosper. At that point Sigurd rode up onto the heath to enact this plan while Regin fled into hiding. While Sigurd was digging the ditch, however, an old man appeared
before him and advised the lad to show more wisdom. If he were to dig a series of branching ditches running off from the one in which he was to lie, the old man suggested, the hero might slay the dragon in safety without fear of being overcome by the worm’s noxious, gushing blood. The man then disappeared, and many think him to have been Odin, he who ever appeared to Sigurd and indeed all the Volsungs in critical moments.

Sigurd did as he had been advised, and crawled into the central ditch before the ground quaked with the approach of Fafnir. As the monstrous serpent approached, the earth trembled and the air was filled with poison spewed forth by the hideous worm, but Sigurd lay unconcerned in his trench. As the dragon slithered over the hero, however, Sigurd thrust his blade under the left shoulder of the beast, only stopping when he had plunged it all the way up the hilt, so that his sword stung the very heart of the dragon. Feeling his death throes come upon him, Fafnir thrashed and flailed with his head and his tail, destroying everything within reach of his twisting body. Still unafraid, Sigurd pulled forth his blade and leapt lightly from the ditch, his arms bloodied all the way up to his shoulders. When Fafnir realized that he was dying and that the young man before him had dealt the blow, he questioned his killer about his identity and lineage. At first Sigurd answered obscurely, some say in the hopes of deflecting the curse that the dying may cast upon those whose names they know. When the dragon berated him for dissembling, the hero named himself and his father. Fafnir pronounced the curse of the gold upon Sigurd, but the hero’s response was that, although all men must die, the brave prefer to enjoy riches in the meantime. Sigurd then tested the wisdom of the dying worm with riddles of the Norns and of Ragnarok, questions of fate and of destruction suitable for the dying day of a long-ravening monster. Fafnir lamented the treachery of his brother Regin, whom he knew to have conspired against him, but he said that he took comfort in the belief that Regin would be the death of
Sigurd. The worm also bemoaned the failure of his poison and his terror-helm in the face of this foe, although always in the past these were weapons before which all men had fled. Sigurd, however, remained unimpressed, and repeated his intention to claim courageously and enjoy fully all of Fafnir’s hoard until that day when he himself was doomed to die; and with these words he condemned Fafnir to the clutches of Hel.

When the worm was dead Regin reappeared. He congratulated Sigurd on a victory worthy of song throughout all the ages. The smith seemed disconsolate at the same time, however, and muttered repeatedly that Sigurd had killed his brother, although he knew himself to be culpable, as well. In response Sigurd upbraided Regin for his cowardly retreat from the heath as the dragon approached, but his foster-father reminded the young hero that the great deed had been accomplished with the sword reforged by the smith. Sigurd, however, was unconvinced that the credit for his deed lay in the sword that had cut the dragon to the quick rather than in the strong hand and heroic breast that had wielded that death blow. Sigurd then cut out the heart of the monster, and as the blood gushed out of the gaping wound, Regin drank his fill of Fafnir’s blood. Overcome by drowsiness after slaking his thirst for the powers inherent in the dragon’s blood, Regin lay down to sleep. First, however, the smith asked his foster-son to roast the heart of the worm for him to eat. The hero made to do as he had been asked, but as he cooked the heart upon a spit some juice foamed out and Sigurd touched it with his finger in order to test whether it was done. Putting his hot finger into his mouth, Sigurd tasted the blood of the dragon; suddenly the young hero realized that he could understand the speech of the birds all around him.

