

What do the Old Icelandic analogues tell us about the conservativeness or innovativeness of the *Nibelungenlied*?

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Introduction

Some parts in the *Nibelungenlied* are said to have connections with stories in Old Icelandic literature, like *Völsunga saga* and *Þiðreks saga*.¹ Indeed, for example, the characteristic of Siegfried in the *Nibelungenlied* is clearly similar to that of Sigurd in *Völsunga saga*. The *Nibelungenlied*, of course, retains pagan elements as do other works written by the Germanic tribes, while the text reveals some independence in respect of its putative sources and analogues. In my discussion, I seek to discuss the elements of conservativeness and innovation in comparison to its Old Icelandic analogues.

First, I shall deal with the characters of Siegfried and Sigurðr. The former is described in the *Nibelungenlied* as a hero having more human nature than the latter in *Völsunga saga*. This distinction and development may in part be attributable to Christianity, which was not readily compatible with a pagan culture that reflected the notion of superhuman power associated with the old northern pagan gods. Thus, the character has developed simply as a plausible real human being, albeit one endowed with overwhelming strength in the *Nibelungenlied*. Secondly, I deal with the relationship between Siegfried and Brunhild and the nature of the two women, Brunhild and Kriemhild, in the text of the *Nibelungenlied* and *Völsunga saga*. The relationship between Siegfried and Brunhild is much less clearly explained in the *Nibelungenlied* than in *Völsunga saga*, and the reason for this may lie in the nature of Christian epic. Thirdly, I discuss Siegfried's death as the role connecting the former and latter of the epic. The latter part is based on the legend of Dietrich of Bern as set out in *Þiðreks saga*. This fusion is important for the development of the story of the *Nibelungenlied*.

These three elements discussions show that while the *Nibelungenlied* is a story coloured throughout by Christianity, the characters in the epic behave in line with feelings that derived not from Christianity but from earlier Germanic tradition. Therefore, the scheme of the story is innovative in terms of its adoption of a medieval Christian world view, but the characters in that

¹ Edward R. Haymes, 'Nibelungenlied' in *Medieval Germany: An Encyclopedia*, ed. by John M. Jeep (New York: Garland Publishing, 2001), p. 563.

story live within the more conservative tradition of their earlier Germanic culture. The epic adjusts their mythology to a contemporary story from their period. The characters' old gods may have died out, but the author of the *Nibelungenlied* revives them in the story as part of the characters' identity.

I

The physical features of Siegfried in the *Nibelungenlied* and Sigurðr in *Völsunga saga* have much in common in terms of their exceptional strength and the physical invulnerability they secure after slaying a dragon and bathing in its blood.² Their overwhelming power may remind us of Óðinn's power. However, there is a difference with regard to their lineages. In *Völsunga saga*, Sigurðr may be depicted as something like a descendant of Óðinn, because Völsungr, who is Sigurðr's ancestor, is born with Óðinn's help.³ We cannot clearly say that Sigurðr and his ancestors are descendants of Óðinn, but he must be given Óðinn's power as a superhuman hero by Óðinn. His ancestors also are said to enjoy Óðinn's favour, and thus his tribe, the Völsungs, may be believed to be descended from Óðinn.⁴ It is obvious that Sigurðr wins Óðinn's favour in that Sigurðr is given an advice to choose a good horse by Óðinn, who is disguised as an old man.⁵ On the other hand, Siegfried in the *Nibelungenlied* is just a human prince in the Netherlands.⁶ He is a complete human being, though he has superhuman strength enough to defeat twelve giants and seven hundreds of warriors in Nibelung land.⁷

Icelandic and Scandinavian sources prefer to seek Germanic supernatural beings as their ancestors, though the author, in the preface of Snorri's *Edda*, adopted the concept of the biblical Genesis.⁸ However, the *Nibelungenlied*, whose story came back to Germany after it was developed in other areas, is re-composed just as a tale of human beings.⁹ This seems to indicate that an innovation in Germany is reflected in the story of the *Nibelungenlied*. The *Nibelungenlied* also has much description of the scenes touched by Christian as well as pagan influence. In particular, the conception of chivalry, which prevails throughout the epic, is much influenced by Christianity. Siegfried is basically depicted as a knightly warrior in the medieval age of chivalry, but he also maintains his supernatural strength, developed within northern European literary tradition. Strength in battle is one of the most important factors for knights in the chivalric world, too, and therefore it

² *The Nibelungenlied*, trans. by A. T. Hatto (London: Penguin, 1965), p. 28 (ch. 3), and *The Saga of the Völsungs*, ed. and trans. by R. G. Finch (London: Nelson, 1965), pp.30-34 (chs. 18-20).

³ *The Saga of the Völsungs*, pp.2-3 (ch. 1).

⁴ *The Saga of the Völsungs*, p.3 (ch. 1).

⁵ *The Saga of the Völsungs*, p.23 (ch. 13).

