

## The Icelandic Hǫgni: The Re-imagining of a Nibelung Hero in the Eddic Tradition

### 1. THE ICELANDIC HǪGNI<sup>1</sup>

Much critical attention has been paid to the character of Hagen in the *Nibelungenlied* and much ink spilt in various attempts to reconcile the murderer of the early part of the poem with the heroic warrior of the latter *âventiures*.<sup>2</sup> Franz Bäuml identified Hagen as “the archetypal ‘dark figure’”, a concept he defined as:

ambiguous, a combination of significant virtue with significant evil for a purpose which may itself be ambiguous, but the achievement of which demands a capacity of understanding, evaluation, knowing which exceeds that of other figures. Both, the combination of significant virtue and evil, and the superior knowledge and understanding of the figure, imply a certain demonic ingredient. (Bäuml 1986, 89)

Certain analogues of the German Hagen, such as Efnysien in the *Second Branch of the Mabinogi*, also demonstrate just such a mixture of evil and virtue; Efnysien, half-brother of Brân, king of Britain, senselessly mutilates the horses of the Irish king, Matholwch, upon learning that he is to marry his sister, Branwen, and later murders Gwern, his sister’s son, yet he is redeemed in the final battle through his self-sacrifice, which destroys the Irish Cauldron of Rebirth. When seeking a northern parallel to the “dark” Hagen, however, it is not to Hǫgni, his nominal counterpart in the Icelandic incarnation of the Nibelung legend, that Jesse Byock turns but to Egill Skalla-Grímsson, who demonstrates all the necessary characteristics of a “dark figure” (Byock 1986, 152).

Byock’s choice is entirely understandable since the Icelandic Hǫgni has not the requisite darkness to be considered a “dark figure”. Most obviously, Hǫgni does not appear in the eddic accounts of Sigurðr’s death as the slayer of Sigurðr. This is especially significant since it is the slaying of Siegfried which acts as the defining moment for Hagen in the *Nibelungenlied*, cementing his ‘dark’ reputation in later scholarship.<sup>3</sup> The effect of making Hǫgni innocent of Sigurðr’s murder in the *Poetic Edda* is to make him less problematic, arguably even less complex, as a character. Edward Haymes has noted that:

---

<sup>1</sup> Names follow normalized Old Norse orthography, except in quotations, though names in eddic translations have been emended for clarity.

<sup>2</sup> In the words of Gentry (1976, 6) “it is not even possible to say that scholarly opinion about Hagen is divided; it is fragmented”. Thelen (1997, 387 n. 6) provides a detailed, but outdated, summary of scholarship, both positive and negative in its assessment of Hagen, for a more recent appraisal of scholarship see Brown (2015). This debate is, however, largely confined to analysis of the B-version of the *Nibelungenlied* which contains the most nuanced and ambiguous presentation of Hagen’s character. The B-version forms the basis for Schulze’s 2010 edition of *Das Nibelungenlied*, which will be quoted throughout.

<sup>3</sup> Haymes (1986a, vi), for example, comments of the murder that “[t]his should make him dark enough for anyone’s definition”. Gentry concurs (1976, 7): “It is primarily the murder which has earned Hagen the opprobrium of most critics.”

There is some indication that the figure of Hagen may have been as much of a problem for the medieval reader as he is for us, since both the *Nibelungenklage* and the C version of the *Lied* make some attempt to clarify his status, to make him conform to an acceptable “mode of intelligibility.” Both texts attempt to do this by making him more clearly a villain. (Haymes 1986b, 73)

Hǫgni in the Icelandic tradition posed no such problem; there is no ambiguity in him, nothing to condemn.

Even were we to accept Haymes qualification that Hagen is a “dark figure” not so much because of his personal traits but “largely because he is a liminal figure, a hero who is at once mortal and in touch with the other world” (Haymes 1986a, vi) there is still no comparison. Hǫgni is central to the Gjúkung dynasty in the *Poetic Edda*. There is never any indication in any of the poems that Hǫgni is not the full brother of both Gunnarr and Guðrún, as opposed to the half-brother of *Þiðreks saga*<sup>4</sup> or the close kinsman yet vassal of the *Nibelungenlied*.<sup>5</sup> Given the significance accorded to the perception of social status in the *Nibelungenlied*, (it being Siegfried’s masquerade as Gunther’s vassal that causes the queens to quarrel), the import of such a social disparity between the two depictions should not be undervalued. Equally important, there is nothing supernatural about Hǫgni in the *Poetic Edda*; on the contrary, the picture in *Atlamál in grœnlensku*<sup>6</sup> of Hǫgni surrounded by wife, sons and brother-in-law is unusually prosaic and domestic. He is certainly not endowed with the supernatural parentage he is accorded in *Þiðreks saga*, nor does he experience any encounters with supernatural beings such as the nixies in the *Nibelungenlied*. Any notion of liminality as regards Hǫgni must be dismissed.

This is all to describe the Icelandic character of Hǫgni in negative terms: he is not Gunnarr’s vassal; he does not possess any link or have any contact with the supernatural world; and he is not Sigurðr’s killer. To describe him solely in these terms would be to do an injustice to the character. In order to build up a more positive, eddic-centric description of his character I shall consider several aspects of his presentation: Hǫgni as a brother, Hǫgni as a husband and father, Hǫgni as a warrior and Hǫgni as a king. It must be noted in passing that the nature of the *Poetic Edda* as a compilation of works means the character of Hǫgni which emerges from such an analysis should not be considered a single, unified creation. The depiction of Hǫgni undoubtedly varies from poem to poem according to the particular tastes of the individual poets and their narrative purposes. Nevertheless, common aspects of his treatment by eddic poets still emerge and it is my contention that a re-examination of the characterization(s) of Hǫgni in the *Poetic Edda*, or rather the lack of characterization, as I will demonstrate, alongside an appraisal of the specific narratological role Hǫgni fulfils in eddic poetry reveals how ideally suited Hǫgni is to the eddic aesthetic. So ideally suited that it is as if he were designed with eddic poetry in mind and thus may potentially be used as an example of the ways in which Icelandic eddic poets adapted and developed their subject matter to suit native traditions and tastes, providing a rare insight into their creative processes.

---

<sup>4</sup> It is usually considered that *Þiðreks saga*, although written in Old Norse, has been heavily influenced by the German tradition. For further discussion on this see Kramarz-Bein (2002).

<sup>5</sup> Hagen is several times described as the kin of the Burgundian kings, by both Kriemhild (895) and Gîselher (1130).

<sup>6</sup> Poetic titles follow standardized orthography; eddic abbreviations are as found in Neckel (1962).

## 2. HÖGNI AS A BROTHER

Högni's legitimacy in the *Poetic Edda* means that he is the full brother of both Guðrún and Gunnarr, though not of Guthormr.<sup>7</sup> The nature of eddic poetry, with its penchant for duologues, means the poets relied upon a small cast of characters, especially when compared to an epic like the *Nibelungenlied*. Consequently, Högni, ideally placed as a brother in the heart of the family unit, encompasses multiple narrative roles. In the poems *Brot af Sigurðarkviðu* and *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* he is the only speaking character not directly involved in the romantic entanglements of the central two couples and thus becomes the best proxy for the audience members themselves, who are, like him, party to the events without being directly involved in them. Moreover, he stands outside of the triangles of eddic tragedy described by Judy Quinn (2009, 306) whereby "each figure is a point in a triangle – between sibling and spouse". No such triangle can be constructed for Högni, who never experiences any moments of divided loyalty in the *Poetic Edda*. It is even possible to question whether Högni really exists independently of his siblings in the *Poetic Edda* or whether he is only ever used to throw their actions or decisions into relief. Hagen, in contrast, commits several actions, such as killing the ferryman, or asking Rüdiger to give him his shield, which are entirely his own, his response to circumstances in each case being a reflection of his own peculiar disposition and temperament.

