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## TOWARDS AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF DESTINY

### *The Dynamics of Fate in Old Norse Literature as Illustrated by Völsunga Saga<sup>1</sup>*

IN RECENT YEARS, the social dynamics of destiny have received growing interest from anthropologists looking to establish ethnographic comparisons to shed light on the different attributes of the human condition. If destiny evokes “conceptions of human lives and futures that are, at least partly, fixed – be it by high political powers, cosmic forces, or transcendental entities,”<sup>2</sup> then it also allows us the opportunity to understand the possibilities of the individuals in an already conditioned world. However, the unavoidability of fate does not necessarily produce a sense of disconnection from one’s outcome, as it can motivate people to orchestrate their own future.<sup>3</sup>

The present study seeks to enrich the ongoing scholarly discourse by conducting an in-depth analysis of the Old Norse conceptualizations of destiny as articulated in *Völsunga saga*. This investigation places particular emphasis on the moral repercussions associated with kinship structure and the ancestral influence within the narrative. Our research posits that these social forces are morally punished and portrayed in a manner akin to the inexorable nature of fate. Apart from being determined by cosmic forces

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2 Alice Elliot and Laura Menin, “For an Anthropology of Destiny,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 8 (2018): 293.

3 Max Weber’s classical conceptions are still useful for the understanding of the relationship between predestination and action (*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London and New York: Routledge, 2005). However, his position has been nuanced by different authors: Alice Elliot, “The Makeup of Destiny: Predestination and the Labor of Hope in a Moroccan Emigrant Town,” *American Ethnologist* 43 (2016): 488–499.

or supernatural beings, destiny is also shaped by specific social norms and hierarchical structures.

I also seek to expand the academic discourse on fate within Medieval Studies. In recent decades, destiny has not received academic attention commensurate with its centrality in Old Norse literature.<sup>4</sup> However, there are enriching works that have also paved the way for the elaboration of this article. Karen Bek-Pedersen has provided valuable analyses and argues that honor is often represented in the same terms as destiny. The actions taken by characters can be represented as something fixed by the *nornir*,<sup>5</sup> as there are situations “in which men and women feel that they are not acting according to their own wishes but nonetheless feel that they must do what they do, as though they were obeying some kind of law.”<sup>6</sup>

While some authors have conceived destiny in a more deterministic way,<sup>7</sup> other explanations leave aside the structural or external dimensions and put more emphasis on the individual. William Ian Miller and Nicolas Meylan have pointed out that fate and prophetic dreams are in the service of individuals who seek to acquire political gain<sup>8</sup> or those who seek to abdicate responsibility for their transgressions.<sup>9</sup> However, while fate may mitigate the condemnation of certain decisions, to assume such a feature is the purpose of fate is to confuse the effect with the cause. We will see in this article that prophetic dreams and destiny are not the result of an individual strategy but of the relationships between different social groups,

- 4 See Stefanie Gropper, “Fate,” in *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, eds. Ármann Jakobsson and Sverrir Jakobsson (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 198. It is not my intention to give an overview of the foregoing scholarship; I will focus briefly on those studies that were most helpful in the development of this article. The most exhaustive analysis of previous research on this topic can certainly be found in Gropper’s work.
- 5 In *Gylfaginning*, these supernatural beings establish people’s destiny and are represented as a triad. They are often thought of in relation to the Greek *Moirai* or the Roman *Parcae*, three female figures who determine the fate of humanity. However, the textile work that characterizes the former is not clearly found among the *nornir*.
- 6 Karen Bek-Pedersen, *The Norns in Old Norse Mythology* (Edinburgh: Dunedin, 2011), 26.
- 7 E.g., Régis Boyer, “Fate as a Deus Otiosus in the *Íslendingasogur*: A Romantic View?”, in *Sagnaskemmtun. Studies in Honour of Hermann Pálsson on his 65th Birthday*, ed. Rudolf Simek and Jónas Kristjánsson (Vienna: Böhlau, 1986), 61–77.
- 8 William Ian Miller, “Dreams, Prophecy and Sorcery: Blaming the Secret Offender in Medieval Iceland,” *Scandinavian Studies* 58 (1986): 101–123.
- 9 Nicolas Meylan, “Fate is a Hero’s Best Friend: Towards a Socio-Political Definition of Fate in Medieval Icelandic Literature,” *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 10 (2014): 155–172.

of a hierarchical structure that determines social actions, and of antisocial desires that jeopardize the stability of the community and drag individuals on to a unidirectional path.

The source chosen for this study is one in which destiny plays a more prominent role than in other Old Norse narratives. *Völsunga saga* is thought to have been composed in Iceland during the 1250s or 1260s.<sup>10</sup> It is preserved in a medieval manuscript (Nykgl. saml. 1824 b, 4to) together with *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, and belongs to the genre of the *fornaldarsögur*, containing influences from romances and courtly literature.<sup>11</sup> *Völsunga saga* is also known for its close relationship to earlier sources, such as the *Skáldskaparmál* and a variety of eddic poems. However, the saga author was able to integrate all these sources and produce a unified narrative with a “considerable consistency.”<sup>12</sup> For the analysis of the saga, I have consulted the editions of Kaaren Grimstad and Ronald Finch, but the latter is the one referred to in this article.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Some scholars, such as M. Olsen, have suggested that *Völsunga saga* might have originated in Norway, though this theory lacks broad acceptance (see Ronald Finch, ed., *Völsunga Saga* (London: Nelson, 1965), xxxvii). These proposals often rely on speculative arguments. For example, Sue Margeson observes that, unlike in *Fáfnismál* and *Skáldskaparmál*, Sigurðr is depicted with two swords (Gramr and Riðill) only in *Völsunga saga* (chapter XIX). She draws a parallel to thirteenth-century Norwegian stave churches in Lardal and Mæri, where Sigurðr is similarly depicted with two swords. Consequently, Margeson argues that this iconography indicates a more Norwegian than Icelandic context for the saga’s composition (see Sue Margeson, “Sigurd with Two Swords,” *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 12 (1988): 194–200). Despite these observations, the evidence remains inconclusive, and the prevailing scholarly consensus maintains that the saga was most likely composed in Iceland.

<sup>11</sup> The episode in which Sinfjöthi is healed from his wounds by following the example of a couple of weasels resembles the event in *Eliduc* in which the maiden is also recovered thanks to the intervention of these same animals. In addition, the courtly description of Sigurðr *Fáfnisbani* is taken from *Þiðreks saga af Bern*. On this topic, see Carol Clover, “*Völsunga saga* and the Missing Lai of Marie de France,” in *Sagnaskemmtun. Studies in Honour of Hermann Pálsson on his 65th birthday*, ed. Rudolf Simek and Jónas Kristjánsson (Vienna: Böhlau, 1986), 79–84; Marianne Kalinke, “Arthurian Echoes in Indigenous Icelandic Sagas,” in *The Arthur of the North. The Arthurian Legend in the Norse and Rus’ Realms*, ed. Marianne Kalinke (Cardiff: The University of Wales Press, 2011), 145–167; Carolyne Larrington, “*Völsunga saga*, *Ragnars saga* and Romance in Old Norse: Revisiting Relationships,” in *The Legendary Sagas. Origins and Development*, ed. Annette Lassen, Agneta Ney, et al., 251–270 (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> Ronald Finch, “The Treatment of Poetic Sources by the Compiler of *Völsunga saga*,” *Saga-Book* 16 (1962–1965): 353.

<sup>13</sup> Kaaren Grimstad, ed., *Völsunga saga. The Saga of the Volsungs* (Saarbrücken: AQ-Verlag, 2000). Ronald Finch, ed., *Völsunga Saga* (London: Nelson, 1965).

The remainder of this article runs as follows: In the next two sections, I will attend to the dynamics of fate in *Völsunga saga* and their links to greedy attitudes and oath-breaking, a collaboration that establishes inescapable destruction. Sections III and IV analyze the ways in which kinship ideologies can grant the individuals an identity that will bind them to their family and favor the fulfillment of duties presented with the same inexorability and devastation as fate itself. Finally, the conclusions will highlight the main argument of the article and provide some references to the context of production that will help us understand the function of fate in Old Norse narratives and its capacity to dramatize social tensions and offer a moral message.

