

Norse Mythology:
A Short Course with a Light Touch

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A Brief History of Norsemen

The aboriginal settlers in Scandinavia were the *Sami*, called Laplanders. The *Sami* are nomadic owners of reindeer herds, which they follow in annual forages along the northern rim of Europe from Norway to Russia and back.

The Norse were a north German people recognized in Roman times as traders and farmers, and hunters—as well as warriors. Unlike the rest of Europe, which concentrated into cities and had regional lords, the Norse lived in small and isolated villages, each led by a local lord. The coastal Norse were skilled sailors who had a knack for surviving under extremely harsh conditions. Their primary products were cod and herring, which were salted and traded with Europe, and walrus tusks, a valuable source of ivory. The Norse diet was heavily beef and dairy products, a diet that made them inordinately tall and strong.

The Norse were pagans who lived in ignorance of the Christianity growing around them; they were the last Europeans to become Christian.

The Advent of the Vikings

The Vikings were a class of early Norse who specialized in raiding (the term Viking means “raider”). In the earlier days they exploited coastal villages in their region as well as traders who passed by within their raiding radius. But with the advent of the very seaworthy Viking longboat, which moved at a fast 14-15 knots, and with the development of crude navigation devices like the lodestone, the Vikings left the littoral and ranged over the open seas, traveling great distances from their home ports—Greenland and North America included.

In 793AD the Vikings exploded onto Europe’s stage with their first raid on the Anglo-Saxon area of Northumbria in Britain. Early Viking raids were not directed at the villages—they were too poor—but at the Christian monasteries, where gold and silver could be found. The Vikings found the Christian priests an easy target because of their lack of defenses and their devotion to peace. The strategy was simple—they took religious relics, items like crosses, bowls, and perhaps St. Elizabeth’s fourth left pinky finger, and ransomed them back to the churches. These easy pickings led to additional raids until the entire British territory was terrified of the “Danes.”

Norse sagas attest to the powerful positions attained by some Vikings. In 860AD Ganger Hrolfr (called “Rollo”) was born in Ålesund, just below the Arctic Circle. Rollo was among the most notorious and successful of the Viking raiders, making several expeditions to northern France to harry the Franks. He was so successful that the Franks stopped fighting him and started bribing him. In 911AD the Frankish king, Charles the

Simple, deeded Rollo the land that is now much of Normandy; its new occupants, the Norsemen, came to be called Normans.

Yet another famous Viking was Ragnar Lödbrok, known from the Norse saga *Ragnars Saga Lodbrokar* and the subject of the recent television miniseries *The Vikings*. The story is a mixture of legend and reality rather than an historical statement, but it is typical of tales of Viking heroes.

1066AD was a banner year for Vikings and for Britain. At the time, Britain consisted of a number of independent states (Northumbria, Mercia, Wessex, Saxony); all except Wessex were under Anglo-Saxon rule. The Anglo-Saxon king, Edward the Confessor, died in January of 1066 and a scramble for his throne began. Harold Godwinson was elected Anglo-Saxon king, but contenders challenged him. Two of those contenders were Norwegian king Harald Siggurdson, called Hardrada (“stern counsel”), and William, Duke of Normandy (“William the Conqueror”).

In the fall of 1066 Harald Siggurdson and Harold Godwinson’s brother joined forces to invade northern England. They landed at in the Shetland and Orkney Islands in the far north and, after early successes, they worked their way south until both were killed in September at the Battle of Stamford Bridge, near York. Their remaining forces returned to Norway.

At the time of the northern invasion Harold Godwinson was expecting an attack in the south by the Duke of Normandy. Harold’s forces were concentrated in the south and were sent northward to counter Harald Siggurdson’s army. As soon as they could, they hurried south to meet the Duke of Normandy. As we know, Harold Godwinson was defeated at the Battle of Hastings; he was Britain’s last Anglo-Saxon king. Never divide your forces!