⁶ *The Nibelungenlied*, p. 20 (ch. 2).

⁷ *The Nibelungenlied*, pp. 27-28 (ch. 3).

⁸ *Snorri Sturluson: Edda*, trans. by Anthony Faulkes (Dent: Everyman, 1987), p. 3.

⁹ R. G. Finch, 'Þiðreks saga' in *An Encyclopaedia Scandinavia*, ed. by Phillip Pulsiano (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993), p. 662.

was natural for the author of the *Nibelungenlied* to adopt the essence of Sigurðr as depicted in the Icelandic sources as a character of great physical strength.

In the period when the *Nibelungenlied* was written, European people may have still had some residual sense of the strength of the vikings in Scandinavia even though the attacks by the vikings came to an end centuries earlier, and thus they may have thought that strength such as that of Sigurðr had been derived from the old pagan gods in whom the Scandinavians used to believe. It seems to be relatively easy to seek the characters of superhuman strength in Scandinavian literary tradition. However, pagan gods are prevented from acting in the Christian world. Therefore, the author of the *Nibelungenlied* must have contrived a way by which Siegfried could display superhuman power without the influence of pagan gods. The innovativeness concerning the character of Siegfried lies in his having been removed from divine influences and associations.

II

The author of the *Nibelungenlied* hardly tells us about the relationship between Siegfried and Brunhild before Gunther asks for her hand. However, in *Völsunga saga*, the scene is described in detail. Sigurd, in *Völsunga saga*, is able to understand birds' conversation and knows the fate awaiting his meeting with Brynhild after he has licked the blood of the dragon.¹⁰ When Sigurðr meets Brynhild, they get along well with each other and promise their marriage in defiance of their fate.¹¹ Thus, it may be natural that Sigurðr retains very deep affection for Brynhild in his heart of hearts even though he forgets her as a result of the trick devised by Grimhild, who is Guðrún's mother.¹² Therefore, Sigurðr helps Gunnar to woo Brynhild and then loves her, though he has still married Guðrún. In *Völsunga saga*, such behaviour to Brynhild seems to be reasonable.

In the *Nibelungenlied*, we do not know how Siegfried first comes to know Brunhild, but we may suppose that both have still known each other within the context. The author may have omitted the scene in order to conceal Siegfried's superhumanness. There is only a brief comment about Siegfried's slaying a dragon as an account of his heroic exploits in the epic.¹³ So, the only superhuman element is the fact that he becomes invulnerable when he bathes in the dragon's blood after the battle. In *Völsunga saga*, Sigurðr is able to understand birds' singing about him and thus he will also know about the likely outcome of his meeting with Brynhild. It is a supernatural element, and therefore it may not have been deemed suitable for the conception of Christian chivalric epic.

After Gunther loves Brunhild with Siegfried's help, she loses her superhuman strength.¹⁴

¹⁰ *The Saga of the Völsungs*, pp. 33-34 (ch. 20).

¹¹ *The Saga of the Völsungs*, pp. 39-40 (ch. 22).

¹² *The Saga of the Völsungs*, pp. 46-47 (ch. 28).

¹³ *The Nibelungenlied*, p. 28 (ch. 3).

¹⁴ *The Nibelungenlied*, p. 93 (ch. 10).

Until the event happens, Brunhild has her vast strength, which few male warriors can match. This seems to show that she maintains the character of a Valkyrie in Norse mythology. However, the scene of loss of Brunhild's extraordinary strength can be accommodated into Christian epic. Indeed, Brunhild, at first, has superhuman power, but its ultimate loss indicates that the epic seeks to adopt her and the story as a chivalric episode. Judging from her disappearance in the latter part of the epic, Brunhild seems to be made use of for this reason. Yet, Brunhild's character in the *Nibelungenlied* is a good example of the world view of old Germanic gods and thus it preserves a conservative element from old Germanic tradition.

The character of Kriemhild also may retain old Germanic traditional elements, though the epic is Christian in nature. There is no scene in which Kriemhild prays to God while she attends Mass. Furthermore, Kriemhild plots her vengeance for her husband, Siegfried, as if she were following old Germanic tradition. The Bible says, 'Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath; vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord', but Kriemhild does not seem to follow the word.¹⁵ Kriemhild sticks to her intention, for she marries Etzel in order to carry out bloody revenge for Hagen, and, as a result, her revenge comes to involve the other warriors of the Burgundian.¹⁶ Christian faith may not completely have taken over the characters in the epic, and it certainly seems to be superficial when they call the name of God. Kriemhild and the others in the epic are motivated by the old Germanic tradition. Therefore, in the *Nibelungenlied* we find a story that embraces a conflict and tension between a Christian courtly world and an older Germanic traditional world.¹⁷

III

The *Nibelungenlied* and the Icelandic analogues have the same story that Sigurðr, the invulnerable warrior, loses his life without fighting owing to his betrayal by his women. The story of Sigurðr's death plays a very important role in terms of the connection between the former part of the epic and the latter, for his death connects the mythological story with the historical one. The historical story is said to be related to the folklore surrounding Dietrich of Bern, which had developed in Scandinavia and returned to the Continent since then.¹⁸

In the latter part of the *Nibelungenlied*, Etzel and Dietrich are important characters for the plot. The character of Þiðrek, in *Þiðrek's saga*, is based on the historic Theoderic the Great, but he

¹⁵ Rom. 12:19.