In particular, Sigurd comprehended the discourse of six birds who were watching him. The first exclaimed that Sigurd should roast the heart for himself; if he were to eat it, he would become
the wisest of men. The second bird exclaimed that Regin, who slept nearby, intended to betray his foster-son. The third bird voiced the opinion that Sigurd should behead Regin, and then Sigurd alone would control Fafnir’s vast hoard. The fourth bird concurred, remarking that the hero would be wise to follow such sage advice, and adding that after he claimed the hoard Sigurd should seek the resting place of Brynhild, where he would gain true wisdom. Such a dangerous and cunning old wolf as Regin, this bird concluded, was never to be trusted. The fifth bird agreed, noting that Sigurd would not be so wise a man as one might think, if he were to allow the kinsman of one he slew to live. The sixth bird summed up the advice of them all: Sigurd would be wise to slay Regin and claim Fafnir’s gold for himself. Sigurd required no more counsel on the matter, and as he decided, so did he do. Decapitating the sleeping Regin, he sent one brother tumbling after the other into the frigid depths of Hel. Then the hero ate a bit of the dragon’s heart and carefully preserved the rest. After he had tasted the flesh of the beast’s core, Sigurd followed the worm’s track back to its hiding place, a great cavernous lair with iron doors set upon iron posts set into the rock of the threshold. Within this den Sigurd found a vast hoard, including Fafnir’s terror-helm, a byrnie of gilded mail, and huge quantities of gold, more, in fact, than the hero thought might be carried by several horses. Sigurd’s noble steed Grani was more than up to the challenge, however, and refused to move from the spot until laden with all of that gold packed into two mighty chests. Additionally, the horse refused to be led, and insisted that Sigurd ride, sitting next to his new-won treasure.

Although the great heroic feats of this “Arthur of the North” echo throughout the Medieval Germanic world, it is in the Norse version that this legendary figure is clothed most elaborately in the cloth of myth. Indeed, the central primary source for the myth of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer is *Volsungasaga*; Regin forges Gram, Sigurd slays the dragon, Regin drinks its blood, and Sigurd
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slays Regin in Chapters 15, 18, 19, and 20, respectively. The marriage of Sigrud’s parents and his own conception may be found in Chapters 11-13, while his encounters with Odin’s shield-maiden Brynhild begin directly after his destruction of the dragon, and the repercussions of this first meeting in large measure comprise the balance of the saga. In addition to the dragon-slaying episode, the myth of Otter’s Ransom, and the numerous portentous allusions to Odin, it is perhaps in the figure of Brynhild, her relationship with Sigurd, and her role in his death and his funeral that these mythic trappings are most clearly manifested. Although she is attributed a mortal ancestry, Brynhild is clearly a Valkyrie who has fallen from Odin’s favor. During the battle between two kings, Brynhild struck down he who had been promised victory by the All-Father. In revenge Odin pierced Brynhild with a thorn which caused her to fall into an enchanted sleep within a ring of shields. Odin also cast down his shield-maiden from her virginal post as a victory-goddess, cursing her never again to have the victory as well as condemning her to marriage. After his victory over the dragon, Sigurd rode to a mountain, the top of which seemed to be encircled by fire that reached to the heavens. As he drew nearer he saw that there was a ring of shields around the peak, and that a great banner flew from the top. When he passed through the wall of shields, he found what appeared to be a fully armored man asleep. The sleeper’s mail-shirt was so tight that it seemed a second skin, and it was when he cut off this byrnie and removed the sleeper’s helmet that Sigurd discovered that this was none other than Brynhild, whose enchanted slumber was the result of the One-Eyed God’s wrath.

Brynhild had vowed never to marry any man, regardless of the All-Father’s strictures, unless she found a hero incapable of fear, and in Sigurd she met her ideal match. This suitability Brynhild made clear by offering a foaming horn of beer to the conquering hero who awoke her. They talked and drank together, and the Dragon-Slayer, who had heard of the great beauty and secret
knowledge of the sleeping shield-maiden, soon put her to the test. Sigurd asked Brynhild to share
her vaunted wisdom, and in response she taught him the magic inherent in runes and offered him
much valuable advice. During their time together Sigurd gave to Brynhild the magic ring of the
dwarf Andvari which carried the curse of the dwarf and which had captured the fancy of the All-
Father himself. The happiness of the greatest of warriors and the wisest of women fell under the
shadow of Odin’s displeasure and the curse of Otter’s gold, however, and although they pledged
each other their troth and their love, it was not to be. Sigurd fell under the power of a magic
potion brewed by the witch Queen Grimhild and forgot his vow to Brynhild until it was too late
and he had married Grimhild’s daughter, just as Brynhild herself foresaw, and as she interpreted
for Gudrun, the daughter of Grimhild, when Gudrun asked Brynhild to interpret a dream.