Only Alfred the Great’s Wessex remained independent. Alfred’s lifelong goal was a united England and he set the institutional foundations for what is now England. Those interested in this period might want to read Bernard Cornwell’s exciting historical fiction series *The Saxon Tales*.

From Paganism to Christianity

Norway was the last region of Europe to convert from pagan beliefs¹ to Christianity. The first to attempt at conversion was by King Olaf Tryggvason (Olaf I), who reigned briefly from 995-1000AD. According to the sagas, in about 985AD Olaf was on an expedition and met a seer who foretold that Olaf would be badly wounded in a battle, but he would recover and then would be baptized. After that he would oversee the conversion of many other pagans.

¹ See my notes on Norse mythology at www.fortunearchive.com.

The battle—and Olaf’s injury—came about. Olaf recovered and was baptized. When Olaf became king in 950AD, placing his seat at the new town of Trondheim, he attempted to force widespread conversion from the age-old paganism to the new Christianity. Those who refused were executed, which, of course, increased the number of Christians but not necessarily the number of believers. The much-maligned Olaf died in battle in 1000AD before full-scale conversion could take hold.

The next effort to replace paganism was by another Olaf, the more benign Olaf Harraldson, known as Olaf the Fat, who became Olaf II in 1015AD. Olaf II avoided the pitfalls of Olaf I’s efforts at conversion: rather than force conversion, he made Christian laws the laws of Norway and changed the institutional fabric of the country to encourage Christianity. Still, he encountered considerable opposition from non-Christians and, more importantly, from local lords who opposed his efforts to solidify his kingship by uniting Norway. In 1028AD King Cnut of Sweden and Denmark invaded Norway and deposed Olaf II, who was killed in a later battle with Cnut in 1030AD. In 1160AD Olaf II was canonized as St. Olaf.

Because the two Olafs had made headway toward Christianizing Norway, and because both Denmark and Sweden, with which Norway was now united under Cnut, were Christian, the conversion of Norway continued. It was largely completed by 1150AD, and fully completed by 1250AD. Initially, of course, the conversion was to Catholicism. But the Lutheran reformation led in 1537 led to the creation of the Church of Norway, to which about 85 percent of the population belongs.

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Norse Cosmology

What we call Norse cosmology (the origins and end of the Norse universe) or Norse mythology (the Norse religion) are not peculiar to the area we now call Norway. They are common to the areas settled by northern Germanic peoples—the Scandinavian countries, Iceland, and the northern European littoral.

Much of our knowledge of Viking cosmology and mythology comes from the Norse sagas contained in the *Poetic Edda*, a 13th Century collection of earlier poems of Norse history that is considered the greatest contribution in Scandinavian literature. An example of modern verse translations of some of the poems is *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrun*, a compilation of Norse poems translated to English by J.R.R. Tolkien and edited by his son. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy is an adaptation of Norse stories called the *Volsunga Saga* (of which more later) with an emphasis on the story of Sigurd and Gudrun.

The *Poetic Edda* was written in Skandic verse about 1200AD; the tales predated that by centuries. Circa 1250AD the Icelandic poet Snorri Sturlusson wrote the *Prose Edda*, a manual on writing poetry that used the earlier poems of the *Poetic Edda* and connected them together with prose evaluations.

According to Norse cosmology, in the beginning there was a place of cold, ice, and fog named *Niflheim*. Far to *Niflheim*'s south was a land of fire called *Muspelheim*. *Muspelheim* was populated by *Jötuns* (Giants) who created fire; the chief *Jötun* was the fire giant *Surt*. The area between *Niflheim* and *Muspelheim* was an uninhabited void.

The fires of the south crept northward and the ice of the north crept southward until they met and the fire melted the ice. At that boundary a new creature was created—a giant troll named *Ymir*. *Ymir* slept for ages, during which he gave birth to the first gods: *Odin* and his two brothers, as well as to a large and growing number of *Jötun*.