## I. Fate, Doom, and Greed

In Old Norse sources, destiny can be discerned through different manifestations, such as omens and dreams. In *Völsunga saga*, the capacity to foretell the future rests on the dying or female figures, excluding the case of Grípr (cf. Grimstad 2000, 26).<sup>14</sup> Thus, those who are dying embody a liminal condition that merges certain aspects of the living world and the realm of the dead and makes possible the acquisition of specific knowledge: that which remains hidden for most of the living becomes visible to those who experience death.

In *Völsunga saga*, most of the prophecies and concepts of fate emerge when Andvari's cursed treasure is on the scene. Significantly, once the treasure and its deleterious effects disappear, the concepts of fate cease to have such a significant presence in the saga. A curse is uttered by Andvari

<sup>14</sup> The relationship between death and clairvoyancy is further elaborated in Old Norse mythology, where the god Óðinn raises the dead and uses heads to acquire hidden knowledge (on the topic of necromancy, see Stephen Mitchell, "Óðinn, Charms, and Necromancy. Hávamál 157 in Its Nordic and European Contexts," in *Old Norse Mythology-Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Pernille Hermann and Stephen Mitchell (Cambridge: Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature, 2017), 289–321). Significantly, the magic used to raise the dead (*Valgaldr*) could also force the seeress to speak (Karen Bek-Pedersen, "What Does Frigg Say to Loki – and Why?", in *Res, Artes et Religio. Essays in Honour of Rudolf Simek*, ed. Sabine Heide Walther, Regina Jucknies, et al. (Leeds: Kismet Press, 2021), 45–46). These patterns are also related to the practice of "sitting out" to wake up trolls and raise the dead in order to receive counsel, information, and protection (John McKinnell, *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2005), 200).

once Loki, Óðinn, and Hœnir have stolen his gold in order to compensate Hreiðmarr's family for the killing of his son Otr: “[...] at hverjum skyldi at bana verða er þann gullhring ætti ok svá allt gullit” (... and said that to possess the ring, or any of the gold, meant death).<sup>15</sup> Andrew McGillivray suggests that this sentence can be interpreted not as a curse but as a simple warning.<sup>16</sup> But this conflicts with the economy of the gift and obviates the inalienable relation that links the object to its original possessor.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the ring of Andvari is called Andvaranautr, which alludes precisely to the presence of the first possessor within the object that derives from him.<sup>18</sup> Andvari's permanence in the treasure was established by the curse and agency he transferred to it, from which he will never be separated.

Through this curse-desire, Andvari determines the fate of all those who come into contact with the treasure as it has the capacity to attract the greed of individuals willing to break other social norms to get their hands on it. These dynamics are evident when the gods cover Otr's body with the treasure. Dissatisfied with the quantity, Hreiðmarr sees that a single whisker is sticking out and forces the gods to cover it, something that already emphasizes the family's greed. This prompts Loki to give them the Andvaranautr ring, whereupon Loki reproduces the dwarf's curse: “Gull er þér nú reitt/ en þú gjöld hefir/ mikil míns hoþuðs./ Syni þínum verðrat/ sæla skopuð/ þat er ykkarr beggja bani” (Gold is now rendered / recompense for you, / much for my head. / ‘Tis not luck will be / the lot of your son: / Death to you both it brings).<sup>19</sup>

The excessive greed and the compensation for the otter's death are understood here as the origin of a specific and violent destiny.<sup>20</sup> This attitude

15 *Völsunga saga*, 26.

16 Andrew McGillivray, “The Best Kept Secret: Ransom, Wealth and Power in *Völsunga saga*,” *Scandinavian Studies* 87 (2015): 365–382.

17 Marcel Mauss “Essai sur le don: Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques,” *L'Année Sociologique* 1 (1925): 30–179. Chris Gregory, *Gifts and Commodities* (London: Academic Press, 1982). Annette Weiner, “Inalienable Wealth,” *American Ethnologist* 12 (1985): 210–227 and *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). Maurice Godelier, *The Enigma of the Gift* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). A discussion on inalienable possessions is further elaborated in Section III.

18 The Old Norse concept of *nautr* refers to an individual's object that has been given away, stolen, looted, or acquired by another person after the death of its possessor.

19 *Völsunga saga*, 26.

20 Hreiðmarr's greed appears even more clearly in *Reginsmál*, where this character refuses to

towards gold is also shared within the family. Fáfnir ends up killing his father to keep all the treasure for himself. But his greed, as will be shown below, manifests itself in Fáfnir's body: "Hann [Fáfnir] gerðist svá illr, at hann lagðist út ok unni engum at njóta fjárlins nema sér ok varð síðan at inum versta ormi ok liggr nú á því fé" (He [Fáfnir] grew so malevolent that he went off to live in the wilds and allowed none but himself to have any pleasure in the riches, and later on he turned into a terrible dragon and now he lies on the treasure).<sup>21</sup>

This transformation is linked to his transgressive behaviour. As Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown has pointed out, societies articulate ritual prohibitions and rules of conduct through which the ritual status of the person (or the collective) who transgresses certain norms is affected, and this can be followed by some kind of misfortune.<sup>22</sup> In a similar vein, Robin Ridington shows that the transgressions of taboos and cultural norms among the Dunne-za bring about the transformation of the human body into the Wechuge, animals that in past times hunted humans but now enter into communication with them through vision quests. Once the taboo is broken, the transgressor begins to adopt the behaviors of the animal and devours its own lips, making communication with society impossible and turning his neighbors into potential victims,<sup>23</sup> cementing the idea that the body is the existential locus of culture,<sup>24</sup> and the skin the point of contact that links people to the social forces that surround them.<sup>25</sup> In the case of Fáfnir, his inhuman desire for gold (triggered by Andvari's curse), prevents the distribution of wealth and produces chaos in society.<sup>26</sup> Certainly, fear

give part of the payment to his other two sons, Fáfnir and Reginn. See Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, eds., *Eddukvæði II. Hetjukvæði* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka forritafélag, 2014), 296–302.

<sup>21</sup> *Völsunga saga*, 26.

<sup>22</sup> Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (New York: Free Press, 1969), 155.

<sup>23</sup> Robin Ridington, "Wechuge and Windigo: A Comparison of Cannibal Belief among Boreal Forest Athapaskans and Algonkians," *Anthropologica* 18 (1976): 107–129.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Csordas, "Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology," *Ethos* 18 (1990): 5. Cf. David Le Breton, *Anthropologie du corps et de la modernité* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2013).

<sup>25</sup> Andrew Strathern, "Why is Shame on the Skin?", *Ethnology* 14 (1975): 347–356.

<sup>26</sup> This relationship between the dragon and the treasure has received great academic interest since the nineteenth century in the works of Grimm and has further been explored by numerous scholars (see Jonathan Evans, "Old Norse Dragons, Beowulf, and the Deutsche

can also exercise a crucial role.<sup>27</sup> But Fáfnir is first and foremost a symbol. What provokes fear is that which he represents: a greedy attitude triggered by the curse of Andvari. It is precisely the desire to keep the wealth for his own benefit that is at the origin of his transformation and moral condemnation. As we can see, Andvari's curse imposes its reality upon the characters' bodies.