As in the *Nibelungenlied*, Högni's relationship with Gunnarr is dominated by the giving of counsel. Though presumably the younger of the brothers, the balance of power between the pair seems entirely skewed in Högni's favour. Illustrative of this is the fact that Högni never seeks advice from his brother, while twice in *Skamma* alone Gunnarr seeks out Högni to obtain backing for his preferred course of action. First in stanza 14:

nam hann sér Högna heita at rúnom,  
þar átti hann allz fulltrúa. (Neckel 1962, 209)

He had Högni called to take counsel,  
for he knew him a trusted friend in all. (Larrington 2014, 179)

In this instance, though Högni objects to killing Sigurðr, a compromise is reached when Gunnarr proposes Guthormr commit the murder. Ursula R. Mahlendorf and Frank J. Tobin (1971, 131) point to Hagen's exclamation "Suln wir gouche ziehen?" (Schulze 2010, 252) ["Are we to rear cuckoos?"] (Hatto 1965, 117) to argue that Hagen "considers Siegfried as a threat to the power of the Burgundian court" in the *Nibelungenlied*, hence his implication that "they are raising a cuckoo who will kill all other birds in the nest, that is to say ruin them all". Katherine DeVane Brown agrees that "[f]rom Hagen's perspective, Siegfried must appear to be a threat to the stability and safety of the Burgundian court" but argues that it is rather Siegfried's deception of Brünhild which, "together with Siegfried's prior threats upon his arrival at Worms, creates reasonable grounds for suspicion that Siegfried would be willing to use similar deceptive means against the Burgundians" (DeVane Brown 2015, 369). Högni, however, foresees nothing threatening about Sigurðr in *Skamma*, enumerating the advantages of his kinship at some length:

---

<sup>7</sup> For fuller discussion of this see section 5 below.

‘Vitoma við á moldo menn in sælli,  
 meðan fiórir vér fólki ráðom  
 oc sá inn húnski herbaldr lifir,  
 né in mætri mægð á moldo,  
 ef vér fimm sono fæðom lengi,  
 áttomgóða æxla knættim.’ (Neckel 1962, 210)

‘We don’t know of happier men anywhere on earth  
 while we four rule the people  
 and the southern leader is alive,  
 nor of a mightier kindred in the world  
 if we should in time bring up five sons  
 of good family to augment our kin.’ (Larrington 2014, 179)

Later, Gunnarr also asks Hǫgni for “rúnar” (Neckel 1962, 214) [“secret counsel” (Larrington 2014, 183)] to prevent Brynhildr’s suicide and tellingly, failing to obtain any support in this instance, his intentions come to nothing. Such exchanges tell us much about the degree of trust placed in Hǫgni by his elder brother, but, whilst Hǫgni is clearly unafraid of speaking his mind, there is no indication of any particular familial bond between them. Indeed, there is an element of narrative necessity to these exchanges; discussion with Hǫgni is the means by which Gunnarr’s intent to murder Sigurðr is made apparent to the audience just as Hagen’s counsel motivates and sets the scene for Siegfried’s murder in the *Nibelungenlied*. Though the Icelandic tradition places a different label on their relationship the substance and narrative function of Hǫgni’s role as counsellor appears very similar to the German tradition.

It is the poet of *Atlakviða* who presents a dramatically different perspective as he tells of Gunnarr’s final request, when at the mercy of his Hunnish enemies:

‘Hiarta scal mér Hǫgna í hendi liggja,  
 blóðuct, ór briósti scorið baldriða,  
 saxi slíðrbeito, syni þjóðans.’ (Neckel 1962, 243)

‘Hǫgni’s heart must lie in my hand,  
 bleeding, cut from the bold horseman’s breast  
 with the sharp-biting knife from the prince’s son.’ (Larrington 2014, 207)

Several interpretations can be placed upon this strange utterance. Carolyne Larrington (2011, 179) calls the moment “unusual”, commenting that far from striving to be the last left living “often brothers vie to die before one another, so that they do not have to witness the death of someone they love”. The moment could be construed as one of great brotherly love, whereby Gunnarr seeks to take upon himself the pain of watching a brother die. Equally possible is that Gunnarr wishes to see his brother dead out of malice, for reasons unexplored. It may even be that the poet wanted an excuse to portray Hǫgni laughing as his heart was cut out; though surely he could have thought of a different instigation had he wanted to, like the poet of *Atlamál* who attributes the request to Atli instead. Tom Shippey presents an alternative interpretation. In his opinion “Gunnarr loves his brother, as he shows by his approving commentary on the heart – hard, unflinching, the heart of a warrior – and it may not be the case that he does not trust him. What is the case is that he has complete trust in himself. Once Hǫgni is dead, there is only one person who knows

where the hoard is, and that makes the secret completely sure” (Shippey 2013, xvii). Shippey’s suggestion that Gunnarr is preoccupied with concealing the Nibelung treasure follows Gunnarr’s own explanation in *Atlakviða* which likewise emphasizes his desire to be the only man aware of the hoard’s location:

‘er und einom mér      öll um fólgin  
hodd Niflunga:      lifira nú Hogni.

Ey var mér týia,      meðan við tveir lifðom,  
nú er mér engi,      er ec einn lific.’ (Neckel 1962, 244)

‘Now with me alone the Niflung hoard’s  
all hidden, now Hogni is not alive.

‘I was always in doubt while we were both alive,  
now I am not, now I alone live.’ (Larrington 2014, 208)

Not only does Gunnarr wish to conceal the gold, the gold itself may also contribute to his motivation, cursed, as it is by the dwarf, Andvari, in *Völsunga saga* (ch. 14), so that all who claim the hoard shall have nothing but death from it. The curse has already resulted in the similar surrogate fratricide of Fáfnir by Reginn, who urged Sigurðr to slay his brother. There are no explicit parallels drawn between Gunnarr and Reginn’s actions in either the *Poetic Edda* or *Völsunga saga* but the hoard’s long association with kin-slaying adds a further fateful inevitability to Gunnarr’s tactical demand for his brother’s heart.

Consequently, the request need not undermine their fraternal relationship. On the contrary, it is a scene that relies on the full-blood relationship between the two. In the *Nibelungenlied* Hagen’s refusal to divulge the treasure’s whereabouts may be read as a service to his king; whilst Gunther is still alive he does not have the authority to yield to Kriemhild’s demand. That his actions cause his lord’s death is regrettable but also unavoidable. Were Hogni Gunnarr’s vassal at this point in the *Poetic Edda*, however, Gunnarr’s request would lose much of its potency and Hogni’s resistance deprived of this brotherly sacrifice would lose much of its heroism. M. I. Steblin-Kamenskij (1982, 86) argued that “the greater the sacrifices a vengeance requires the more heroic it is” and Gunnarr’s request may be viewed in this light, with Hogni’s death as a necessary sacrifice to deny the Huns the treasure and thus be revenged upon them. It is precisely because of their fraternal relationship that Gunnarr knows Hogni will not shrink from making this sacrifice in order to safeguard their kingdom’s wealth and confound their enemy; to ask it of a vassal might seem callous. Indeed, Gunnarr has already been complicit in the deaths of his brother-in-law, Sigurðr, and half-brother, Guthormr, even if he never struck a blow himself. The final sacrifice of his full-blood brother is a fitting climax to Gunnarr’s kingship. After all the family members he has sacrificed and betrayed, he finds a willing victim for his schemes, strengthening the bond between the brothers even in death. Here, then, Icelandic poets have uniquely developed the relationship between Gunnarr and Hogni, reinforcing the theme of sibling loyalty that is so strong throughout the Icelandic tradition.

Hogni’s bond with his sister Guðrún also seems an especially close one in the most striking contrast to the antagonism which dominates Hagen and Kriemhild’s

interactions in the *Nibelungenlied*.<sup>8</sup> Guðrún's relationship with Hǫgni is easily the most intimate of her sibling relations. She never once speaks or even appears in a scene with Guthormr and only one exchange with Gunnarr is recorded, in *Atlakviða*, when she greets him upon his arrival at Atli's court. Two exchanges with Hǫgni are recorded, one in *Brot* and one in *Guðrúnarkviða II*, during which Hǫgni tells her what has become of her husband. Both times it is made very clear that only Hǫgni is strong enough to do this, giving their interactions an especial intimacy. In *Brot* it says (emphasis mine): “*Einn því Hǫgni andsvor veitti*” (Neckel 1962, 198) [“Hǫgni *alone* gave her an answer” (Larrington 2014, 170)].

Similarly, in *Guðrúnarkviða II* Guðrún recalls how:

Hnipnaði Gunnarr, sagði mér Hǫgni  
frá Sigurðar sárom dauða. (Neckel 1962, 225)

Gunnarr looked downwards, Hǫgni told me  
about Sigurðr's painful death. (Larrington 2014, 192)

Unlike *Brot*, however, in *Guðrúnarkviða II* the exchange is expanded as Guðrún upbraids her brother for the news he brings:

‘Hví þú mér, Hǫgni, harma slíca,  
vilja laussi, vill um segja?  
þitt scyli hiarta hrafnar slíta  
við lönd yfir, enn þú vitir manna.’