Odin and his brothers feared being outnumbered by the always growing number of *Jötuns* so they killed *Ymir*, whose body became the world—his brain became the clouds, his skull the sky, his blood the water, his bones the earth, his hair the grass and trees, and so on. *Ymir*'s eyelashes became *Midgard*, the land of humans; *Midgard* is, of course, Tolkien's Middle Earth.

Odin and his brothers became the chief male gods (the *Æsir*) and they created *Asgard*, a realm where they lived in a human-like society with their goddesses (the *Asanjur*) and their children, animals, and servants. The *Jötuns* were relegated to their own distant realm (*Jötunheim*).

Another lesser class of gods, the *Vanir*, arose in the realm called *Vanheim*. There were a total of nine realms, or worlds, organized around *Yggdrasil*, the Tree of Life.

Each creature had its own realm: the *Æsir* and the *Asynjur* in *Asgard*, the *Vanir* in *Vanaheim*, humans in *Midgard*, the *Jötun* in *Joutunheim*, the unworthy dead in *Helheim*; elves, dwarfs, trolls, and norms also had their own realms.

At the base of *Yggdasdril* were three *Norns*, women with knowledge of the future, who maintained the Tree of Life by feeding its roots, and who spun the Thread of Fate that defined the destinies of both men and gods. It is this thread that determines the events in our lives, not the gods. The Norse gods do not sit by the telephone waiting for a call for help from *Midgard*; rarely do they intervene in mankind's affairs—they are, primarily, observers.

The dead go to three places. Those who die bravely in battle, their hands still holding their swords, are whisked away by the *Valkyries* to *Asgard* to live in *Valhalla*, *Odin's* Great Hall; there they await *Ragnarök*, the final battle and the end of the universe as we know it. While in *Valhalla*, they engage in joyous combat during the day and festive partying and storytelling at night.

Those slain in battle who are worthy but not taken by the *Valkyries* to *Asgard* are taken by the goddess *Freyja* to her field *Fólkvangr*, also to await the final battle. The remainder (essentially women, noncombatant males, unworthy males slain in battle, or unworthy civilians) go to *Helheim*, the domain of the Goddess *Hel*.

The Norse Pantheon

The list of Viking deities is very long. The chief male deities, the *Æsir*, are the epitome of the manly arts—strength, war, pillage, wisdom, courage. Below the *Æsir*, but living and interacting with them, are the *Vanir*, gods generally associated with the finer things. The nine worlds are separate realms but they can interact, as when the gods in *Asgard* and the humans in *Midgard* travel to each other's realm over the Rainbow Bridge.

In addition, there is a very long list of other beings, including apocalyptic animals like *Fenrir* the Wolf and the *Midgard Serpent* and, as noted above, strange creatures like *Jötuns*, *Norns*, *Trolls*, *Elves* and *Dwarfs*. *Fenrir* the Wolf and the *Midgard Serpent* play an important role in the world's destiny.

The Norse gods are not immortal—they can die from accident or violence, but they are immune from death by old age or illness.

Some of the most frequently named gods and goddesses are:

- *Odin* (from whom we have “Wednesday”)—the chief and oldest of the *Æsir* and the god of wisdom and knowledge. *Odin* lives in *Asgard* with his wife *Frigg* and their sons *Hödr* (who is blind but able to see the future) and *Baldr*. *Odin's* thirst for knowledge was demonstrated when he plucked out one eye to give it to *Mimir* in exchange for knowledge from his knowledge, and when he

hanged himself on *Yggdarsil*, the tree of life, until the secrets of the runes (the Norse alphabet) were revealed to him. That Odin was wise and had all knowledge is a reflection of the best attributes of a Norse lord—he should not be directly involved in war but should cleverly guide his clan toward victory. *Odin* is associated with death—he sends his *Valkyries* to bring men who died in battle still holding their swords to *Valhalla*.