Moreover, fate is reactivated through Fáfnir's words during his confrontation with Sigurðr, when he tells him that the gold will bring his death. However, the hero accepts his fate saying, "Hverr vill fé hafa allt til ins eina dags, en eitt sinn skal hverr deyja" (Everyone wants to keep hold on wealth until that day come, but everyone must die some time).<sup>28</sup> The danger of the treasure is again reaffirmed by Fáfnir, who even seems to advise Sigurðr not to get hold of the treasure. Immediately afterwards, the logical course of the dialogue seems to be interrupted by the introduction of an apparently unrelated topic. Sigurðr asks Fáfnir about the nature of the *nornir* and for the name of the island (*hólmr*) on which Surtr and the Æsir will shed their blood in Ragnarök, that is, Óskaptr. This narrative break should not be understood as a mere discordance. Regardless of how aesthetically discordant it may sound to the modern reader, this "inter-

Mythologie," in *The Shadow-Walkers. Jacob Grimm's Mythology of the Monstrous*, ed. Tom Shippey (Arizona: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005), 207–269; Victoria Symons, "Wreopenhilt ond wyrmfah. Confronting Serpents in Beowulf and Beyond," in *Representing Beasts in Early Medieval England and Scandinavia*, ed. Michael Bintley and Thomas Williams (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2015), 73–93. Significantly, in another version of the story of Fáfnir and Sigurðr presented in *Piðreks saga af Bern*, the dragon that the hero confronts does not keep any wealth or behave greedily. This is also seen in other dragons within this same saga, which shows a closer proximity to Christian thought, where this creature becomes the representation of the Devil and evil. The Christian influence in this work is clearly seen in the fight between Piðrekr and another dragon, where the struggle between the Devil and God is particularly ostensible. Confronting the beast, Piðrekr turns to God for help in his task. See Henrik Bertelsen, ed., *Piðreks saga af Bern* (Copenhagen: Møllers Bogtrykkeri, 1905), 362. This influence of Christianity can also be seen in the way in which the monster attacks, for it uses its tail to immobilize and squeeze the hero. This reflects the influence of the texts of Isidoro de Sevilla, who maintains in his *Etymologies* that the most dangerous part of the dragon resides in its tail (Jacques André, ed., *Isidore de Séville. Etymologies. Livre XII. Des animaux* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1986), 135–137).

<sup>27</sup> Árman Jakobsson, "Enter the Dragon. Legendary Saga Courage and the Birth of the Hero," in *Making History. Essays on the Fornaldarsogur*, ed. Martin Arnold and Alison Finlay (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2010), 33–52.

<sup>28</sup> *Völsunga saga*, 31.

ruption" of the dialogue adds two clear elements that support the background of the dialogue. The allusion to the *nornir* and to the ill-fated place (Óskaptr) in which Ragnarök will unfold follows Fáfnir's words about the cursed gold, highlighting the capacity of the treasure to construct an inexorable and destructive fate. Just as the gods fall in the face of chaotic forces in a *hólmr*, Sigurðr will also deliver his personal *hólmganga*<sup>29</sup> to meet the death that has been preordained.<sup>30</sup>

## II. Oaths and Greedy Attitudes as Tools of Fate

The encounter between Sigurðr and Fáfnir not only sets the destiny of the Volsung hero but also the future of the families with whom he comes into contact. As Judy Quinn argues, the Andvaranautr ring harms the lives of those who stay in contact with it and snuffs out their family lines.<sup>31</sup> But this curse cannot be understood without the greedy attitudes that it generates. Andvari's agency is constituted as the ultimate fate of individuals as well as generating the necessary desires to produce that fixed future. Once Sigurðr had taken possession of the treasure, destiny began to manifest itself in the present. Not only did Fáfnir die, as Andvari had wished in his curse, but Reginn was also killed by the hero when some birds told him that his foster father (*fóstri*) intended to betray him and keep the gold for himself.

However, the effectiveness of the curse also depends on another series of obligations and social ties, including oath-taking. The act of taking vows guarantees the preservation of the pledged commitment, a principle further underscored by the peril associated with their violation. Breaking oaths, as Brynhildr warns in her advice, heralds great disasters: "Ok sver

29 This practice was a regulated duel that confronted two individuals to settle various disputes, such as disagreement with the results of the General Assembly, disputes over inheritance, women, property, etc. Cf. Jesse Byock, "Hólmganga," in *Medieval Scandinavia. An Encyclopedia*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano and Kirsten Wolf (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993), 289–290.

30 See also Joyce Tally Lionarons, *The Medieval Dragon. The Nature of the Beast in Germanic Literature* (Enfield Lock: Hisarlik Press, 1998), 66–67.

31 Judy Quinn, "Trust in Words: Verse Quotation and Dialogue in Völsunga saga," in *Fornaldarsagornas struktur och ideologi, handlingar från ett symposium i Uppsala 31.8–2.9 2001*, ed. Ármann Jakobsson, Annette Lassen, et al. (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2003), 89–100.

eigi rangan eið, því at grimm hefnd fylgir griðrofi" (And don't swear a crooked oath, for dire vengeance follows on breach of truce).<sup>32</sup> This is in line with one of the responsibilities of the goddess Vár, as described in the *Snorra Edda*, whose task is to take revenge on those who break the oaths (*várar*) they had made to each other.<sup>33</sup> Despite these negative consequences, Sigurðr and Brynhildr swore to enter into marriage. And it is precisely the curse of the treasure and its ability to attract greed which provokes the breaking of vows and produces the fate that treason portends. Once Brynhildr and Sigurðr had established their vows, the hero's treasure attracted the greed of the Gjukungs. Grímhildr thought of Sigurðr as a good ally not only because of his greatness, but also because he "hafði ofr fjár, miklu meira en menn vissi dæmi til" (having immense wealth, far greater than any heard of before).<sup>34</sup> Consequently, the hero is fooled by Grímhildr into taking a potion that makes him forget the oaths he made with Brynhildr, and he marries Guðrún.

After this, Gunnarr shows his interest in marrying Brynhildr and, by means of magic, exchanges his appearance with his brother-in-law Sigurðr, who visits Brynhildr and obtains her betrothal. During this episode, Brynhildr fails to discover the trick while it is in progress but later confesses to Sigurðr that she recognized his eyes but that her good fortune was obscured by a certain power: "Ek undruðumk þann mann er kom í minn sal, ok þóttumk ek kenna yður augu, ok fekk ek þó eigi víst skilit fyrir þeiri hulðu er á lá á minni hamingju" (I was puzzled by the man who came into my hall, and I thought I recognised your eyes, but I wasn't able to see things clearly because of the veil which shrouded my good fortune).<sup>35</sup> In addition, Sigurðr took the ring he had previously given her and gave it to Guðrún. This unexplained action is arguably the result of the curse, for it is Brynhildr's discovery that the Andvaranautr ring is in Guðrún's hands that triggers a series of actions that will shape the fate of various characters and their families. This produces a series of prophecies that portend a fateful destiny. Sigurðr knows beforehand that a sword will

<sup>32</sup> *Völsunga saga*, 40. This sentence closely follows the strophe 23 of *Sigrdrifumál* (*Eddukvæði II. Hetjukvæði*, 318).

<sup>33</sup> Anthony Faulkes, ed., *Snorra Edda. Prologue and Gylfaginning* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2005), 29.

<sup>34</sup> *Völsunga saga*, 47.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

pierce his heart and that Brynhildr will not survive the conflict,<sup>36</sup> which in the end comes to pass.<sup>37</sup>

Predictions and prophetic dreams continued to be shaped around this grim fate. Shortly before dying, Brynhildr prophesies that Guðrún will marry Atli against her will, which will end up in disaster for both families. Indeed, after this marriage takes place, Atli dreams of his children's death as well as of his own. Once again, this future is made possible by the pernicious effects of the greed that the treasure itself produces, as it is Atli who decides to invite the Gjukungs to his territories in order to betray them and keep the gold for himself. A drunken Gunnarr accepts Atli's offer, because he cannot resist his destiny ("mátti ok eigi við sköpum vinna"),<sup>38</sup> a decision which is also followed by his brother Hogni, even though they were alerted by Guðrún, and their wives told them about their prophetic dreams foretelling their death. The influence of destiny on their decision is made clear by Guðrún, who regrets seeing her brothers in Atli's land and says, "Ek þóttumk ráð hafa við sett at eigi kæmi þér, en engi má við skopum vinna" (I thought I had advised against your coming, but no one can fight against his fate).<sup>39</sup> This destiny is no doubt produced by Atli's interest in gold, something that he makes explicit to the Gjukungs themselves once

36 Ibid., 55.

37 As we will note in Section V, Brynhildr commits suicide. Significantly, she was burnt together with Sigurðr. This might indicate that their union was desirable: Death is able to join together that which life separated. The desire to keep in memory such a union by this specific representation closely follows *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* but contrasts radically with *Helreið Brynhildar*, where it is made explicit that two separate pyres were made for Sigurðr and Brynhildr. The position of the author of *Völsunga saga* is also in line with numerous romances that were translated into Old Norse under the supervision of King Håkon Håkonsson during the thirteenth century. In *Tveggja elskanda strelngleikr*, the lovers die together in a snowstorm and are buried in the same stone grave (Robert Cook and Mattias Tveitane, eds., *Strelngleikar. An Old Norse Translation of Twenty-One Old French Lais. Edited from the Manuscript Uppsala De la Gardie 4-7-AM 666 b, 4°* (Oslo: Norsk Historisk Kjeldeskrift-Institutt, 1979), 276). Likewise, in *Tristramps saga* this tendency is also seen, although it is specified that Ísodd prevented Ísónd and Tristram from being buried together. Be that as it may, these impediments further emphasized the greatness of the lovers, as an oak tree grew so high from each grave that its branches came to intertwine over the gable of the church: "Ok má thví sjá, hversu mikil ást þeira á milli verit hefir" (And for this reason one can see how great was the love that was between them) (Marianne Kalinke, ed., *Norse Romance I. The Tristan Legend* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1999), 222).