Furthermore, Sigurd deceived Brynhild by taking on the visage of Gunnar, Gudrun’s brother, and
winning the hand of Brynhild for Gunnar by doing what no other man could accomplish—
entering the ring of fire and demanding that the shield-maiden fulfill her sacred vow and marry
the man capable of this feat. Brynhild acquiesced, and, although they slept in one bed for three
nights, Sigurd, in the form of Gunnar, placed a naked blade between them, claiming that
Gunnar’s marriage must be sanctified in this manner. Before he left, Brynhild gave to the man
she took to be Gunnar the cursed ring of Andvari which she had received from Sigurd, and it was
this wretched bauble that brought the wrath of his one true love down upon the Dragon-Slayer.
Sigurd gave the ring to Gudrun, who showed it to Brynhild when the women quarreled over
whose husband was the greater hero. When Brynhild saw this ring, she knew that she had been
deceived and betrayed, and that her love had bartered her to a lesser man. She then plotted
Sigurd’s death, vowing that she would not live with two husbands alive in one hall. Once Sigurd
was upon his funeral pyre, however, along with his killer and his son by the shield-maiden,
Brynhild joined her lover in the eternal embrace of death, leaping through the flames to her love as Sigurd had to his.

Brynhild’s vow to accept only the most fearless of men hearkens back to her identity as a Valkyrie, as does her act of serving Sigurd a flagon of ale, a traditional female role of hospitality and mark of honor in the Germanic north with literary resonance with the feasts of Hrodgar in *Beowulf* as well as mythic resonance with the nightly revels in Valhalla. Brynhild’s knowledge of runes and other secret wisdom, her ability to interpret dreams, her absolute need to obtain the very best, most fearless warrior, and her towering rage and thirst for vengeance when she is deceived in this respect all mark her as Odin’s own handmaid. The thorn with which Brynhild is cursed is a phallic representation of the loss of maidenhead to which the angry god has sentenced her, as is the drawn sword that Sigurd, in the guise of Gunnar, puts between them during their three nights together. Similarly, Sigurd’s act of taking the betrothal ring back from Brynhild on this occasion, in addition to recalling the curse and renouncing the vows associated with that particular ring, evokes a vaginal image, as do the rings of shields and fire. Indeed, in the Thridek version of the story, Sigurd takes these trophies after he has, with Gunnar’s acquiesce, explicitly reft Brynhild of her maidenhead. Brynhild’s role as shield maiden is ended by her loss of virginity, and thus it is the reappearance of her betrothal ring on the hand of Sigurd’s wife that is the proof of her humiliation that she can not tolerate. In the machinations which lead to Sigurd’s death, however, we see the old power and function of the Valkyrie emerge. Brynhild chooses the greatest warrior of all, marks him out for death, and sees his body bloody and lifeless. That she then chooses to join him in the afterlife reinforces this association as much as it evokes the practice of human sacrifice sometimes associated with funeral rites.
Siegfried: The Dragon-Slayer of the Germans