- *Tyr* (“Tuesday”), the *Æsir* god of war and the bravest of the gods. *Tyr* lost his right hand in the jaws of the great wolf *Fenrir* when the gods, knowing that *Fenrir* will cause great destruction, trapped him and tied him up. At the end of the *Æsir-Vanir* war *Tyr* and another god killed each other, demonstrating the mortality of the gods.
- *Thor* (“Thursday”), the *Æsir* blacksmith, was a god of strength and a protector of mankind whose hammer *Mjölfnir* was a magical weapon that generated thunder and lightning and could destroy mountains; when *Mjölfnir* was thrown it would fly back to *Thor*’s hand after doing its damage. *Thor* was red-haired, ill-tempered, and only moderately smart. His 540-room house was the first McMansion and the largest dwelling in *Asgard*.
- *Freyr*, the *Æsir* god of fertility and peace, was a *Vanir* until the war between the *Æsir* and the *Vanir* ended in a truce and *Freyr*, his sister *Freya*, and their father *Njördr*, (from whom “Nord” and “Norse”) were transferred to *Asgard* as hostages.
- *Freya* (“Friday), sister of *Freyr*, the goddess of love. She went to *Asgard* along with *Freyr* as a hostage and became an *Asanjur*.
- *Loki*, the god of deceit and cunning, a prankster who loved to play tricks on his fellow gods and on mankind and who created great troubles, as when he tricked *Hödr*, the blind son of *Odin* and *Frigg*, into killing his brother *Baldr*. *Loki* is the father of the Great Wolf *Fenrir*, of the *Midgard Serpent* (a sea serpent who will grow so large as to encircle the earth) and of the goddess *Hel*, who rules the netherworld of *Helheim*. *Loki*, clearly the black sheep of the gods. began as a *Vanir* but in some writings he was elevated to the *Æsir*. He, and particularly his children, will play a role in the end of the world.
- *Freya*, a *Vanir* goddess, selects the more meritorious of men slain in combat (those not taken by *Odin* to *Valhalla*) to be taken to her field *Fólkvangr*. The rest go to *Hel*.
- *Njördr*, a *Vanir*, the god of the sea and father of *Freyr* and *Freya*. He was transferred with his children to *Asgard* as a hostage after the *Æsir-Vanir* war.
- *Hœnir*, an *Æsir* and a god of leadership. *Hœnir* became leader of the *Vanir* after

he was sent to *Vanheim* as a hostage following the *Æsir-Vanir* war.

- *Mimir*, a *Vanir* and a god of wisdom, controlled access to the Well of Knowledge. He became counselor to *Hœnir* after they were transferred to *Vanhim* as hostages following the *Æsir-Vanir* war.

The *Æsir-Vanir* War

Originally the *Æsir* and the *Vanir* were separate groups: the *Æsir* lived in *Asgard* and the *Vanir* in *Vanheim*. But once upon a time the *Vanir* goddess *Freya* visited *Asgard*, where she was welcomed for her powers to divine the future. But many *Æsir* objected to her presence, arguing that her powers were being misused to gain wealth and that she was undermining the *Æsir* standards of good conduct. They tried to murder her, an act that angered the *Vanir*.

Eventually this hostility grew into war when *Odin* sent an army to invade *Vanaheim*. A long conflict ensued—the *Aesir* fighting under the honorable rules of war but the weaker *Vanir* countering with deceit and trickery. Eventually, after a long stalemate. There was a truce and an exchange of hostages: *Njördr* and his children *Freyr* and *Freya* were sent by the *Vanir* to *Asgard* in exchange for *Mimir* and *Hœnir*.

Ragnarök: The Norse End Time

The Norse end-time, called *Ragnarök*, will arrive with a great war when the *Æsir*, the *Vanir*, and the dead from *Valhalla* and *Fólkvangr* unite against the *Jötun*, the *Midgard Serpent*, *Fenrir* the Wolf, and the dishonorable dead from *Hel*. The *Midgard Serpent* will spew poisonous vapors and create giant waves until it and *Thor* kill each other. The *Jötuns*, led by the fire giant *Surt*, will make the seas boil and the land burn. *Odin* and *Fenrir* will kill each other. All gods will die with the exception of the children of *Odin* and *Thor*. They will survive to create a new life in a realm previously uninhabited and untouched by the war, called *Idavoll*. Two humans (yes, a male and a female) will survive by hiding under *Yggdrasil*, the tree of life. Those two humans will populate a new land called *Okolnir*.