38 *Völsunga saga*, 66.

39 Ibid., 69.

they arrive in his territory: “Verið velkomnir með oss [...], ok fáið mér gull þat it mikla er vér erum til komnir, þat fé er Sigurðr átti, en nú á Guðrún” (Welcome among us [...] and give up all the gold to which I am entitled, the treasure that was Sigurd’s and is now Gudrun’s).<sup>40</sup>

Atli’s wishes will put an end to the lives of the Gjukungs, but the secret that concealed the place where the treasure was located also dies with them. However, the consequences are also dire for the king. The dreams that troubled him had already foretold of this: Guðrún killed the children she had with Atli and served them to him as food. Moreover, she made cups from the skulls of their sons, from which Atli drank the blood of his offspring mixed with wine. After informing him of her trickery, Guðrún pierced her husband with a sword and set fire to the hall.<sup>41</sup> As we can see, the destruction of the Volsungs, Budlungs, and Gjukungs had been predicted by the dreams and prophecies of different characters. But these omens were structured by the curse of Andvari, whose agency required and triggered human desires and social transgressions such as oath-breaking.

### III. On The Definition of the Self and Ancestral Influences

Meyer Fortes has argued that in “societies with a social organization based on kinship and descent,” ideas on destiny can emerge as extrapolations of experiences that are produced within systems of relationships.<sup>42</sup> Among the Tallensi of West Africa, the ancestral spirits are closely related to destiny and exercise a continuous influence on human affairs, deciding

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 69.

<sup>41</sup> There are other cases within Old Norse narratives in which revenge is undertaken in a similar way. In *Völundarkviða*, the blacksmith Völundr is captured by a greedy king who forces him to produce wealth after cutting off his legs. But Völundr kills the king’s sons and makes cups from their heads, from which their parents drink (Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, eds., *Eddukvæði I. Goðakvæði* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornrítafélag, 2014), 428–437). We can also find more parallels in Greek tragedies. Sophocles tells how Tereus obtains the hand of Procne against her will; Procne longs for her homeland and wishes to live with her sister Philomela, so Tereus tries to take Philomela with them. However, during this journey, Tereus rapes her and cuts out her tongue to keep it a secret. But his doings are discovered. Procne, showing solidarity with her sister, kills the son she had with Tereus and serves him as food (Stefan Radt, ed., *Tragicorum Graecorum fragmenta*. Vol. 4, *Sophocles* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999).

<sup>42</sup> Meyer Fortes, *Oedipus and Job in West African Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 412.

over people's lives, health, and deeds. When manifested, these ancestors usually "make some demand or elicit submission," requiring service and obedience.<sup>43</sup> This model of organization produces the social dynamics represented especially in the first part of *Völsunga saga*, where the ancestors and family duties have the capacity to shape the characters' fate.

The inexorability of certain family obligations (see next section) is partially the result of the dependency of the self's identity on the family. When the definition of the self derives specially from kinship structure, an individual's outcome is more easily determined by family precepts. As Joan Bestard argues, kinship ideologies tend to attribute shared characteristics to family members and naturalize social and personal abilities: The more dependency there is on the family for the self's identity, the more structured their actions are.<sup>44</sup> Consequently, social expectations and family duties will be more easily accepted and presented as inescapable. These ideologies can certainly be expressed in narrative.

One of these qualities refers to the courage or temperament (*hugr*). Its association with the Volsungs appears when Borghildr incites Sinfjötli to take a drink of poison "ef hann hefði hug Völsunga" (if he had the courage of the Volsungs).<sup>45</sup> In a similar vein, Reginn also incites Sigurðr to kill Fáfnir by appealing to the courage he should have as a Volsung: "Ok þótt Völsunga ætt sé at þér, þá mun þú eigi hafa þeira skaplyndi" (but even though you are of the Volsung line, you'll scarcely have the Volsung temperament).<sup>46</sup> Although these characters' courage is being called into question, they are expected to act as they naturally should and are encouraged to follow the example of their ancestors by adopting behaviors that characterize their family condition. This is also evident during Sinfjötli's trial, during which he had his clothes sewn onto his own body. Unlike his Geatish half-brothers, Sinfjötli endured the pain. The deed establishes and naturalizes a hierarchy between Geats and Volsungs, as Sinfjötli descends from two members of the same family (the Volsungs Signý and Sigmundr) and is free of external "contamination." Moreover, he showed no fear when confronting a poisonous snake (*eitormr*), something that coincides

43 Ibid., 400.

44 Joan Bestard Comas, "La relación entre familia y nación en las sociedades modernas," *Historia contemporánea* 31 (2005): 543.

45 *Völsunga saga*, 18.

46 *Völsunga saga*, 24.

with the encounter between his kin Sigurðr and the serpent (*ormr*) Fáfnir. None of the Volsungs showed horror towards snakes, even if the animals' capacity to infuse fear is emphasized. This highlights a family distinction that separates the Volsungs from the rest of society.<sup>47</sup>

Prophetic gifts<sup>48</sup> can also be understood as inherited qualities, as Signý refers to her clairvoyancy as a *kynfylgia*.<sup>49</sup> Although the concept of *fylgia* (pl. *fylgjur*) has been commonly related to female supernatural characters or animals associated with an individual or his family, Zuzana Stankovitová has shown that these concepts generally refer to something more elusive and abstract. Regarding the word *kynfylgia*, it can be more accurately translated as a family trait.<sup>50</sup> In the case under analysis, "that which follows the family" (*kynfylgia*) is by no means a supernatural entity but rather an inherited faculty that defines family members.<sup>51</sup>

Other abilities, such as an immunity to poison, are also inherited by some of the Volsungs. However, not only is the conformation of a family identity expressed through these strategies, but it can also be (re)produced by the inheritance of what anthropologists denominate "inalienable posses-

47 The emphasis on natural courage takes on greater importance in comparison with the sources of *Völsunga saga*. The development of the trials to which Sinfjölli is subjected does not appear in the poetic sources, while Reginn does not reproach Sigurðr for his lack of courage in *Reginsmál*. Similarly, Borghildr does not appeal to the courage of the Volsungs in *Frá dauða Sinfjötla*. She simply uses words of disapproval – "ámaelisorð" (*Eddukvæði II. Hetjukvæði*, 284). It is clear that the saga author highlights this common nature of the members of a family in order to emphasize the importance of kinship in the definition of the individual. Significantly, the capacity to induce fear is also ascribed to this family. Apart from highlighting their noble and outstanding origin, the sharp eyes of Sigurðr and his daughter Svanhildr are described with the capacity to instill fear, something that both characters prove shortly before dying.

48 The concept of prophecy (*spá*) abounds in the saga and can be part of certain proverbs. When emphasizing Sigmundr's clairvoyant gifts, Brynhildr said: "ok var þar spá spaks geta" (*Völsunga saga*, 45). This is linked to a proverb that appears in other literary sources: "spá er spaks geta" (A wise man's guess is a prophecy). These words were for example uttered by Barði in *Grettis saga* when he received advice from his foster father Þórarinn the Wise (Guðni Jónsson, ed., *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, VII (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska forritafélag, 1936), 104).

49 *Völsunga saga*, 5.

50 Zuzana Stankovitová, "Following up on Female *fylgjur*: A Re-examination of the Concept of Female *fylgjur* in Old Icelandic Literature," *Paranormal Encounters in Iceland 1150–1400*, ed. Miriam Mayburd and Ármann Jakobsson (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020): 245–262.