Svaraði Hǫgni sinni eino,  
trauðr góðs hugar, af trega stórom:  
‘Þess áttu, Guðrún, græti at fleiri,  
at hiarta mitt hrafnar slíti.’ (Neckel 1962, 225)

‘How Hǫgni, can you bring yourself to tell  
of such terrible harm to me, bereft of joy?  
May ravens tear out your heart  
across more far-flung lands than you can know of.’

Hǫgni answered once only,  
not inclined to be cheerful, out of great grief:  
‘More you'd have to weep for, Guðrún, from this:  
if ravens were to tear out my heart.’ (Larrington 2014, 192)

Guðrún's curse seems prophetic given the manner of Hǫgni's eventual death in the Atli poems and the extent to which Hǫgni's response succeeds in mollifying her is

<sup>8</sup> Although it is intriguing that when Kriemhild leaves Worms with her husband, Siegfried, she attempts to take Hagen and his kinsmen with her as part of the thousand knights promised her by Gernot (694–5). Her motives behind this request remain unclear. Hagen is undoubtedly the best of her brothers' vassals and she may request his service for this reason alone, but it is not impossible that she should want a comforting and familiar face in her new homeland and look to Hagen to provide it. His anger at her request is extreme, perhaps because he feels her request will impact upon his social standing and is therefore insulting to him. Conversely, the intensity of their feud provides an intimacy of a kind. Campbell (1996, 32) describes it as one of just two “passionate involvements” for Hagen, the other being his love for his vassal friends, Rüdiger and Volker.

debatable but his short reminder that she is lucky not to lack brothers as well as a husband should not be underestimated. From a purely practical point of view Hogni is entirely right, her position would be much more precarious were she a widow without family to turn to. Sigurðr's immediate attempt to comfort Guðrún as he is dying in *Skamma* recognizes the same when he adjures her:

‘Grátaðu, Guðrún, svá grimmliga,  
brúðr frumunga, þér bræðr lifa.’ (Neckel 1962, 211)

‘Do not weep, Guðrún, so fiercely  
young bride, you have brothers still alive.’ (Larrington 2014, 180)

Significantly, Guðrún makes no response to Hogni's comment, wordlessly implying that she recognizes the truth of his words. Indeed, as much as Guðrún's curse may foreshadow his death, his own words anticipate her terrible grief at his passing. Finally, Guðrún blames Hogni for bringing her the news but nothing she says actually implies she holds him responsible for her husband's death; her understandable eruption of grief and anger is aimed at Hogni largely because Gunnarr will not look at her or engage with her at all.

There are other hints in the *Poetic Edda* that the relationship between Hogni and Guðrún is an especially close one. In *Dráp Niflunga* Guðrún sends the warning ring not to her brothers but to Hogni in the singular: ‘til iartegna sendi hon Hogni hringinn Andvaranaut oc knýtti í vargshár’ (Neckel 1962, 223) [“as a sign she sent Hogni the ring, Andvari's Jewel, and twisted round it a wolf's hair” (Larrington 2014, 190)]. Her fond memories of childhood in *Atlamál* are sparked not by Gunnarr's name but by Hogni's:

‘hræfða ec um hotvetna, meðan Hogni lifði.

Alin við up vórum í eino húsi,  
lécom leic margan oc í lundi óxom’. (Neckel 1962, 258)

‘I could endure everything while Hogni was still alive.

‘We were brought up together in the same house,  
we played many games and grew up in the grove.’ (Larrington 2014, 220)

Though she goes on to lament her “bræðr” [brothers] in the plural, Gunnarr is not mentioned by name. Additionally, earlier in the same poem Atli exclaims:

‘kostit svá keppa, at klœcqví Guðrún!  
síá ec þat mættac, at hon sér né yndit.’ (Neckel 1962, 256)

‘Do all you can to make Guðrún sob,  
so that I might see her without a vestige of joy.’ (Larrington 2014, 218)

It is not Gunnarr who is mentioned next but Hogni, when he orders: “Takit ér Hogni oc hyldit með knífi” (Neckel 1962, 256) [“Take Hogni and butcher him with a knife” (Larrington 2014, 218)]. Although he also orders Gunnarr to be hanged, the major

impact lies in his first command, coming on the heels of his expressed desire to see his wife suffer and being also much more brutal in its vision of revenge.

Larrington argues that Guðrún, Gunnarr and Hǫgni share an “exemplary closeness” since none of them were fostered as children like Sigurðr or Brynhildr (Larrington 2011, 177). While the poems certainly reflect that, they also reflect a more nuanced picture of the Gjúkungs’ sibling relations, implying a closer relationship between Guðrún and Hǫgni than between Guðrún and Gunnarr. Such nuance extends beyond the consanguineal to the affinal, showing the profound interdependence between the two. The contrast between Hǫgni’s favourable attitude toward his brother-in-law, Sigurðr, and his hostility toward his sister-in-law, Brynhildr, is striking but accords well with Hǫgni’s warmer feelings for his sister.<sup>9</sup> Although complicit in the deception practised to win Brynhildr for Gunnarr, Hǫgni played no active part and is less severely compromised than his brother. He is thus more disposed to see the advantages in keeping Sigurðr alive and may be closer to his sister as a consequence. In contrast, Gunnarr’s choice of bride seems to put a strain on his relationship with Hǫgni, whose support for Sigurðr even in the face of his brother’s disagreement, shows that loyalties do not always divide along straightforwardly affinal-consanguineal lines. Not only as a brother, then, but also as a brother-in-law, there is a complexity and depth to Hǫgni’s horizontal kinship relations which defines and shapes his character.

### 3. HǪGNI AS A HUSBAND AND FATHER

Hǫgni is the only member of the Gjúkung dynasty to achieve dynastic success, in that he fathers several sons, one of whom outlives and avenges him and presumably continues the Gjúkung line into another generation. Hǫgni’s parenthood is by no means exclusive to the *Poetic Edda*; both *Piðreks saga* and the Faroese ballad tradition, among others, relate the efforts of Hǫgni’s son to wreak revenge upon his father’s killer. However, since it is only in the Icelandic tradition that Hǫgni is legitimate, it is only in the *Poetic Edda* that this son represents a continuation of the direct Gjúkung line. Throughout the *Poetic Edda* Hǫgni is the sibling most aware of the dynastic legacy they are creating, or rather the lack of it. When dissuading Gunnarr from betraying Sigurðr in *Skamma*, Hǫgni reminds him of the advantages of raising Sigurðr’s children among their own, arguing that they do not know of happier men whilst they rule together:

‘né in mætri mægð á moldo,  
ef vér fimm sono fæðom lengi,  
áttomgóða æxla knættim’. (Neckel 1962, 210)

‘nor of a mightier kindred in the world  
if we should in time bring up five sons  
of good family to augment our kin.’ (Larrington 2014, 179)

---

<sup>9</sup> The *Nibelungenlied* notably inverts this pattern, as Hagen vows to avenge the insult to Brünhilde (861) while viewing Siegfried with suspicion (864).



His consideration for the Gjúkung dynasty is not echoed by his brother. Ironically, it is Sigurðr who shows himself most in sympathy with Hogni's opinion, demonstrating a similar dynastic awareness when he laments his son's death as he himself is dying:

‘Ríðra þeim síðan, þótt siau alir,  
systor sonr slícr at þingi’. (Neckel 1962, 211)

‘No such sister's son, though seven you should nurture,  
would ride with them afterwards to the Assembly.’ (Larrington 2014, 180)

His implication that, whilst Guðrún may remarry and have other sons, none will be of the same calibre as his murdered heir reveals a dynastic concern mirrored in other versions of the legend which also show him prizing dynastic growth; in *Piðreks saga* it is the prospect of gaining brothers, in contrast to Brynhildr's lack of kin, which encourages Sigurðr to desert her for Guðrún (Quinn 2014, 84). It is the dynastic opportunities the Gjúkungs offer which seem to attract him.