And so it goes...

The Norse Sagas

Norse sagas attest to the powerful positions attained by some Norsemen, especially those called Vikings (“raiders”). One subject of a saga was Ganger Hrolfr (“Rollo”). In 860AD Rollo, an historical figure, was born in Ålesund, just below the Arctic Circle. Rollo was among the most notorious and successful of the Viking raiders, making several expeditions to northern France to harry the Franks. He was so successful that the Franks stopped fighting him and started bribing him. In 911AD the Frankish king, Charles the Simple, deeded Rollo the land that is now much of Normandy; its new occupants, the Norsemen, came to be called Normans.

Yet another famous Viking was the probably apocryphal Ragnar Lodbrök, known from the Norse saga *Ragnars Saga Lodbrokar*. He is the subject of *The Vikings*, a recent History Channel miniseries. The story is a mixture of legend and reality rather than an historical statement, but it is typical of tales of Viking heroes.: herosm, deceit, violence and pillage.

The Sagas are ancient tales of heroism, magic, treachery and violence that reflected the world around the northern European fringe. They were first written down by an anonymous Icelandic poet round 1200AD in the *Poetic Edda* using a poetry form called Skandic verse. A short time later, around 1250AD, another Icelandic poet named Snorri Sturlusson used the *Poetic Edda* as the foundation for what has become known as the *Prose Edda*. The Prose Edda is a manual on writing poetry that uses prose transitions from one Skandic verse to another.

Some of the Sagas are quite famous. The *Ragnar Löthbrok Saga*, mentioned above, is certainly among them. A more important saga, in terms of its contribution to modern English literature, is the *Völsunga Saga*, one of the central sagas in early Norse literature. It is an ancient tale of several generations of an heroic Norse family—the Völsungs—and it is the basis of J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and of Richard Wagner’s *The Ring of the Nibelung* opera cycle. Many of its themes have crept into English literature.²

The *Völsunga Saga* has something for everyone: heroism and cowardice, forthrightness and treachery, birth and death, revenge and forgiveness, murder and nurture, greed and good will, gods and men, and—best of all—everyone dies in the end! Integrated into this saga is the story of *Andvari’s Gold*, which entered the *Lord of the Rings* through the character of the greedy dwarf *Smaug* and the golden ring that brings troubles to all who hold it. This saga must also be in the Guinness record book for the number of proper names—everything and everyone had a name—and for the total of deaths by foul means.

² My source is *The Story of the Völsungs (Völsunga Saga)*, an 1893 book translated by Einikr Magnusson and William Morris; it is the first English translation of the saga and is still available.

Because of its importance, what follows is an extended précis of the entire *Völsunga Saga*. If you make it through the whole thing I award you a gold star. Anyone interested should read the book for more details—the language is magnificent.

The *Völsunga Saga* begins with King Sigi, son of Odin and Odin's wife Frigg, and goes through several generations of male descendants down to Sigurd, the last and the most heroic of the *Völsungs*. Of particular importance in both bulk and contribution are the chapters on Sigurd, his wife Gudrun, and Brynhild, a woman shield-warrior who loves Sigurd so much that she has him murdered. You will remember these as the protagonists in *The Ring of the Nibelung*, in which Sigurd is Germanized to Siegfried.

Sigi had a son, Renrir, of whom little is said. Renrir had a son, Völsung, who became King of Hunland. Völsung had twin children: a son (Sigmund) and a daughter (Signy). Here the story takes on heat.

Over her objections Signy was betrothed to King Siggeir of Gothland. At the wedding feast Odin appeared in his normal guise as an old one-eyed stranger with a gleaming sword. He buried the sword deep in a tree named Branstock and challenged everyone to extract it. All tried in vain until Sigmund's turn, when the sword came out easily. Sigmund kept the sword and named it Gram. (Thus did Odin start the tale of Excalibur, King Arthur, and Camelot.)