51 See Gabriel Turville-Petre, "Liggja *fylgjur* þínar til Íslands," *Saga Book 12* (1937–1945): 119–126.

sions.” These possessions are objects that retain the connection with their original possessor and function as pillars of identity. As Annette Weiner puts it, “the object acts as a vehicle for bringing past time to the present, so that the histories of ancestors, titles, or mythological events become an intimate part of a person’s present identity. To lose this claim to the past is to lose part of who one is in the present.”<sup>52</sup> These objects are inherited as sacred gifts that shape power relationships and justify the oppression of those who do not have access to them, as these objects are generally removed from economic circulation: “No society, no identity can survive over time (...) if there are no fixed points, realities that are exempted (...) from the exchange of gifts or from trade.”<sup>53</sup>

In *Völsunga saga*, the Gramr sword fits these characteristics and retains an inalienable relationship to Óðinn. During the first part of the narrative, the god himself gives the Volsungs and Geats the opportunity to earn this sword. However, only Sigmundr – one of his descendants – manages to acquire it. When the Geatish king Siggeirr asks Sigmundr to give him the sword, the latter refuses his offer and keeps it, excluding Siggeirr from the privileged system of relationships the Volsungs had with their ancestor Óðinn. This leads to a war, in which most of the Volsungs die, and propitiates the rite of passage of Sigmundr and Sinfjötli.<sup>54</sup> During this process, the sword plays a prominent role in the formation of the identity of Sigmundr and Sinfjötli, as it is the element that allows them to escape from a burial mound and avenge their family by killing Siggeirr. This resurgence highlights the importance of the connection between the Volsungs and Óðinn in the configuration of their identity. By killing Siggeirr after claiming their connection to the god, they are also legitimating their status and strengthening the differences between social groups.<sup>55</sup>

52 Weiner, *Inalienable Wealth*, 210.

53 Godelier, *The Enigma of the Gift*, 8.

54 An analysis of this ritual can be seen in Mario Martín Páez, “Liminaridad y licantropía: sobre los ritos de paso y la ascendencia en *Völsunga saga*,” *Memoria y civilización* 24 (2021): 319–340. General information and theories on rites of passage have been prolifically provided by Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner: Arnold Van Gennep, *Les rites de passage. Etude systématique des rites* (Paris: Editions A&J Picard, 2011); Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967).

55 This is also highlighted by the name of the sword, as Gramr is a common *heiti* to refer to the king. This is related to another aspect of the swords, as they are generally associated with heroes and kings (Hilda Ellis Davidson, “Sword,” *Medieval Folklore. A Guide to Myths,*

Significantly, the maintenance and transmission of the sword to male descendants is presented as a female responsibility through the actions of Signý and Hjordís.<sup>56</sup> These women can adopt the role of the “kin-keepers,” as they take care of, protect, and reproduce the family identity acting “as linking points in the kinship structure.”<sup>57</sup> By guarding inalienable objects and favoring their inheritance, they reestablish the links and the memory that bind the family and the sword bearer to their ancestors.<sup>58</sup> But apart from the Gramr sword, Óðinn also gives counsel to his descendants and allows their subsistence by giving fertility apples when they are incapable of continuing the family line. However, as we will see in the next section, these gifts must be reciprocated by his descendants by showing obedience and serving him, accepting his demands as impositions of fate.

#### IV. Family Honor and Kinship Obligations as Inescapable Duties

Kinship obligations can be understood as “a collection of attitudes and behaviors related to the provision of support, assistance, and respect to family members” and may entail personal sacrifices for the family good and authorities.<sup>59</sup> Katherine Ratfile notes that societies with a collectivist perspective often have strict rules and role models for fulfilling family obligations: Such responsibilities are not considered optional and produce ongoing bonds of support for family members.<sup>60</sup> These obligations can

*Legends, Tales, Beliefs, and Customs*, ed. Carl Lindahl, John McNamara, et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 400). As we can see, these facets can also be linked to kinship, something also evident in the case of the famous sword Tyrfingr in *Hervarar saga*: It represents not only power, but a heritage understood in a broader sense, including both land and treasure, as well as identity and family ancestry (cf. Carol Clover, “Maiden Warriors and Other Sons,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 85 (1986), 38).

56 The name of Hjordís, meaning “sword-maiden,” emphasizes her link to this weapon.

57 Raymond Firth et al., eds., *Families and Their Relatives. Kinship in a Middle-Class Sector of London* (London: Routledge, 2006), 108.

58 As happens with courage and the capacity to infuse fear, the role of the sword within a kinship ideology is more notorious in the saga than in its sources. The Gramr sword lacks this historical framework in the eddic poems.

59 Andrew Fuligni and Wenxin Zhang, “Attitudes toward Family Obligation among Adolescents in Contemporary Urban and Rural China,” *Child Development* 74 (2004): 180.

60 Katherine Ratfile, “Family Obligations in Micronesian Cultures: Implications for Educators,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 23 (2010): 671–690.

be imposed not only through the possession of inalienable objects and the naturalization of the individuals' characteristics but can also be presented as inescapable through honor.<sup>61</sup> This reputation is related to the cultural validation of individuals' social position and triggers behaviors that coincide with social norms and expectations.<sup>62</sup> Honor can function as a collective responsibility, in belonging to a family and being affected by the kin's actions.<sup>63</sup> In *Völsunga saga*, the power of this social value to impose behaviors and protect the value of the family can be seen in the reactions of Völsungr when his daughter Signý tries to convince him not to attack Siggeirr:

“[...] ok strengða ek þess heit at ek skylda hvárki flýja eld né járn fyrir hræzlu sakir, ok svá hefi ek enn gert hér til, ok hví munda ek eigi efna þat á gamals aldri? Ok eigi skulu meyjar því bregða sonum mínum í leikum at þeir hræðisk bana sinn, því at eitt sinn skal hvern deyja, en má engi undan komask at deyja um sinn.”

([...] and swore an oath that fear would make me run from neither fire nor iron. Up to this moment I have acted accordingly, and why should I not keep to it in old age? And when the games are on there'll be no young women pointing a finger at my sons for fearing to meet death, for everybody must die sometime – there's no escape from dying the once !)<sup>64</sup>

Family honor is an effective way of controlling and legitimizing both the family structure and the values and obligations that individuals are expected to abide by.<sup>65</sup> Among these obligations we can find the inexora-

61 Focusing on medieval Iceland, William Ian Miller defines honor as a commodity (*Bloodtaking and Peacemaking. Feud, Law and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990)). However, there is generally no dissociation between honor and those who possess it, which makes its conception as a commodity questionable.

62 Julian Pitt-Rivers, “Honor and Social Status,” *Honor and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society*, ed. John Peristiany (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 19–77 and *The Fate of Shechem or the Politics of Sex. Essays in the Anthropology of the Mediterranean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 47.

63 Carlos Maiza Ozcoidi, “La definición del concepto de honor. Su identidad como objeto de investigación histórica,” *Espacio, tiempo y forma. Serie IV, Historia moderna* 8 (1995): 194.

64 *Völsunga saga*, 6.

65 Peter Dodd, “Family Honor and the Forces of Change in Arab Society,” *Middle East Studies* 4 (1973): 40–54.

bility of taking revenge. The power of kinship structure and blood is so strong that it can sometimes exercise influence even when the subject is not aware of his real ancestry. Even if Sinfjötli thought his real father was Siggeirr, he took the main role in the revenge and goaded Sigmundr into acting against Siggeirr. But as we observed in the case of Fáfnir, the body is a stage on which socialization processes converge.<sup>66</sup> These instances of revenge can be correlated with the wolf-like traits that both Sigmundr and Sinfjötli adopt. While they were preparing themselves to take revenge on their relatives, the Volsungs donned wolf skins with a strange power (*náttúra*) and adopted the animal's voracious behavior, howling and acquiring great powers. In this period, in which they were able to kill enemies more numerous than themselves, Sigmund knocks down Sinfjötli after boasting of his power, biting his throat, and causing wounds that would have caused his death if his ancestor Óðinn had not helped them.<sup>67</sup> Likewise, avengers or those who are expected to commit revenge in the future can be related to wolves, even if they are children. In *Volsunga saga*, this can be seen in Brynhildr's counsels, as she recommends that Sigurðr not trust the victim's kin, even if they are young, as "opt er úlfr í ungum syni" (there is often a wolf in a young son).<sup>68</sup> That is the reason Gunnarr was recommended to kill Sigurðr's child: "Al eigi upp úlfhvelpinn" (Do not let the wolf whelp rise up).<sup>69</sup> Thus, in the same way that Andvari's curse transformed Fáfnir's body, kinship structure can also change human bodies through the imposition of certain obligations and the requirement of fulfilling specific social roles. These cases of shapeshifting illustrate how society's morals can be introjected into one's body. As Maurice Godelier argues, social relationships are not simply reproduced between individuals; they are also at work within them.<sup>70</sup>

In contrast to the case of Fáfnir, the transformation of Sigmundr and

66 Terence Turner, "The Social Skin," in *Not Work Alone. A Cross-Cultural View of Activities Superfluous to Survival*, ed. Jeremy Cherfas and Roger Lewin (New York: Sage Publications, 1980), 112.