Composed in the early thirteenth century, the Middle High German epic the *Nibelungenlied* develops the ancient northern theme of the Dragon-slayer Hero in the context of a courtly tradition, and much of the narrative emphasis in this version shifts to Kriemhild of the Burgundians, Siegfried’s wife. Kriemhild is a driving force in the plot of this iteration of the story, from her introduction as the most beautiful of maidens in the first lines of the poem to her consummation of her vengeance and her own death in the closing passage. Indeed, while Siegfried’s actions are outsized and he looms, in presence and absence, over the whole of the story, in point of fact he has been slain by the midway point of the poem. Moreover, while the Norse Sigurd seems in many ways the embodiment of the epic Germanic hero, these features are mixed in the person of the Middle High German Siegfried with a healthy measure of the Medieval courtier. While the opening section of *Volsungasaga* is dedicated, as the title would suggest, to Sigurd’s mythical heritage as the scion of the family of the Volsungs, the opening chapters of the *Nibelungenlied* recount the courtly credentials of the two young lovers-to-be; further, where Sigurd was fostered in the humble household of Regin the smith, Siegfried’s coming-of-age was marked by his knighthood in a splendid and elaborate festival in the court of his parents. More to the point, the description of the dragon-slaying episode of this version of the hero is relegated to a second-hand account of Siegfried’s various feats of arms. When Siegfried arrives at Worms to seek Kriemhild’s hand at the very beginning of the tale we learn that he has taken possession of the treasure of the Nibelungs, and that he wields the great sword Balmung and possesses a marvelous cloak of invisibility. It is this cloak, rather than a magical shape-shifting ability, that Siegfried employs to help his brother-in-law Gunther to win and to subdue Brunhild of Iceland, although in this version Siegfried owes no vow of loyalty to Brunhild.
Indeed, in true Romance fashion, Kriemhild is Siegfried’s first love, and the hero sought his lady’s hand on the basis of her reputation alone.

Siegfried is, however, without a doubt first and foremost a Dragon-Slayer Hero; indeed, in a significant parallel to the episode wherein Sigurd slays Fafnir, we are told that the hero of the *Nibelungenlied* bathed in the blood of a mighty dragon. In this detail we might perceive resonance with both the magical powers imparted to Sigurd through the juices of Fafnir’s roasted heart and the earlier trench-digging episode, in which Odin appears to warn the Norse hero to beware of being destroyed by the worm’s blood. In addition, the detail of Siegfried’s blood-bath is a crucial plot point in the *Nibelungenlied*, as we are informed that it was through this gory baptism that the hero provided himself with his invulnerable horny hide. His secret weakness is betrayed when Kriemhild confides to her brother’s confidante Hagen that a linden leaf covered a spot between the shoulder blades and thus that the hero’s skin might be pierced in that place. Siegfried is slain almost immediately thereafter, and the bulk of the story is spent recounting how Kriemhild came to the court of Etzel (Attila the Hun), became his wife, and plotted and executed her vengeance for Siegfried upon her brother Gunther and his court and especially upon Hagen, who had wielded Siegfried’s death-blow. The secret of the treasure of the Nibelungs dies with the last of that line, and we hear echoes of Andvari’s curse in the dying shrieks of Kriemhild, slain for having the temerity to have grasped her husband’s sword and with it to have beheaded Hagen by her own hand. It is especially noteworthy that—as influenced by continental traditions and the genre of the Romance as the Middle High German epic may be—the essential attributes of the heroic journey of Siegfried resonate so clearly with those of Sigurd. Although the details change and the trappings reflect contemporary local cultural factors, both Siegfried and Sigurd clearly hearken back to a common Germanic ancestor.
The final sequence of the Old English epic *Beowulf* takes place long, long after Beowulf’s travels to the land of the Danes and his battles with Grendel and Grendel’s Mother. For fifty winters Beowulf has ruled the Geats in peace and prosperity, and when his last great battle falls to his lot the hero is an old man. A servant fleeing the displeasure of his master found the entrance to an ancient barrow filled with the treasure of a long-dead people. Seeking to win the favor of his lord, this foolish thrall took from the hoard a single jewel-encrusted flagon; instead of gaining fortune for this audacious deed, however, the wretch brought upon the people of that region the fiery wrath of the dragon, which for three hundred winters had claimed that barrow as its home and that treasure as its own. When the serpent discovered its loss, its rage was fearsome to behold and waxed as the day waned. When night finally fell the beast rose into the sky, raining fire, destruction, and death upon all the homes and farms in the vicinity. Soon the entire coastal region had fallen under a storm of flame, smoke, and ash, and nowhere in the lands of the Geats was safe. Even the mighty hall of Beowulf the king fell to a heap of smoldering embers, as did his great fortifications without number. Enraged in his turn, Beowulf considered his strategy for avenging his people upon this vile monster; knowing well that a linden-wood shield would avail him little against such an opponent, Beowulf commanded a great targe to be forged of iron. He gathered to him a select company of eleven comrades, and as a guide they added to their number the foolish thief who had pilfered the dragon’s lost cup from the ancient barrow.