Guðrún, however, seems curiously unaffected by the death of her son, far more concentrated on the horizontal lines of dynastic loyalty than on the vertical lines of succession.<sup>10</sup> Of the six children she is recorded as mothering in the *Poetic Edda* (a son and Svanhildr by Sigurðr, Erpr and Eitill by Atli, and Hamðir and Sqrli by Iónakr) not one outlives her.<sup>11</sup> In fact, whenever Guðrún directly addresses any of her children in the *Poetic Edda* it presages their imminent death, a circumstance of which, in the staging of the dialogues, she is entirely aware. Though awareness does not necessarily denote culpability on her part, the fatal overtones to Guðrún's maternity are, thus, inescapable, both to the audience, to Guðrún's children and to Guðrún herself. Indeed, Sqrli's admission in *Hamðismál* that “Vilcat ec við móður málom scipta” (Neckel 1962, 270) [“I do not want to bandy words with mother”] (Larrington 2014, 231) seems the perfect commentary on Guðrún's deadly exchanges with her progeny.

By her own admission in *Guðrúnarhvöt*, Svanhildr is her favourite child: “er ec minna barna balt fullhugðac” (Neckel 1962, 266) [“the one of my children whom I loved best in my heart”] (Larrington 2014, 228)]. Her grief for Svanhildr's death is second only to that for Sigurðr himself, unsurprising perhaps given that she was Sigurðr's daughter, yet Guðrún displays no such grief for her lost son by Sigurðr in the extant corpus of poems.<sup>12</sup> Kriemhild is similarly apathetic towards her son by Siegfried, refusing Sigmundr's plea to return to the Netherlands:

‘durch iuwer kindelîn.

<sup>10</sup> There is an interesting parallel to Guðrún's attitude in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, when Hervor declares: “litt rækik þat | lofðunga niðr | hvé synir mínir | síðan deila,” (Turville-Petre 1956, 21) [I care little about that, descendant of princes, how my sons afterwards will settle their differences], suggesting such an attitude may not be uncommon for avenging women in the Norse tradition.

<sup>11</sup> Sigurðr's son is killed by her brothers; Svanhildr is executed by her husband, Iormunrekkr; Erpr and Eitill die by Guðrún's own hand; and Hamðir and Sqrli are goaded by her into what amounts to a suicide mission.

<sup>12</sup> Since her son's death is overshadowed by that of his father it may be that grief for the husband simply eclipses grief for the son but she offers no comment on his absence and never reproaches her brothers for his death. Her preference for Svanhildr may be simply because she is a daughter, with whom she can more readily identify or because, unlike so many of Guðrún's children, Sigurðr's son included, Svanhildr survived into adulthood before she was killed. She certainly does not hesitate to sacrifice numerous sons for the sake of her single daughter.

daz ensult ir niht, vrouwe, wise lâzen sîn.  
swenne iuwer sun gewahset, der trôstet iu den muot.’ (Schulze 2010, 316)

‘for the sake of your little son – you must not leave him an orphan.  
When he grows up he will console you.’ (Hatto 1965, 142).

In the B-version of the *Nibelungenlied*, she has Ortlieb, her son by Etzel, brought deliberately into the hall in order to provoke a conflict:

Dô der strît niht anders      kunde sîn erhaben, [...]  
dô hiez si tragen ze tische      den Etzelen sun.’ (Schulze 2010, 552)

Since there was no beginning the fighting in any other way, she had Etzel’s son carried to the board. (Hatto 1965, 236).<sup>13</sup>

The passage is mirrored by a similar incident in *Þiðreks saga* (ch. 379), when Grímhildr encourages her son to strike Hǫgni, who strikes off his head in retaliation.

Only Hǫgni in the eddic corpus begets a child to outlive him and avenge his death. Not only does this son help Guðrún but he instigates the revenge plot in *Atlamál*. Guðrún wishes for Atli’s death (*Am.* 86:1–2) but seems no more inclined to act upon her words than Atli upon his expressed opinion that she should be stoned and burned on a pyre (*Am.* 87:1–2). The poet describes how:

Sáto samtýnis,      senduz fárhugi,  
henduz heiptyrði,      hvártki sér unði. (Neckel 1962, 260)

They sat in the same hall, directing rancorous thoughts at each other,  
threw out hateful words, neither was happy. (Larrington 2014, 223)

There is no implication that the state of affairs would not have continued indefinitely had Hniflungr, Hǫgni’s son, not “gat fyr Guðrúno, at hann væri grimmr Atla” (Neckel 1962, 260) [“He let Guðrún know that he felt loathing for Atli” (Larrington 2014, 223)].<sup>14</sup> It is only after Hniflungr’s appearance in the narrative that Guðrún takes an active role in obtaining revenge, encouraging Hniflungr and eventually striking Atli herself. Ursula Dronke (1969, 105) finds the pause in Guðrún’s actions illogical, considering that she “has already expressed her intense desire to kill Atli [...] and needs no one else to spur her on” and calling the presence of Hniflungr “ill-motivated”. The desire to place Guðrún at the centre of the poem should not blind us to all else, however. Dronke (1969, 103) dismisses Atli’s words in stanza 87 as “empty threats” whilst at the same time taking Guðrún’s to express a real sense of murderous intent. The poet does not distinguish her wishes as any less empty than her husband’s at this point, however, and just because we know Guðrún ultimately

<sup>13</sup> Though as Haymes (1986b, 85) notes “the revisor of the C-version removes Kriemhild’s guilt in this scene and transfers the blame totally to Hagen”.

<sup>14</sup> There has been some debate as to whether Hniflungr is a proper name here or a genealogical tag, simply identifying Hǫgni’s son as a member of the Nibelung dynasty (von See et al. 2012, 627–8). The name does not appear elsewhere but the role of Hǫgni’s son in avenging his father is well attested in *Þiðreks saga*, the Faroese *Høgna táttur*, the Danish ballad *Grimilds Hævn* and the *Hvenske Krønike* (von See et al. 2012, 628).

carries out her threats does not mean she always intended to do so. However self-assured the Guðrún depicted in other poems may have been, the Guðrún of *Atlamál* certainly needs the extra impetus Hniflungr provides to carry out her revenge.

Hǫgni interacts with only one of his sons, at the moment of his departure in *Atlakviða*, when his son, unnamed in this poem, bids them all farewell:

þá qvað þat inn æri      erfivorðr Hǫgna:  
'Heilir farit nú oc horscir,      hvars ycr hugr teygir!' (Neckel 1962, 242)

Then said Hǫgni's young heir:  
'Go well now and wisely, where your spirit draws you.' (Larrington 2014, 206)

His words are the final ones spoken before the kings' departure and it is interesting that in *Atlamál* it is once again a farewell from one of Hǫgni's family that takes centre stage, only this time it is his wife Kostbera's lingering goodbye that is used to give pathos to the moment. In neither case is any particular attempt made to endow Gunnarr's departure with the same overtones. Although Gunnarr's wife, Glaumvor, does appear at their departure, her final words are a warning for the messenger Vingi and not her husband, in stark contrast to the three whole stanzas devoted to Hǫgni and Kostbera's final farewells, when the poet is sure to underline the finality of their parting:

Sásc til síðan,      áðr í sundr hyrfi;  
þá hygg ec scǫp scipto,      scilðuz vegir þeira. (Neckel 1962, 252)

A long time they gazed before they turned away from each other;  
I think their fates were laid down there when their ways parted. (Larrington 2014, 215)

The poet's gloomy prognostication is in direct contrast to the hopeful sentiments just expressed by both parties. Kostbera is described as "blíð í hug sínóm" (Neckel 1962, 252) ["she felt cheerful"] (Larrington 2014, 215), commanding them to "Sigli þér sælir, oc sigr árníð" (Neckel 1962, 252) ["Sail safely and achieve your errand victoriously!"] (Larrington 2014, 215)]. Her anxiety of the night before seems to have disappeared or is being held very strictly in check, and Hǫgni, though he "hugði gott nánóm" (Neckel 1962, 252) ["he felt concern for his family"] (Larrington 2014, 215), also reassures them hopefully, recommending them to "[h]uggizc iþ" (Neckel 1962, 252) ["be in good spirits"] (Larrington 2014, 215), since "mǫrgum ræðr litlo, hvé verðr leiddr heiman" (Neckel 1962, 252) ["for many it makes no matter how they are accompanied from home"] (Larrington 2014, 215)]. Presumably he is referring to Vingi's treacherous presence in their company, since it is his presence at the parting that provokes Glaumvor's uncertainty as to the outcome of their journey. It is a touching farewell, filled with false hope on both sides but it is only in the *Atli* poems that this domestic side of Hǫgni's character appears, juxtaposing his death for his siblings' sake most harshly with the happy family life he could have led had he abandoned his loyalties to them. The poet seems eager to build him a life outside of his siblings, to make him an independent character rather than an adjunct to his brother's calamity.