67 We can also find characters adopting the form and behavior of wolves during a process of revenge in *Hrólfs saga kraka* and in *Gesta Danorum*. Gerard Breen, "The Wolf is at the Door. Outlaws, Assassins, and Avengers Who Cry 'Wolf!', " *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 114 (1999): 33.

68 *Volsunga saga*, 40.

69 *Ibid.*, 57.

70 Maurice Godelier, *The Metamorphoses of Kinship* (London: Verso, 2011).

Sinfjötli is not related to the transgression of social norms but rather to their fulfillment. Paradoxically, accepting social norms leads to the destruction of society itself. This points out that the social structure itself is corrupt, thus criticizing the origin of conflict and defending the need for other social practices and models that deal with conflicts in a less aggressive and destructive way.

Concerning the power of kinship on the characters' destiny, showing obedience to an ancestor in *Völsunga saga* can even be prioritized over one's own survival. When Sigmundr was fighting and grasping the victory in a battle aided by his luck and spádísir (female entities associated with prophecies), his ancestor Óðinn appeared and broke his sword, changing the balance of the battle and ultimately provoking the defeat of Sigmundr's army. Just as Brynhildr's hamingja was overcome by the greater power of destiny, Sigmundr's luck was voided by his ancestor Óðinn. Moreover, at the end of the battle, his wife Hjörðis tries to heal him. However, the strength of the subordination to an ancestor is such that the hero refuses the offer of help made to him: “Margr lifnar ór litlum vánum, en horfin eru mér heill, svá at ek vil eigi láta græða mik. Vill Óðinn ekki at vér bregðum sverði, síðan er nú brotnaði. Hefi ek haft orrostur, meðan honum líkaði” ('Many have recovered when there was little hope,' he answered, 'but my good luck has turned and so I do not wish to be made well. Odin does not want me to draw sword, for now it lies broken. I have fought battles while it was his pleasure').<sup>71</sup>

Luck and good fortune were thought to be an important quality of kings and chieftains.<sup>72</sup> When the king's luck falters, the victory of his army in battle can turn out to be unattainable.<sup>73</sup> Even though Sigmundr was

71 *Völsunga saga*, 21.

72 Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth* (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 1999), 187, and “The Appearance and Personal Abilities of Goðar, Jarlar, and Konungar: Iceland, Orkney and Norway,” in *West over Sea. Studies in Scandinavian Sea-Borne Expansion and Settlement before 1300*, ed. Beverley Smith, Simon Taylor, et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 101–102.

73 See Aaron Gurevich, *Historical Anthropology of the Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 105. Peter Hallberg has suggested that concepts of luck and good fortune such as *gæfa* and *hamingja* have a long tradition within the Norse context which predates the arrival of Christianity (“The Concept of Gipta-Gæfa-Hamingja in Old Norse Literature,” in *Proceedings of the First International Saga Conference, University of Edinburgh, 1971*, ed. Peter Foote, Hermann Pálsson, et al. (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1973), 143–183).

protected by his luck and *spádisir*, he was overwhelmed by a superior force that shaped his destiny. The present is thus traversed by an ineludible past where the ancestors retain the power to construct relationships and influence both what their descendants are and what they ought to be, pushing them into a conditioned future with the same strength as fate itself. This obligation of accepting the will of an ancestor in spite of the terrible consequences is also seen at Sinfjötli's death, as he knew that the beverage that his father Sigmundr was commanding him to drink was poisoned, yet he obeyed and died as a result. The same logic is also to be found in the conformation of certain marriages. There are three cases that follow the same pattern: the marriages of Signý with Siggeirr, Brynhildr with Gunnarr, and Guðrún with Atli. Certainly, these cases present differences, particularities, and deep dynamics that would require an extensive analysis in order to provide a holistic explanation.<sup>74</sup> However, for the argument of this article, it is sufficient to note how vertical impositions are established and what kind of consequences they have. There are indeed common elements that need to be specified here. The parents force their daughters to marry a man for political reasons and with the intention of establishing alliances that could increase the power of their families.

Even if these women uttered their unwillingness to marry their future husbands, the vertical power imposed within the kinship system is such that they finally abide by the will of their parents. In the same way that Sinfjötli obeyed his father despite knowing that the result of that decision would be his death, Signý, Guðrún, and Brynhildr obeyed their parents even though they were aware of the disastrous consequences of doing so. As Guðrún states: “Petta mun verða fram at ganga ok þó at mínum óvílja, ok mun þat lítt til ynðis, heldr til harma” (“Then so it must be”, said Gudrun, though against my will, and there'll be little cause for rejoicing, but rather for grief.”)<sup>75</sup> Indeed, Atli betrays Guðrún's family and kills her brothers. In response to that, Guðrún kills the children she had with Atli and ends up killing her own husband as well. This pattern is also

74 This has already been undertaken elsewhere: Mario Martín Páez, “The Social Dynamics of Lovesickness and The Ecclesiastical Project's Expansion in Medieval Northern Europe,” *Mediaevalia. An Interdisciplinary Journal of Medieval Studies Worldwide* 44 (2023): 29–58 and *Destino, familia y honor en el Medievo Nórdico. Un análisis antropológico de la Völsunga saga y su contexto social* (Murcia: Editum, 2023).

75 *Völsunga saga*, 64.

to be found in Signý's marriage. Her husband Siggeirr kills most of the Volsungs, and Signý avenges her family by actively participating in the death of her husband and children. Moreover, she takes her own life and is burnt once the revenge is fulfilled. In the same vein, Guðrún tries to kill herself, although she survives the attempt.

In the case of Brynhildr, the Gjukungs ask Buðli for his daughter's hand and threaten to plunder his land if they do not get what they desire. Brynhildr's will is to fight them, but her father threatens her with disinheritance if she does not marry Gunnarr.<sup>76</sup> In Brynhildr's words, “[Buðli] kvað þó sína vináttu mér mundu betr gegna en reiði” / ([Buðli] said his favour would serve me better than his anger).<sup>77</sup> After her marriage, Brynhildr participates in the killing of her real love (Sigurðr) and starts to experience the turmoil that will also put an end to the lives of the Gjukungs and the Budlungs. As in the cases described above, Brynhildr dies by her own hand.

Judy Quinn understood this suicide as the result of Brynhildr's own interest, while Kirsi Kanerva considered this character to be an empowered woman who decides when her own life ends, thus establishing an emphasis on the individual.<sup>78</sup> However, individual agency cannot be understood without its relationship to social structure: They are two sides of the same coin.<sup>79</sup> When compared to the cases of Signý and Guðrún, we

76 Significantly, in *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* (st. 35–38) it is her brother Atli who threatens and forces Brynhildr to marry Gunnarr despite her unwillingness (*Eddukvæði II. Hetjukvæði*, 341–342). This serves to mark the verticality within the consanguine kinship and to establish a clearer comparison with the cases of Signý and Guðrún.

77 *Völsunga saga*, 53. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson argues that kinship ties were not always enough for the establishment of an alliance, as friendship was more predominant in Iceland during the Middle Ages. This would explain the existence of this bond within a family context (*Viking Friendship. The Social Bond in Iceland and Norway, c. 900–1300* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017).