¹⁶ *The Nibelungenlied*, pp. 150-65 (ch. 20).

¹⁷ Susann Samples, 'The German Heroic Narratives' in *German Literature of the High Middle Ages*, ed. by Will Hasty (New York: Camden House, 2006), p. 167.

¹⁸ Edward R. Haymes, 'Dietrichepik' in *Medieval Germany: An Encyclopedia*, ed. by John M. Jeep (New York: Garland Publishing, 2001), pp. 167-68.

had not undergone such an experience as he exiled himself to the palace of Attila, who was the king of the Huns.¹⁹ Furthermore, King Attila, Etzel in the epic, died a year or two before Theoderic was born, for the story about Þiðrek may have developed while the story had been introduced from the Continent into Scandinavia. However, the modified story enables Dietrich to join the epic and play an important role particularly in the scene of the fall of the Nibelungs in the last part of the epic.

Historically, King Attila was very strong king, who ruled vast territories. Though Etzel is a great king of the Huns, he just watches the fierce battle between the Huns and the Burgundians in his court. Therefore, he seems to be a relatively weak king in the epic. In *Völsunga saga*, Atli is described as a mean and greedy character.²⁰ The *Nibelungenlied* also adopts this weak character as opposed to the bravery that had traditionally been associated with him. One of the reasons may be that Etzel is a heathen king.²¹ In *Völsunga saga*, Atli is doomed to destroy himself and his family, and likewise, in the *Nibelungenlied*, he loses his vassals in the battle against the Burgundians and laments for them even though he survives after the battle.²² The author of the *Nibelungenlied* may have regarded the heathen king as a weak person from the Christian perspective.

The first part of the story and the latter in the *Nibelungenlied* had already become united in Icelandic literature, *Skáldskaparmál* in Snorri's *Edda*, though these motifs are different from each other.²³ The reason why Þiðrek is connected with Etzel may be that saga writers in Iceland may not have known much about the geography of the Continent and that they may have regarded the legend of the Nibelungs and that of Dietrich as the stories of the same region and age. Therefore, these legends could have become co-mingled. The co-mingled stories returned to the Continent, and then the stories are preserved as the German literature.

Conclusion

The *Nibelungenlied* is a literature much influenced by the medieval Christian world view, and thus the epic may not have easily accommodated elements of pagan culture. However, pagan culture has many examples of heroic narratives, which are entirely compatible with the chivalric stories of the Christian world. The author of the *Nibelungenlied* skillfully adopted and adapted the stories from pagan culture and then he may have toned down to some extent the superhuman prowess of the heroes in case it was perceived to contradict or challenging the Christian world. Epic super-heroes and super heroism seem to have kept to a minimum in order to adapt it to the Christian chivalric literature. This represents an innovative element in the epic.

¹⁹ Edward R. Haymes, 'Dietrichepik', pp. 167-68.

²⁰ *The Saga of the Völsungs*, pp. 61-66 (chs. 34-5).

²¹ *The Nibelungenlied*, p. 150 (ch. 20).

²² *The Saga of the Völsungs*, pp. 72-74 (ch. 40) and *The Nibelungenlied*, p. 291(ch. 39).

²³ *Snorri Sturluson: Edda*, pp. 102-104.

Besides the physical strength of heroes, the prominent roles of women in the *Nibelungenlied* were also a distinctive feature of old Germanic tradition, which is inherited from Old Icelandic analogues. Kriemhild's plot to wreck vengeance on Hagen is a characteristic example of old Germanic customs. The characters in the *Nibelungenlied* still maintain elements of old Germanic tradition in a story, which is strongly coloured by Christian courtly world. It is a conservative feature of the epic.

The structure of the epic is also strongly influenced by the Icelandic analogues. The *Nibelungenlied* may have been composed by two sagas, which are different from each other. However, the two stories were mingled together in Iceland or Norway. In this reconfigured state the story returned to the Continent, and has remained largely the same until the present day. This may show that the mythology in northern Europe is firmly tied to Germanic heroic identity, and that the author must thus have reworked the Old Icelandic analogues in order to adjust the stories to a medieval Christian mindset.

The *Nibelungenlied* balances the innovative elements with the conservative features from its Icelandic analogues. Though the epic has a Christian ethos, it employs old Germanic traditions, still surviving in Old Icelandic literature, for showing Germanic heroic identity.

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