There is no reason to suppose that Kostbera and Glaumvor are not complete inventions of the *Atlamál* poet, never appearing outside that poem and *Völsunga saga* which clearly draws upon it. Kostbera's function is not solely to enable the eddic poet to put a new domestic and more realistic spin on familiar material however.<sup>15</sup> Kostbera, Glaumvor and Guðrún form a community of women in the text and Kostbera's actions find close if perverted correspondences in Guðrún's. Both women play the hostess but Kostbera's superlative reception of her enemy, Vingi, which never breaks the laws of hospitality, can be contrasted with Guðrún's macabre serving of her own sons' flesh to her husband and his guests. Similarly, both women sacrifice their sons yet Guðrún does so by her own hand where Kostbera merely allows them to depart to certain but socially acceptable death in battle. Kostbera's relationship with Høgni can equally be compared with Guðrún's and Atli's, shedding further light on Høgni's characterization as a husband.

There is frequent dialogue between husbands and wives in *Atlamál*; the conversations between Kostbera and Høgni, Glaumvor and Gunnarr and the incessant bickering between Guðrún and Atli. Implicitly, the poet is comparing all the couples. The apparent loss of stanzas giving Gunnarr's replies to his wife's forebodings make it difficult to reach a fully informed decision but Høgni seems to compare favourably with his rivals. For all that Kostbera's predictions turn out to be the truth there is no suggestion that Høgni was foolish to dismiss her fears since "[a]llar ro illúðgar" (Neckel 1962, 249) ["all women think the worst"] (Larrington 2014, 213). Høgni's fearlessness is considered a matter for pride and he infects Kostbera with his confidence rather than absorbing her anxiety. The balance of power in their relationship, in which Kostbera ultimately defers to her husband, is in total contrast to Guðrún and Atli's relationship as Atli's failure to secure Guðrún's loyalty leads to his downfall. The poet is not blindly uncritical of such an arrangement and Høgni's dismissal of his wife's fears leads to his own demise but he avoids the kind of total calamity brought upon Atli's household when a wife is not successfully integrated into her husband's kin.

Whilst Høgni may be presented as a good husband, however, the use of his relationship with Kostbera to contrast with those of his married siblings indicates that once again the character is being used as a foil for Gunnarr and Guðrún. Although he may appear with wife and children, the context is still firmly one of horizontal relations. His actions are consistently presented with reference to those of his siblings and even the creation of an entire family is not enough to establish Høgni as anything other than a necessary prop for his brother and sister.

#### 4. HØGNI AS A WARRIOR

In keeping with his aggressive portrait in the German tradition Høgni is clearly the most warlike of the brothers in the *Poetic Edda*.<sup>16</sup> It is Høgni who initiates the

<sup>15</sup> Several scholars have noted *Atlamál*'s debt to the Icelandic family saga tradition, especially with regard to the dream sequences. Dronke (1969, 106) asserts that "the 'prose-like' elements in *Atlamál* should probably be attributed, not to the absence of poetic influences, but to the growing dominance of the prose saga as an artistic form. Late Eddic verse and the pre-literary family sagas clearly exerted a mutual influence upon each other."

<sup>16</sup> Given his very early death the aggressiveness of Guthormr is difficult to determine; though he needs to be primed with wolf's meat before attacking Sigurðr, Sigurðr's extreme prowess means this need not

slaying of Vingi in *Atlamál* in a scene where the poet lays stress on his preference for swift retribution as opposed to a more measured response to Vingi's warning:

Orð qvað hitt Høgni – hugði lítt vægia –,  
varr at vættugi, er varð at reyna:  
'Hirða þú oss hræða, hafðu þat fram sialdan!  
ef þú eycr orði, illt mundo þér lengia.'

Hrundo þeir Vinga oc í hel drápo. (Neckel 1962, 253)

Then said Høgni – he didn't weigh his words much –  
not one whit did he hesitate, as was afterwards proved:  
'Don't try to frighten us, don't try that again!  
If you drag out your words it will lengthen your miseries.'

They pushed Vingi down and they knocked him into hell. (Larrington 2014, 216)

There is no real need for Vingi's death in the poem, his betrayal has been carried out and although his change of heart comes too late, he has done his best to warn them of it; the only motivation can be to revenge his deception upon him and Høgni takes the lead. Just as Høgni is the purposeful one, who hammers on the gate to be let in (*Am.* 38:5–6) so Høgni deals, albeit futilely, with Vingi's revelation of treachery.<sup>17</sup> In *Atlakviða*, when Gunnarr apparently walks into the Hunnish court entirely unarmoured (*Akv.* 16:1–2) and does not offer the least resistance, it is even described how "Høgni varði hendr Gunnars" (Neckel 1962, 243) ["Høgni defended himself and Gunnarr" (Larrington 2014, 207)].

It is fitting then that bravery is the quality specifically associated with Høgni in Guðrún's whetting of her sons in *Guðrúnarhvöt*:

'Urðoa iþ glíkir þeim Gunnari,  
né in heldr hugðir, sem var Høgni.' (Neckel 1962, 264)

'You haven't become like Gunnarr and his brother  
nor any the more been brave as Høgni was—'. (Larrington 2014, 226)

Such a reputation is well-earned by the manner of his death in the *Poetic Edda*. His death, or rather his torture, is a dramatic moment in the *Atli* poems with his heart being hewn from his chest while he still lives. In fact, his death is rather assumed than reported. The poet's final comment upon him in *Atlamál* is that "qvǫl hann vel þolði" (Neckel 1962, 257) ["he endured the torture well" (Larrington 2014, 219)], for all the world as if he survived the experience. In *Atlakviða* the report is similar, our

---

reflect adversely upon his courage and valour. Nevertheless, Høgni's bravery is clearly the more celebrated.

<sup>17</sup> It is perhaps the closest Høgni ever comes to acting without reference to his siblings and purely as a reflection of his own character and even then, the actual action of slaying occurs in the plural. The episode bears some similarity to Hagen's unnecessary killing of the ferryman (1559) and it is interesting that Høgni's most independent action should be paralleled, if obliquely, by his German counterpart, perhaps hinting at the mutual development of both traditions in frequent contact with and response to one another.

final image of Högni is of him defiantly laughing in the face of his own mutilation, not the moment his resistance ceases, his animation disappearing with the loss of his life (*Akv.* 24). The timing of his death, just over halfway through both poems, contrasts with his destruction in the *Nibelungenlied* where it is his death and not Gunnarr's which marks the final end of the Nibelung resistance and with his survival in *Þiðreks saga* for a whole day after battle has ended (ch. 393).

The evidence of pictorial representations indicates that Gunnarr's death was by far the more celebrated in the Norse tradition. There are numerous examples in Scandinavia from c.1200 onwards of images depicting Gunnarr playing the harp with his feet in the snake pit, often on church portals or fonts (Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir 2012, 1030). Only once is Högni's death depicted pictorially and even then, it is accompanied by an image of Gunnarr in the snake pit.<sup>18</sup> Although he is clearly the better warrior, Högni's death is subordinate to his brother's in the Icelandic tradition. It is Gunnarr's death which marks the final downfall of the Nibelungs and Högni's death, though heroic, is to serve his brother's purposes, concealing the treasure's whereabouts from the Huns, and at his brother's behest. Once again, we see Högni's characterization and actions as dependent upon those of his brother and in both *Atlakviða* and *Atlamál* it is Gunnarr and Guðrún's reactions to their brother's death and not the moment of death itself that are most important to the poets.