78 Judy Quinn, “Scenes of Vindication: Three Icelandic Heroic Poems in Relation to the Continental Traditions of Þiðreks saga af Bern and the Nibelungenlied,” in *Medieval Nordic Literature in the European Context*, ed. Else Mundal (Oslo: Dreyers forlag, 2015), 90–99; Kirsi Kanerva, “Female Suicide in Thirteenth-Century Iceland: The Case of Brynhildr in *Völsunga Saga*,” *Viator* 49 (2018), 129–154.

79 Sherry Ortner, “Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26 (1984): 126–166 and *Anthropology and Social Theory. Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006). Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory. Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1979).

detect the same pattern in which agency constantly interacts with the social constraints that ultimately shape the character's fate. These events correspond to the Émile Durkheimian typology of fatalistic suicides, which derives "from excessive regulation, that of persons with futures pitilessly blocked and passions violently choked by oppressive discipline."<sup>80</sup> Apart from the family impositions, lack of consent or love is fundamental in the production of conflict. Using the same expression, the saga author states that none of these female characters' *hugr* smiled upon their husbands.<sup>81</sup> This clearly contrasts with other marriages in which there is consent and the paternal influence is absent. Helgi and Sigrún are married because of their own decision and establish a neolocal post-matrimonial residence, highlighting their distance from their original families. Moreover, their tragic outcome represented in eddic poems is absent in *Völsunga saga* and substituted by a peaceful ending, stating that they will live a long life. It seems clear that when vertical orders and the family and paternal precepts are inflexibly imposed, the path that the individuals follow leads to a fixed destruction that reminds us of other external and inescapable forces, such as the fate produced by Andvari's curse.

The pernicious effects of Andvari's curse is certainly mixed in with the effects of greed, oath-breaking, and blind obedience to family precepts. The destruction that the obedience to an ancestor and other family duties entails is the same as, or can even merge with, the effects of fate and greed. Apart from this destructive power, both fate and family obligations are imposed with the same inexorability. This is especially evident if we compare the discourses of Völsungr and his grandson Sigurðr explained above. Both characters pronounce the same words, which do not appear anywhere else

80 Émile Durkheim, *Suicide. A Study in Sociology* (London: Routledge, 2005), 239. I would like to thank the sociologist of suicide Andy Eric Castillo Patton for bringing up this reference in a discussion.

81 Thus, Signý states that her *hugr* does not make her smile with Siggeirr ("ok eigi gerir hugr minn hlæja við honum," (*Völsunga saga*, 5). Brynhildr also employs the same expression: "Eigi sá ek svá Gunnar, at minn hugr gerði hlæja við honum" (I've not looked at Gunnar so that my heart smiled upon him) (Ibid., 55), while the narrator says about Guðrún that "her heart [*hugr*] never smiled upon him [Atli]" ("En aldri gerði hugr hennar við honum hlæja" (Ibid., 64). The concept *hugr* has several meanings, and its richness is difficult to replace with a single word in English. As we have previously seen, it can refer to courage or temperament, but it can also be used in the sense of mind, feeling, affection, and desire. It is not only affection, then, that does not smile on the husbands, but also a set of broader individual dispositions.

in *Völsunga saga*: “eitt sinn skal hverr deyja” (everyone must die sometime). Völsungr reacts to family honor in the same way that Sigurðr confronts fate. The facticity of these external forces is such that the individuals merely accept them. It seems that the comparison between fate and kinship structure calls into question the individual’s ability to act in a prestructured world. The reactions of Völsungr and Sigurðr are also similar to Gunnarr’s response to his wife’s prophetic dreams. However, they are opposed to other sagas in which the character tries to avoid his future, such as *Orvar-Odds saga*, a narrative that is entirely conditioned by the prophecy that Oddr receives at the beginning of the story.<sup>82</sup> This character was reluctant to let the seeress reveal his future. In spite of his threats, the sorceress<sup>83</sup> reveals an ill future for him: He shall live for three hundred winters and will finally die from the venomous bite of a snake that will come out of the skull of his horse Faxi.<sup>84</sup> Trying to avoid his future, Oddr kills his horse and buries it. However, his adventures come to an end when he returns to Berurjóðr, where he sees the skull of his horse Faxi, from which a snake emerges and inflicts a fatal wound upon him.<sup>85</sup>

Nonetheless, both in the case of *Völsunga saga* and *Orvar-Odds saga*, regardless of whether destiny is accepted or avoided, in the end fate im-

82 Torfi H. Tulinius, *The Matter of the North. The Rise of Literary Fiction in Thirteenth Century Iceland* (Odense: Odense University Press, 2002), 159.

83 In Old Norse sources, the seeresses are generally welcomed, as confirmed by *Eiríks saga rauða* and *Nornagests þátr*. Significantly, in *Orvar-Odds saga* the sorceress reveals a promising future to those that treat her well but gives a dark fate to Oddr. One may wonder whether prophetic acts go beyond a mere revelatory function and might have a certain performativity and produce reality. A clear intention can be seen in *Grímnismál*. In this eddic poem, Grímnir is not well received by King Geirrðr, who imprisons him. However, the former reveals that he is Óðinn himself and says that a sword will kill the king, something that happens instantly (*Eddukvæði I. Goðakvæði*, 378–379). Anthropological works might illustrate this casuistic: Walter Ong and Bronislaw Malinowski have certified a close relationship between intention and discourse, although they focus on societies without written language. See Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the World* (London: Routledge, 1982); Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic Science and Religion and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1948).

84 Richard Boer, ed., *Orvar-Odds saga* (Leiden, 1888), 15–17.

85 This story might have been influenced by *The Russian Primary Chronicle* (s. XII), in which King Oleg of Kiev received the same forecasts as Oddr by his diviners. Even if Oleg was skeptical about the prophecy, he died from the bite of a snake that emerged from his horse’s skull. See Samuel Hazzard Cross and Olgerd Sherbowitz-Wetzor, eds., *The Russian Primary Chronicle. Laurentian Text* (Cambridge: The Mediaeval Academy of America, 1953), 69.

poses its reason and certifies that there are forces that exist beyond an individual's doings and decisions. As Samuli Schielke puts it, "destiny teaches us that free choice and individual autonomy are fictions – useful, inspirational fictions perhaps, but fictions all the same."<sup>86</sup>

## V. Conclusion

Social transgressions and the excesses demanded by kinship structure are presented as destructive forces with the same strength as fate itself. The effect of a curse and family duties have the same capacity to structure people's outcome. Fate is imposed and realized through the transgression of basic social norms that favor the normal course of the context of production of the saga. We have seen that the greed generated by Andvari's curse is severely punished, as it produces chaos and can also transform humans into monsters. This is in line with the Icelandic social structure during the Middle Ages. The laws of *Grágás* state that he who buries wealth for his own benefit will lose all his property and be condemned to exile for three years.<sup>87</sup> Likewise, those who use trade not to increase their social status but to enrich themselves are defined in negative terms and morally condemned.<sup>88</sup> Indeed, one of the most valued and necessary virtues of Icelandic chiefs and Norwegian kings was that of their generosity, which had to be reciprocated with service.<sup>89</sup> The circulation of wealth was a necessary condition for the maintenance of the system of relations. Without it, the relationship between peasants and chiefs or between kings and subordinates would fall, and along with it, the whole social and political system, as reciprocity was "the primary structuring mechanism of society."<sup>90</sup> The necessity of exchange shows the dependence of society on

86 Samuli Schielke, "Destiny as a Relationship," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 8 (2018): 345.

87 William Ian Miller and Helle Vogt, "Finding, Sharing and Risk of Loss: Of Whales, Bees and Other Valuable Finds in Iceland, Denmark and Norway," *Comparative Legal History* 3 (2015): 42.

88 Helgi Þorláksson, "Social Ideals and the Concept of Profit in Thirteenth-Century Iceland," in *From Sagas to Society. Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, ed. Gísli Pálsson (Middlesex: Hisarlik Press, 1992), 231–245.

89 Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth and Viking Friendship*.

90 Jesse Byock, "Governmental Order in Early Medieval Iceland," *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 17 (1986): 26.

the production of these social relations and the maintenance of a system of alliances. Cross-culturally, personal relationships based on reciprocal exchanges or redistribution are usually accompanied by messages and ideologies that condemn accumulation and can concur with the Uyangá's lama's saying: "Greediness is one of the principal paths to misery."<sup>91</sup> If wealth is not distributed through gifts or feasts, the behavior becomes socially disruptive. This destructiveness is emphasized in the saga by linking hoarding to the unstoppable decay of society.