After recounting his past deeds and valor before his men, Beowulf determined to go into battle with the dragon alone. He commanded his thanes to wait outside the barrow, for the glory or the doom of the serpent’s wrath were his and his alone to bear. Beowulf lamented the fact that he
might not wrestle the monster weaponless, as he had Grendel, but he had to acknowledge that such tactics would avail him little against the blazing breath of this adversary, and so he determined to use to advantage his iron byrnie and buckler. Beowulf vowed that once the battle was joined he would not retreat at all, though it cost him his life. The hero then trod alone the terrifying path into the dragon’s lair; he was no coward. Steams and smokes issued forth from the stone archway over the entrance to the innermost chamber, and Beowulf gave out a great war-cry as he crossed that threshold. The dragon, enraged by the presence of his enemy, burst upon the ancient king. The combatants then converged, Beowulf’s blade flashing in the fire of the dragon, and though shield protected him and sword smote his enemy, neither served him so well as he might have hoped. The dragon, falling back with a slight wound from his enemy, soon renewed his attacks with vigor, while the king, whose sword had failed him for the first time, struggled to continue the fight. The hated enemies rushed once more against one another, their struggle causing the barrow to rumble, while reek and heat shot forth from the entrance.

Of all of Beowulf’s picked companions, only one, Wicglaf, stood firm; the others fled into the woods to save their own lives. Remembering the king’s generosity to him and to his family, Wicglaf could not hold himself back when he realized that Beowulf was perishing, broiling alive under his iron helm. The young warrior, as yet untested in battle, brandished his sword, an ancient heirloom of his family, and lifted his wooden shield, little as it might avail him against the heat of the drake. Delivering to his companions a stunning rebuke, Wicglaf reminded them of the open-handedness of their lord, and of their own vows of loyalty whilst deep in their cups, goblets filled to overflowing with the drink their lord himself had so generously bestowed upon them. Seeking to save his lord or to die with him, the young thane rushed to his king’s side; although his buckler was soon cinders and his armor helped him little, Wicglaf found some
protection from the scorching flames of the dragon under the broad iron roof which Beowulf’s shield provided for them both. Although the dragon redoubled its efforts in the rage which befell it when it discovered yet another interloper in its lair, Beowulf was himself buoyed by the words and spirit of his young retainer, and thrust once more at the dragon’s neck, snapping his ancient blade. The monster took this opportunity to charge for the third time, taking Beowulf’s neck between its jaws so that the hero’s life-blood welled up and gushed out of the grisly wounds. Desperate to protect his lord, Wicglaf thrust his sword deep into the serpent’s belly, so that the flames of the monster began to abate; taking strength for a final onslaught from the inspiration of his young follower, Beowulf himself drew his short blade and thrust it into the flank of the dragon, dealing it a mortal wound. Thus, together, king and thane brought down the dragon. The poison of the worm’s bite flowed deadly in the hero’s veins, however, and Beowulf knew that he had but a short time to live.