Högni becomes the consummate brother, but in order to make him so, the Icelandic poets appear to have stripped him of personal traits. Take, for example, the greed for the Nibelung hoard which Hagen is so eager to acquire in the *Nibelungenlied*. It is to guard the secret of this treasure's whereabouts that Hagen sacrifices himself in the *Nibelungenlied* yet although Gunnarr professes to have the same motive we see markedly little of the famous hoard in the *Poetic Edda* (though the lacuna in the manuscript may be partly responsible for this silence) and the desire for it is mentioned with regard to Gunnarr and Atli but not Högni. Gunnarr expresses his opinion in *Skamma* that:

‘gott er at ráða            Rínar málmi  
oc unandi            auði stýra’. (Neckel 1962, 209)

‘It's good to have hold of the Rhine-metal  
and pleasantly to enjoy wealth’. (Larrington 2014, 179)

In contrast, Hagen is closely bound up with the treasure in the *Nibelungenlied*. Hagen is behind the hoard being brought to Burgundy and he is the one to sink it in the Rhine, “er wând, er sold in niezen” (Schulze 2010, 330) [“imagining he would make use of it some day” (Hatto 1965, 149)]. Similarly, in *Þiðreks saga* (ch. 425) it is Högni's son who inherits the keys to the mountain where the treasure is hidden, implying it was his father who placed it in the cave. Interestingly, Marco Battaglia has noted that all of what he calls the “fairy elements” in the Nibelungen cycle “occur as principal or more marginal details around the dominant theme of a magnificent treasure” (Battaglia 2009, 293). One could include Hagen in this number in the *Nibelungenlied* and *Þiðreks saga*, in both of which he displays the supernatural element so necessary for a “dark figure”. It may be significant that when this

<sup>18</sup> A portal from c.1200 from the stave church at Austad, East Agder, Norway shows a man cutting out the heart of another (presumably Högni but possibly Hjalli) whilst a figure stands by holding a container in which to place it and yet another looks on, hands outstretched to receive it (Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir 2012, 1030–1, fig. 7)

supernatural edge is lacking, his association with the treasure decreases accordingly. Hǫgni shows not the slightest hint of greed in the *Poetic Edda*; for him it is family considerations which are the driving force behind his actions. The same may be said of Atli, instead of simply desiring the gold further motivation has been introduced in the *Poetic Edda* by grafting Brynhildr onto Atli's family tree and having him blame the Nibelungs for her death, as he accuses them in *Atlamál*: “sendoð systir Helio, slícs ec mest kennomc” (Neckel 1962, 255) [“you sent my sister off to hell, that upsets me most” (Larrington 2014, 218)]. Once again the eddic poets wish to centre the plot around family loyalties and consequently the gold is sidelined.

Hǫgni as a warrior, therefore, is perhaps the aspect where we see the greatest similarity with the character of Hagen but the poetic focus has undeniably shifted. Hǫgni may be the best warrior in the Gjúkungs' company but he is not to take centre stage. Instead his role is orientated around those of his brother and sister, his services entirely at their disposal and not his own.

## 5. HǪGNI AS A KING

It is only in the *Poetic Edda* and *Vǫlsunga saga* that Hǫgni is presented as Gunnarr's legitimate brother, son of their mutual father, named King Gjúki in the *Poetic Edda*. In *Þiðreks saga* Hǫgni is the son of an incubus, who seduced the queen in the absence of the king, here named Aldrian although Aldrian more usually appears as the name of the fairy and indeed in the *Nibelungenlied* Hagen is several times called ‘son of Aldrian’, although, as A. T. Hatto (1965, 194 n. 2) notes, only from *âventiure* 25 onwards. Hagen is obviously still closely related to the Burgundian dynasty, since Kriemhild remarks to him in *âventiure* 15: “du bist mîn mât, und bin ich der dîn” (Schulze 2010, 262) [“you and I are of one blood” (Hatto 1965, 121)] but he is very firmly categorised as a vassal. Mahlendorf and Tobin (1971, 128) describe Hagen as “a subordinate and as a man who respects the established order. Hagen is a vassal not merely by accident of birth but by nature and outlook”.<sup>19</sup> For Francis Gentry (1976, 7) “Hagen functions as the chief vassal of the king, a position which he zealously fulfills”. His service to the Burgundian kings is often highlighted as the major, if not the only, motivation for his actions, both treacherous and honourable in the *Nibelungenlied*. As Holger Homann (1982, 764) writes, “when necessary, he does not hesitate to lie, deceive, and dissemble in the service of his king, and his loyalty justifies his actions”.

By contrast, Hǫgni serves his king, Gunnarr, not as a vassal but as a brother. That he is a full co-ruler with his brothers seems implied by his words in *Skamma*: “fiórir vér fólki ráðom” (Neckel 1962, 210) [“we four rule the people” (Larrington 2014, 179)].<sup>20</sup> He, unlike Gunnarr, is never explicitly referred to as the son of Gjúki,

<sup>19</sup> Thelen (1997, 394) strenuously rejects such a reading. In her view “Hagen cannot be called the consummate vassal. In *âventiure* 37 Hagen's vassalage is suspect when he places the preservation of his own life above his highest duty as vassal. If his ultimate duty is to serve and protect his kings, he fails them now, unwilling to sacrifice his own life to defend them.” Campbell (1996, 26) concurs that “from the moment the Burgundians left Worms for Hungary, he [Hagen] had functioned and would continue to function not as a vassal loyally serving the interests of his masters but as a leader in his own right with his own personal agenda.” Nevertheless, though evaluations of Hagen's performance as a vassal have varied, the concept of vassalage has remained a consistent lens through which the character of Hagen has been interpreted and appraised.

<sup>20</sup> Aside from Hǫgni, the speaker, and Gunnarr, the addressee, exactly who is referred to by “fiórir vér” remains disputed. von See (et al. 2009, 353) notes several possibilities for the remaining two: two other

except when identified with his siblings in the collective as the sons, children or heirs of Gjúki. However, Gunnarr does refer to him as “sonr þjóðans” (Neckel 1962, 243) [“prince’s son” (Larrington 2014, 207)] in *Atlakviða*, which gives strong emphasis to his royal status and there is no need to refine overmuch on the lack of patronymics. It is Guðrún whose status as the daughter of Gjúki is most frequently repeated in the *Poetic Edda* (twelve times in its various permutations)<sup>21</sup> and even Gunnarr is only three times called Gjúki’s son or heir.<sup>22</sup> In the case of Guðrún it is easy to see why eddic poets would be so keen to stress her parentage since her character is rooted in her continued identification with the Gjukung dynasty rather than her husbands’ kin groups, leading her, in the end, to reject both husband and children in favour of her brothers. In Gunnarr’s case the appellations occur either when he is being implicitly contrasted with Sigurðr or when his position as the natural enemy of Oddrún’s family needs to be reinforced. Hogni is never juxtaposed with another character in like manner (when he is compared with Hjalli it is his bravery and not his lineage which distinguishes him), nor is there ever any real need to emphasize his loyalties since they remain so steadfast throughout and the situation never arises which might conceivably challenge his allegiance. Further evidence of his parentage can be seen in *Dráp Niflunga* where one of his sons is named Gjúki, presumably after his grandfather, just as in *Þiðreks saga* Hogni’s son is named Aldrian after Hogni’s supposed father, the king.

What puts his legitimacy in the eddic tradition beyond doubt, however is Hyndla’s account of the Gjukung dynasty in *Hyndluljóð*, in which she lists:

‘Gunnarr oc Hogni, Giúca arfar,  
oc iþ sama Guðrún, systir þeira;  
eigi var Guthormr Giúca ættar,  
þó var hann bróðir beggja þeira’. (Neckel 1962, 292)

‘Gunnarr and Hogni, heirs of Gjúki,  
and likewise Guðrún, their sister;  
Guthormr was not of the line of Gjúki,  
though he was brother of both of them’. (Larrington 2014, 249)

In almost all other variants of the Nibelung legend the illegitimate brother or more broadly the non-royal kinsman is Hogni/Hagen and it is invariably he who kills Sigurðr/Siegfried. In the eddic corpus, however, it is Guthormr who, primed with wolf’s meat, does the deed and it may be no coincidence that he, rather than Hogni, is also the one stigmatized as the illegitimate brother in *Hyndluljóð*.

That Guthormr was not of the line of Gjúki is not recorded in *Völsunga saga* but it is attested in *Skáldskaparmál*, where Snorri writes of Gjúki and Grímhildr: ‘Börn þeira vǫru þau Gunnarr, Hogni, Guðrún, Guðný. Guthormr var stjúpsonr Gjúka’ (Faulkes 1998, 47) [Gunnarr, Hogni, Guðrún, Guðný were their children. Guthormr was Gjúki’s stepson]. While Snorri designates Guthormr as a stepson of Gjúki, Klaus von See (et al. 2000, 767) notes that: ‘Die Lieder des eddischen

---

sons of Gjúki; Guthormr and Gjúki, himself; or Guthormr and Sigurðr. If Sigurðr is included then the authority of the kingship implied may be diminished since he is so easily removed from power but Hogni’s inclusion among the rulers remains indisputable and noteworthy.