King Siggeir left the wedding feast feeling insulted by the Völsungs, so he vowed revenge. (To the Norse, revenge did not mean writing a nasty letter.) He invited Sigmund and King Völsung to visit Gothland. They accepted and when they arrived Siggeir's men attacked them and their warriors. All, including King Völsung, were killed with the exception of nine men who were captured, Sigmund among them. Every night a she-wolf came to the captives and ate one of them. On the ninth night (nine is an important number, the number of worlds in Norse mythology), when Sigmund was to be eaten, Signy came and slathered him with honey, even putting a large quantity into his mouth. When the she-wolf arrived it was distracted by the honey and began licking it. Eventually it went for the honey-gob in Sigmund's mouth, putting its tongue in Sigmund's mouth to extract it. (Thus began French kissing.) Sigmund bit the wolf's tongue off and it ran away.

After the she-wolf departed, Signy helped Sigmund escape from captivity and he lived in the Gothland woods while Siggeir thought he was dead. Signy visited often, sometimes staying the night. Signy had two sons with Siggeir whom she sent to Sigmund to be his assistants. He found them useless and lazy, and when he told Signy she said he should kill them, which he did. (So much for a Norse mother's unconditional love.) Then Sigmund and Signy had a son that she pretended to all, including Sigurd, was Siggeir's son; Sigmund thought the boy his nephew. The boy was named Sinfjotli and since both his parents were both Völsungs he grew to be a great warrior. Signy died soon after this.

When he was an old man Sigmund was killed in battle when he was left defenseless after Odin came down and destroyed the great sword Glam that he had given Sigmund at Signy's wedding feast. A Valkyrie (a female deity responsible for collecting the dead from battlefields and taking them to Valhalla or Fólkvanger) asked Sigmund if he wanted to be restored to life or go to Valhalla; Sigmund chose the high road.

Soon after his death, Sigmund's wife gave birth to a son named Sigurd, who inherited the pieces of the great sword that Odin had destroyed. A King named Regin raised Sigurd. Regin had two brothers named Otter and Fafnir. Otter was killed by Loki when he was on the form of an otter. Fafnir was a venomous worm (dragon) who protected a trove of gold that had been stolen from the dwarf Andvari. An important element of the story is that Anvari's gold was cursed—only trouble, pain, and death would come to the holder.

Regin and Sigurd made a pact: Regin would have the pieces of Sigmund's sword Glam reassembled as good as new if Sigurd agreed to kill Fafnir; Regin and Sigurd would then share the treasure. Regin delivered the restored sword and Sigmund used it to kill Fafnir (who took a long time to die so they had a lengthy conversation about life). When Fafnir was dead, Sigurd roasted his heart for a meal, during which he imbibed a drop of Fafnir's blood. The blood had the surprising effect of allowing Sigmund to understand the language of the birds. He discovered that the birds were chatting about how foolish Sigurd was—Regin has tricked him into killing Fafnir and now Regin plans to kill Sigurd so he can keep all of the treasure. (yes, a little bird told him!) So Sigurd decapitated Regin with the new sword, and kept Andvari's gold for himself.

Sigurd, now called Sigurd Fafnir's-Bane, has become Cock of the Walk. He is very handsome, with long wavy red hair and a very tall and strong build; he is the best warrior in a world that values warcraft above any other skill; he is very rich from Andvari's gold. He is every bride's hope and every mother-in-law's dream. His only blood-debt is the revenge of his father's death, a debt he soon collects when he kills the king who killed Sigmund.

Soon after this he comes upon a sleeping woman, a shield-warrior named Brynhild, whom he wakes up. They talk and he sees that Brynhild is very fair (every lady in the sagas is the "fairest of all," except the hags), she is very wise, and she can see the future; what a dish! For her part, she has vowed to her father to marry the greatest warrior in the land, and that, she knows, is Sigurd. Since they make such a good match they "pledge their troths." But when they meet again a few days later, Brynhild prophesies that Sigurd will marry her good friend, Gudrun, who is the daughter of King Giuki and whose family is called the Giukings.