On the other hand, the fulfillment of honor ceases to be positive when the structure imposes excessive obligations. Accepting social norms that derive from a corrupt structure is tantamount to transgressing the social norms necessary for the proper development of society, such as the distribution of wealth. Heroism was an element represented in the past that no longer had a place in medieval Iceland, where values such as moderation prevailed above all.<sup>92</sup> It is not surprising that strict vertical obligations produced within the natal family, including revenge, are punished. Torfi H. Tulinius points out that the symbolic dynamics of *Völsunga saga* reflect the concerns of thirteenth-century Iceland, it being the intention of the author to show "the absurdity of excessive vengeance and the importance of keeping commitments."<sup>93</sup> This is in line with attitudes that existed around the time the saga was written. Guðrún Nordal notes that Sturla Þórðarson also condemns the errors of his contemporaries, "the killings and the pride among his own kinsmen."<sup>94</sup> Significantly, with the gradual insertion of a state, practices of revenge tend to be condemned. Although Iceland did

91 Mette High, *Fear and Fortune. Spirit Worlds and Emerging Economies in the Mongolian Gold Rush* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017), 71.

92 David Clark, *Gender, Violence, and the Past in Edda and Saga* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 20–21. Vilhjálmur Árnason, "An Ethos in Transformation: Conflicting Values in the Sagas," *Gripla* 20 (2009): 217–240. Theodore Andersson pointed out how *Gísla saga* uses heroic contents to call them into question: These are actions that no longer have a place, being relegated exclusively to the past ("Some Ambiguities in *Gísla saga*: A Balance Sheet," *Bibliography of Old Norse-Icelandic Studies*, ed. Hans Bekker-Nielsen (Copenhagen: Royal Library, 1968), 7–42). Nevertheless, we see that in the heroic narratives there is already a judgment on these kinds of actions. The fact that they are carried out does not imply that they are defended, for it is precisely their destructive outcome that indicates that other practices might be more appropriate for the maintenance of society.

93 Torfi H. Tulinius, *The Matter of the North*, 158.

94 Guðrún Nordal, *Ethics and Action in Thirteenth-Century Iceland* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1998), 25.

not agree to pay tribute to the Norwegian king until 1262/1264, the royal ideology was present in the Icelandic context. Revenge was increasingly criticized in royal spheres: It was the king who should dispense justice.

In addition to defending family honor, showing excessive obedience to an ancestor is another family duty that was morally punishable. In this phenomenon, surrendering to parents when they decide on marriages becomes important. The prophecies that follow the regularization of these marriages reinforce their destructiveness and fateful quality. When love is truncated by social obligations, individuals become powerless in the face of external forces greater than themselves.<sup>95</sup> The condemnation of the violation of marital vows and excessive political control of marriages express the tensions that characterize societies in which arranged marriages are the norm. Ethnographic comparisons demonstrate that when love and personal choice encounter societal struggles to cope with the dominance of arranged marriages, personal wishes can take part in non-ordinary discourses such as poetry<sup>96</sup> and offer, as Charles Lindholm suggests, “a way of imagining a different and more fulfilling life” that confronts and resists vertical impositions.<sup>97</sup> At the time of the composition of *Völsunga saga*, the idea of consent was already known in Norway and Iceland, as suggested by letters sent in 1189 by the archbishop Eiríkr Ívarsson to the Icelandic bishops of Skálholt and Hólar. In these letters, any marriage in which the couple had consented before witnesses was valid.<sup>98</sup> However, this idea did not take shape in legal documents until the New Christian Law of 1275<sup>99</sup> and was later preserved in Jónsbók, a legal code brought to Iceland by the Norwegian King Magnus Håkonsson and accepted in 1281. Whether or

95 Similarly, Samuli Schielke has shown in his studies in Egypt that when marriage decisions are made by others and imposed vertically, notions such as fate (*nasib*) emerge as an expression of these social obligations that act as an external force beyond the control and desires of individuals: Samuli Schielke, *Egypt in the Future Tense. Hope, Frustration, and Ambivalence before and after 2011* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2015).

96 On this topic, see Lila Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments. Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (California: University of California Press, 1986) and “Shifting Politics in Bedouin Love Poetry,” in *Language and the Politics of Emotion*, ed. Catherine Lutz and Lila Abu-Lughod (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 24–45.

97 Charles Lindholm, “Romantic Love and Anthropology,” *Etnofoor* 19 (2006): 16.

98 Jón Sigurðsson, ed., *Diplomatarium Islandicum. Íslenzkt fornbréfasafn, sem hefir inni að halda bréf og gjörninga, dóma og málðaga og aðrar skrár, er snerta Island eða íslenzka menn*, I (Kaupmannahöfn: Hið íslenzka bókmenntafjelag, 1857–1876), 287–288.

99 Ebbe Hertzberg, ed., *Norges gamle Love inntil 1387* (Christiania: Malling, 1985), 36.

not these ideas influenced the composition of *Völsunga saga*, it is clear that literature conveyed and advocated messages that ran parallel to them. Reacting against the hierarchical impositions that often characterized arranged marriages in the context of production, the consensual relationships in *Völsunga saga* are validated through the depiction of the disasters involved in their dissolution.

All these social dynamics can be shaped by or compared to destiny. Both the guilty and the innocent suffer the pressure of structure, desires, and fate upon their lives and bodies. The definition of harmful behaviors acquires more fatalism when their effects are presented as unstoppable. Fulfilling this role, destiny emerges as an expression of social tensions and obligations, establishing moral boundaries which shape human behaviors.

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## Á G R I P

Í átt að mannfræði örlaganna: Örlagadýnamík í fornnorrænum bókmenntum eins og hún birtist í *Völsunga sögu*

**Efnisorð:** örlög, heiður, félagsleg mannfræði, fornnorrænar bókmenntir, *Völsunga saga*

Markmið þessarar greinar er að kanna flóknar og margslungnar tengingar milli örlaga og félagslegs siðferðis í fornnorrænum bókmenntum, með sérstakri áherslu á *Völsunga sögu*. Færð eru rök fyrir því að örlög séu ekki eingöngu ákvörðuð af máttarvöldum eða yfirnáttúrulegum verum, heldur móttist þau einnig af ástrikum,

félagslegum tengslum og samfélagslegri valddreifingu. Í greininni er rannsakað hvernig örlog, græðgi og eiðrof leiða sameiginlega til óhákvæmilegra og óumflýjanlegra endaloka. Einnig er skoðað hvernig skyldurækni einstaklinga við fjölskylduna felur í sér óumflýjanleg eyðingaröfl eins og örlogin sjálf. Ágirnd sem bæði er tengd örlogum og skyldurækni við fjölskylduna hlytur sams konar síðferðislega refsingu. Hvort tveggja er eyðileggjandi afl sem getur sett sýnilegt mark á einstaklinga og undirstríkað þannig brot þeirra. Með því að víkka út fræðilega umræðu um örlog innan miðaldarannsókna er greininni ætlað að vera framlag til þeirrar umræðu sem nú fer fram um örlog í félagslegri mannfræði og tengdum fræðigreinum.

## S U M M A R Y

Towards an Anthropology of Destiny: The Dynamics of Fate in Old Norse Literature as Illustrated by *Völsunga saga*

**Keywords:** Fate, Honor, Social Anthropology, Old Norse Literature, *Völsunga saga*

The aim of this article is to explore the complex and intricate relationships between fate and social ethics in Old Norse literature, with a specific focus on *Völsunga saga*. It will be argued that destiny is not solely determined by cosmic forces or transcendental entities but is also shaped by desires, social dynamics, and hierarchical structures. The article explores how fate, greedy attitudes, and oath-breaking work together to bring about a fixed and inescapable downfall. It further examines how kinship obligations are presented with the same inexorability and destructivity as fate itself. Both the covetous attitudes linked to destiny and kinship duties receive the same moral punishment, having the transformative capacity to impose a visible mark on individuals that highlights their transgression. By expanding the academic discourse on fate within Medieval Studies, this article seeks to contribute to the ongoing debate on destiny in Social Anthropology and related disciplines.

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