<sup>21</sup> *Br.* 6:2 and 11:2; *Gðr. I* 16:2; *Sg.* 2:4 and 30:8; *Hlr.* 13:2; *Gðr. II* 38:6; *Gðr. III* 2:2; *Akv.* prose; *Am.* 50:1; *Ghv.* 9:2; *Hm.* 2:8.

<sup>22</sup> *Grp.* 47:6; *Sg.* 4:5; *Od.* prose.



Nibelungenzyklus scheinen dagegen davon auszugehen, daß Guthormr ein leiblicher Sohn Giúkis ist' [The poems of the eddic Nibelung cycle seem in contrast to assume that Guthormr is a biological son of Gjúki] pointing to *Grípisspá* 50 and *Skamma* 20–3 as evidence. The exact nature of the Guthormr's parentage seems unclear in the Icelandic tradition therefore, but the fact of his different lineage is as certain as Hǫgni's royal pedigree.

Despite the superficial difference in rank, however, Hǫgni's actions have much in common with the vassal of the German tradition. Throughout the *Poetic Edda* Hǫgni is single-mindedly committed to serving the interests of King Gunnarr in a manner reminiscent of Hagen in the *Nibelungenlied*. In *Brot* and *Guðrúnarkviða II* he is the one to inform Guðrún of her husband's death and whilst this is indicative of a close relationship with his sister it can also be said that somebody had to inform her and by taking the job upon himself Hǫgni is sparing his brother and king the painful necessity. We should also note the similarity to the German tradition wherein Hagen is the one most eager to declare the deed. Admittedly, the grief-stricken way Hǫgni tells Guðrún is very different from Hagen's callous order to have the body left outside her door (1000–1) but the parallel demonstrates that Hǫgni's action in telling Guðrún proves nothing about his kingship.

In *Skamma*, Hǫgni disagrees strongly and vocally with Gunnarr about preventing Brynhildr from committing suicide, to the point of flatly refusing to intervene with the harsh pronouncement:

‘Letia maðr hána      langrar gongo,  
pars hon aptrborin      aldri verði!’ (Neckel 1962, 214)

‘Let no man hinder her from the long journey,  
may she never be born again from there!’ (Larrington 2014, 183)

In *Atlakviða* and *Atlamál*, Hǫgni also speaks his mind to advise against accompanying Atli's messengers to his court but the evidence of the *Nibelungenlied* suggests that vassals could be just as strenuous in their disagreement as a fellow king might be. Hagen firmly objects to the mission to Hunland in the *Nibelungenlied* (1456) and resists Gunther's attempts to use him as a simple message bearer (528–9) upon their return from Iceland. As a vassal, he is forced to yield if his king insists, as when his objections to the journey to Hunland are overridden (1461), but a similar constraint seems to be at work on Hǫgni. Where the bonds of vassalage may not bind him the bonds of brotherhood will and he, too, never fully pits his will against his brother's but always capitulates when his brother insists, as, for example, with the murder of Sigurðr. Kingship, therefore, is not a feature deeply ingrained in Hǫgni's characterization. In contrast, his fundamental attitude could be read as more that of a vassal than a king.

Of course, the style of kingship represented in the poems is itself anachronistic, an imagined picture of kingship in the heroic past, coexisting at times uneasily with hints of a more familiar scene as when the Icelandic Þing is twice referenced.<sup>23</sup> The oddity in Hǫgni's attitude, though, lies more in the way his every action is geared towards his siblings and not himself, as has been continually demonstrated and could potentially argue for his recent elevation from vassal to king

---

<sup>23</sup> Sg. 27:4, *Gðr II*. 4:1.

by eddic poets. It is fair to say that the roots of Hǫgni's kingship do not go very deep in the Icelandic tradition.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The Icelandic Hǫgni emerges, therefore, as the perfect foil for his siblings. Even his interactions with his wife and children are depicted largely to throw his sister's marital relations into relief and, although the better warrior, he dies to fulfill his brother's and his king's wishes. His habit of service reveals an underlying similarity with his position as vassal in the German tradition and makes both his kingship and his kinship look like fairly recent developments in the poems of the Icelandic tradition, a tradition that was, after all, very adept at creating new siblings. Brynhildr's kinship with Atli, for example, endows them both with an entire family never glimpsed in the German variants and horizontal as opposed to vertical expansion seems to have been the eddic preference.<sup>24</sup>

Recognising the innovations in Hǫgni's Icelandic characterisation is not to imply anything about the relative 'originality' of the two traditions. Rather, we must move away from the idea that the German and Icelandic traditions split cleanly and recognise that there must have been numerous points of contact between the two at various different stages in the Nibelung legend's development. The Icelandic Hǫgni can be at once both an inspiration for and a response to the characterisation of Hagen in the German tradition. The material defies a simple stemma.

It seems likely that Hǫgni was assimilated into the Nibelung legend at an early stage, though precisely where from and what his earliest role in the legend was is more difficult to determine.<sup>25</sup> Definite pronouncements upon this issue cannot be made and I would only suggest that the character of Hagen of Troneg was deeply rooted by the time the *Nibelungenlied* came to be recorded, with a legendary history centred around his youth at the court of King Etzel,<sup>26</sup> whilst Hǫgni in the *Poetic Edda* is less so. Although it is sometimes suggested by editors that the Icelandic tradition, being sparser, is somehow more 'primitive', there is nothing to discourage the notion that Hǫgni the brother and king was an innovation of Icelandic poets, who elevated him to kingship.<sup>27</sup> There is no room for a vassal in the eddic aesthetic, which thrived on family dynamics and loyalties and relied upon a small and tightly knit cast of characters, all of whom had to be related either by blood or marriage. Nor does the

---

<sup>24</sup> In the *Poetic Edda* Brynhildr is the daughter of Budli and sister to both Oddrún and Atli. *Völsunga saga* (ch. 23) gives further details of another sister Bekkhildr, wife of Heimir, who is also Brynhildr's foster father.

<sup>25</sup> Although many of the legend's central characters appear in the historical record there is no mention of a Hǫgni/Hagen. The names Siegfried and Brunhildr can both be traced to Merovingian sources; Gunnarr and Gjúki correspond to the names Gundaharius and Gibica, attested in the sixth century Burgundian law code, the *Lex Burgundionum*, whilst Ildico, clearly a reflex of the German Kriemhild, is reported in the chronicles as the name of the wife with whom Attila was celebrating his marriage when he died in AD 453.

<sup>26</sup> That the author of the *Nibelungenlied* knew such legends is demonstrated by Etzel's reminiscences about Hagen's childhood at the Hunnish court in *âventiure* 28 (1753–4), Hagen is described as Etzel's "friunt von Tronege" (Schulze 2010, 508) ["friend of Troneck" (Hatto 1965, 218)].

<sup>27</sup> Hatto (1965, 389), for example, states with no uncertainty that "there can be no question but that the Norse version is the more and the German version the less archaic", on the basis of no real evidence. While the composition of certain eddic poems such as *Atlakviða* and *Hamðismál* may well predate the earliest surviving accounts of the German tradition, the relative archaism of the traditions themselves is far harder to judge.

concept of vassalage translate well into early medieval Icelandic society, which had no such formal system of social hierarchy. A chieftain's thingman is perhaps the closest parallel but such a position does not encode the same complex feudal relationship between knight and lord as on the Continent. Tying Hǫgni to the Gjúkung dynasty by blood rather than vassalage avoided overextending the cast of characters beyond the family and opens up alternative narrative possibilities for his character. His innocence in the Icelandic tradition might even be attributed to this brotherly relationship with Gunnarr and Guðrún, which encouraged the exoneration of the princes who were to die at Atli's court and the transferral of responsibility onto Guthormr, who is killed immediately by Sigurðr as he is dying. Guthormr's death removes the desperate need to kill her husband's murderer which drives Kriemhild to seek revenge and thus allows Guðrún to maintain her familial loyalties as well as leaving Hǫgni alive for a heroic last stand at Atli's court.

As a final piece of evidence in this regard, *Hamðismál*, generally considered to be an early eddic production and among the oldest poems in the *Poetic Edda*,<sup>28</sup> refers elliptically to Sigurðr's death as the "dǫð Hǫgna" (Neckel 1962, 269) ["achievement of Hǫgni" (Larrington 2014, 231)], a line also appearing almost verbatim in *Guðrúnarhvot* (4:4), suggesting the tradition of Hǫgni's guilt may not have been unknown in the North.<sup>29</sup> That it is not the tradition of Hǫgni's guilt but Hǫgni's innocence that dominates, however, speaks as much to the distinctive character of the Icelandic reception and development of the Nibelung legend as to the evident intermingling of the two traditions. Taken together with the foregoing analysis, the true multiplicity of Hǫgni's character in Iceland emerges, varying from the murderer also found in the German tradition, to the consummate brother, warrior and counsellor of *Skamma* or *Atlakviða*, to the thoroughly domesticated family-man of *Atlamál*, almost certainly one of the youngest poems in the *Poetic Edda*.