Beowulf as Dragon-Slayer is a hero who seeks to protect his people, who have done nothing to incite the rage of this enemy and can do nothing to protect themselves from it. The Anglo-Saxon epic hero, moreover, is anxious for eternal fame and the glory of the battle, which will grant him an immortality denied to his line due to his childlessness; indeed, Wicglaf seems to him a son of his own heroic spirit, which is as much of an heir as Beowulf is able to claim. The Dragon in Beowulf, like Fafnir in the Saga of the Volsungs, is the very emblem of greed, of a boundless avarice which might never be sated but which is, conversely, ever watchful, jealous, and likely to spark into a raging flood of anger, hatred, and retribution. Dragons signify such selfishness throughout the Middle Ages in many different contexts, of course, but here in the Anglo-Saxon epic we are presented with a clear schematic for understanding how greed, generosity, loyalty, and betrayal are seen to operate in Germanic myth and legend. The dragon, the consummation of
greed who collects treasure which stagnates in its keeping, is by definition the antithesis of the good king, who is expected to be generous with the gold which flows into his coffers, directing it with justice and prudence to the worthy amongst his retainers, who then are to respond with unflinching courage and loyalty to their lord unto death. This system fails very often indeed, as the poem makes clear, but in many respects Beowulf is such a good, generous king, and Wicglaf is such a loyal, courageous thane. Thus this Dragon-Slaying episode recalls and clarifies the most crucial elements of the Anglo-Saxon Hero.

**Sources and Further Reading**


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1 For a helpful and clear outline of the movements of the Germanic peoples through the Age of Migrations, see Jones 22-33. For the case that the Viking Age could be seen as an extension of the Age of Migration, see Jones 182. For an argument that, although the derivation of the term *vikingr* is disputed, it certainly was used in contemporary Medieval accounts to mean “raider” or “pirate,” see Jones 75-77, especially 76 footnote 1, which includes a summation of the etymology of the term “Viking”.

2 For an assessment of the perceptions of the saga writers regarding their ancestors’ reasons for emigration to Iceland, see Bjöck 82-84; it is important to stress, however, that Byock finds these perceptions to have been rather biased.

3 For critical commentary on and analysis of the sources of Norse Mythology, see especially: Branston 35-46; Crossley-Holland xxxii-xxxvi; Davidson 14-16, 23-24, 44-47; Fee 14-15; Hreinsson xxx-xxxv; Kellogg xviii-xxv; Larrington xi, xiii-xxi; Lindow 12-27; Page 10-26; Puhvel 190-191.

4 For critical commentary concerning the mythology of Dragons in the Middle Ages, see especially: Branston 73, 76-77, 78-79; 82, 94, 96-98, 169, and 286-290; Crossley-Holland xxii-
xxiii; Davidson 159-162 and 194; Fee 112-113; Lindahl 100-103; Lindow 239; Simek 64-65 and 231.

5 For critical commentary regarding the Dragon-Slayer as Hero, see especially: Fee 117-119, 130-133; Lindahl 100-103.

6 For critical commentary regarding the myth of Otter’s Ransom, see especially: Crossley-Holland 136-142 and 222-223; Davidson 43-44; Fee 90-92; Lindow 58-59; Puhvel 217; and Simek 16. In addition, High-quality interactive images of and videos pertaining to the Otter slab at Maughold on the Isle of Man, as well as many other related objects and sites, complete with commentary, are available via The Medieval North Atlantic interactive multimedia resource: http://public.gettysburg.edu/~cfee/MedievalNorthAtlantic/

7 For critical commentary upon the Dragon-Slayer Hero in Volsungasaga, see especially: Bjock 1-29; Davidson 43-44, 49, 150-151; Fee 119-120 and 130-131. In addition, Andersson comments upon the dragon-slaying sequence of the Thridek variation of Sigurd’s tale on pages 174-177.

8 The Nibelungenlied is preserved in various forms in more than 30 manuscripts; two of the earliest, B and C, may come closest to the original version, but the provenance is complicated and not all scholars would agree with this assessment. For more information concerning the manuscript tradition and the dating of the poem, see especially Hatto 358-369; the present study takes Hatto’s edition as authoritative. We learn of Siegfried’s slaying of the dragon through Hagen’s summary of the hero’s history in Chapter 3, Siegfried’s vulnerability is revealed in Chapter 15, and Siegfried is slain in the next chapter. For additional critical commentary concerning the epic of the Nibelungs, see especially: Andersson 105-117; Fee 120; Gentry 114-116; Haymes 101-131; McConnell 42-66.
The dragon episode comprises lines 2200-2820 in *Beowulf*. For critical commentary, see especially: Fee 127-128 and 132-133.