And so it came to pass. Sigurd went to Gudrun's land at a time when her friend Brynhild was also visiting. At a feast for his arrival, Gudrun's mother gave Sigurd a cup of wine laced with a potion that made him forget his love for Brynhild and look fondly on Gudrun. The mother also worked to get her son Gunnar married to Brynhild, hoping to get Brynhild out of the way and to upgrade the future of her mediocre son.

Because Brynhild had promised her father that she would marry the bravest warrior in the land, she sets a test for Gunnar to pass to prove that he is just that: he must ride Sigurd's horse Grani through a great fire while carrying Sigurd's sword Glam; when on the other side of the fire he must defeat a band of warriors. If he can do this and survive, he will be as great a warrior as Sigurd and she will marry Gunnar.

Gunnar tries but fails even to go into the fire—he doesn't have the skill or nerve, and Grani just won't do it with the wimpy Gunnar on his back. So Gudrun's mother does some shape-switching: she makes Sigurd look like Gunnar and vice-versa. Sigurd, guised as Gunnar, takes Grani the horse and Glam the sword through the fire and defeats the warriors. Brynhild, thinking it was Gunnar who passed the test, agrees to marry Gunnar.

After the wedding things seem to be going well. But one day Gudrun gets angry with Brynhild and tells her about the shape-switch. Brynhild gets mightily pissed at the betrayal and she goes into a deep anger-induced depression: her husband is false, her true love is lost to her and has betrayed her, and her best friend was part of the plot. She vows revenge on Sigurd and compels Gunnar to kill him. Gunnar has taken an oath of loyalty to Sigurd which he won't break, so he entices his brother Guttorm into doing the deed. (Norse ethics are strange: you don't want to break an oath, but it's OK to arrange a murder?).

Guttorm steals into Sigurd's room when he is asleep and stabs him, but before Sigurd dies he throws Gram and kills Guttorm. With Sigurd's death the last of the Völsungs is gone and without a male heir. To add to the tragedy, even Granli, the faithful horse, dies—toppling over from heartbreak on learning of Sigurd Fafnir-Bane's death. The Giulkings take Sigurd's gold and Gunnar, now king, becomes very rich through this treachery.

Brynhild has had her revenge and she soon dies of heartbreak, but not before telling Gunnar about future events. Gudrun will go off to marry Atli, Brynhild's brother. Gudrun will resist the marriage so it will be fueled by another of Gudrun's mother's potions. Atli and Gunnar do marry, and they settle into an unhappy relationship. Eventually Atli begins to ponder the Giulkings wealth. He decides that after Sigurd's death Andvari's gold is rightfully Gudrun's, so since Gudrun is now his wife, Atli figures that the gold is his. He also decides that he has a blood-debt for the death of Brynhild, his sister.

So Atli invites all the Giulkings to visit him bearing their gold and goods. Gunnar and his one remaining brother Högni naively accept the invitation over the strong objections of their wives. (Norse men were brave, strong, and dumb; their women were weak but smart—it has ever been thus.) When they arrive, Atli's forces attack and, after great bloodshed, Gunnar and Högni are captured. They refuse to tell the whereabouts of the treasure and are murdered. Thus ends the Giulking line, except for Gudrun and a

surprise late entry, Nibelung (Högni's son and Gudrun's nephew). Also alive is Swanhilde, daughter of Sigurd and Gudrun.

Gudrun never liked Atli anyhow, but now she is appalled at his behavior and his murder of her two brothers. She conspires with Nibelung to kill Atli and Atli's two sons with Gudrun. Thus, Atli's line ends.

The only characters left standing are Gudrun, Swanhilde, and Nibelung. But don't worry, they will die soon. Well, not all—Nibelung will survive to inherit the Giulking estate, which includes Andvari's gold. And he will be the leadoff character for the *Nibelung Saga*.