Nevertheless, a comparative appraisal of his characterisation throughout the *Poetic Edda* reveals his essentially functional underpinnings; Hǫgni's marital and filial relations serve only to contrast with the marital and dynastic failings of his brothers and sisters and despite his prowess in battle his death never achieved the same reputation in Scandinavia as his brother's. Whilst he cuts a heroic figure he is not the hero of the piece as Hagen may be construed in the latter half of the *Nibelungenlied*. He is an immensely useful character to eddic poets, however. Where the *Nibelungenlied* has a cast of thousands to flesh out the action, the *Poetic Edda* has only Hǫgni who can act as an onlooker, counsellor, battle companion, messenger. At least one named character outside of the central protagonists is needed to give substance to the idea that the drama is not taking place in an isolated setting and to provide perspective on the unfolding tragedy. Hǫgni fulfills exactly this function. In fact, he is so convenient a character with his utter lack of personal turmoil (in striking contrast to his siblings) that it seems likely he was designed for eddic poetry to accommodate the minimalistic eddic aesthetic by serving as a general everyman and preventing the need for a larger cast of characters. The eddic Hǫgni seems a truly

<sup>28</sup> On the vexed question of dating eddic poetry see Thorvaldsen (2016).

<sup>29</sup> The reference is oblique and bears multiple interpretations but von See (et al. 2012, 740 and 883) is in no doubt that: "Aus der besonderen Hervorhebung Hognis als Täter in Ghv. 4 wie im Hm. 6 ließe sich höchstens der Schluß ziehen, er habe bei der Tötung Sigurds die Waffe geführt, wie dies im mhd. Nibelungenlied ([...] 16. âventiure, Str. 981) und in der Þiðr.saga k.391 [...] der Fall ist." [From the especial emphasis on Hǫgni as the perpetrator in Ghv. 4 as in Hm. 6, one can at most draw the conclusion that he bore arms at the slaying of Sigurd, as is the case in the MHG *Nibelungenlied* (Âventiure 16, stanza 981) and *Þiðreks saga*, ch. 391.] See also Jón Helgason (1967) who evaluates the connotations of "dǫð" as either positive or negative in this context.

Icelandic creation, demonstrating that eddic poets were not afraid to re-imagine their source material in radical ways in order to accommodate it within their own poetic traditions and aesthetic.

#### WORKS CITED

- Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir. 2012. "Gunnarr and the Snake Pit in Medieval Art and Legend." *Speculum* 87 (4): 1015–49.
- Battaglia, Marco. 2009. "In the Beginning was the Ring: Mythological Echoes and Heroic Allusions in the Origin of the 'Nibelungen Hort'." In *Studi anglo-norreni in onore di John S. McKinnell*, edited by Maria Elena Ruggerini, 289–303. Cagliari: CUEC.
- Brown, Katherine DeVane. 2015. "Courtly Rivalry, Loyalty Conflict, and the Figure of Hagen in the *Nibelungenlied*." *Monatshefte* 107 (3): 355–81.
- Byock, Jesse. 1986. "Egill Skalla-Grímsson: The Dark Figure as Survivor in an Icelandic Saga." In *The Dark Figure in Medieval German and Germanic Literature*, edited by Edward R. Haymes and Stephanie Cain Van D'Elden, 151–63. Göppingen: Kümmerle.
- Bäumli, Franz H. 1986. "Changing Patterns of Cohesion: The Dark Figure in Later Middle High German Narrative." In *The Dark Figure in Medieval German and Germanic Literature*, edited by Edward R. Haymes and Stephanie Cain Van D'Elden, 89–98. Göppingen: Kümmerle.
- Campbell, Ian R. 1996. "Hagen's Shield Request: *Das Nibelungenlied*, 37<sup>th</sup> Adventure." *The Germanic Review* 71: 23–34.
- Dronke, Ursula, ed. and trans. 1969. *The Poetic Edda: Heroic Poems*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Faulkes, Anthony, ed. 1998. *Snorri Sturluson. Edda. Skáldskaparmál. 1. Introduction, Text and Notes*. London: Viking Society for Northern Research.
- Gentry, Francis G. 1976. "Hagen and the Problem of Individuality in the 'Nibelungenlied'." *Monatshefte* 68 (1): 5–12.
- Guðni Jónsson, ed. 1954. "Völsunga saga." In *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda*. Vol. 1, edited by Guðni Jónsson, 107–218. Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfan Forni.
- Hatto, A. T., trans. 1965. *The Nibelungenlied*. London: Penguin.
- Haymes, Edward R. 1986a. "Preface." In *The Dark Figure in Medieval German and Germanic Literature*, edited by Edward R. Haymes and Stephanie Cain Van D'Elden, iii–vi. Göppingen: Kümmerle.
- . 1986b. *The Nibelungenlied: History and Interpretation*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- . trans. 1988. *The Saga of Thidrek of Bern*. London: Garland.
- Homann, Holger. 1982. "The Hagen Figure in the *Nibelungenlied*: Know Him by His Lies." *Modern Language Notes* 97 (3): 759–69.
- Jón Helgason. 1967. *Kviður af Gotum og Húnum: Hamðismál, Guðrúnarhvöt, Hlöðskviða, með skýringum*. Reykjavík: Heimskringla.
- Kramarz-Bein, Susanne. 2002. *Die Biðriks saga im Kontext der altnorwegischen Literatur*. Tübingen: A. Francke.
- Larrington, Carolyne. 2011. "Sibling Drama: Laterality in the Heroic Poems of the *Edda*." In *Myths, Legends, and Heroes: Essays on Old Norse and Old English Literature in honour of John McKinnell*, edited by Daniel Anlezark, 169–87. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- , trans. 2014. *The Poetic Edda*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Mahlendorf, Ursula R., and Frank J. Tobin. 1971. "Hagen: A Reappraisal." *Monatshefte* 63 (2): 125–40.
- Neckel, Gustav. ed. 1962. *Edda: die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*. 3rd rev. ed. Vol. I, revised by Hans Kuhn. Heidelberg: Carl Winter.
- Quinn, Judy. 2009. "The Endless Triangles of Eddic Tragedy." In *Studio anglo-norreni in onore di John S. McKinnell*, edited by Maria Elena Ruggerini, 304–26. Cagliari: CUEC.
- . 2014. "Scenes of vindication: three Icelandic heroic poems in relation to the continental traditions of *Piðreks saga af Bern* and the *Nibelungenlied*." In *Medieval Nordic Literature in European Context*, edited by Else Mundal, 78–125. Oslo: Dreyer.
- Schulze, Ursula, ed., and Siegfried Grosse, trans. 2010. *Das Nibelungenlied*. Stuttgart: Reclam.
- von See, Klaus, and Beatrice La Farge, Simone Horst, Katja Schulz, eds. 2012. *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda: Bd. 7 Heldenlieder*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter.
- von See, Klaus, and Beatrice La Farge, Eve Picard, Katja Schulz, eds. 2000. *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda: Bd. 3 Götterlieder*. Heidelberg, Universitätsverlag C. Winter.
- von See, Klaus, and Beatrice La Farge, Eve Picard, Katja Schulz, Matthias Teichert, eds. 2009. *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda: Bd. 6 Heldenlieder*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter.
- Shippey, Tom. 2013. "Foreword." In *Revisiting the Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Heroic Legend*, edited by Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington, xiii–xix. London: Routledge.
- Steblin-Kamenskij, M. I. 1982. "Valkyries and Heroes." *Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi* 97: 81–93.
- Thelen, Lynn. 1997. "Hagen's Shields: The 37<sup>th</sup> 'Åventiure' Revisited." *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 96 (3): 385–402.
- Thorvaldsen, Bernt Ø. 2016. "The Dating of Eddic Poetry." In *A Handbook to Eddic Poetry: Myths and Legends of Early Scandinavia*, edited by Carolyne Larrington, Judy Quinn, and Brittany Schorn, 72–91. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Turville-Petre, G., ed. 1956. *Hervarar Saga ok Heiðreks*. London: Viking Society for Northern Research.