

«En engi má við sköpum vinna»: Individual Agency and Structural Determination in *Völsunga Saga**

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CONICET

Abstract:

The purpose of this article is to analyze the relationship between decision making and contextual determination in *Völsunga Saga*, produced in Iceland or Norway during the 13th Century. We will show that social and kinship structures impose obligations that individuals normally accept as something inexorable. We will see that the influence of structure pressure is manifested not only in the physical qualities of the individuals, but also in their personal behavior. Our aim is to demonstrate that structural constraints are compared to the inexorability of destiny and the destructive character of greed and the doom treasure of Andvari. Finally, we will discuss how the idea of intentionality is explored in the saga and may justify certain actions that go against social expectations. It will be argued that these dynamics run parallel to the theology of intention present in the Christian thought and reflect the efforts of the saga author to insert his narrative in a wider ideological context.

Key words:

Structural constraints, kinship, fate, intentionality, sagas.

«Pero nadie puede ir en contra de su destino»: Agencia individual y determinación estructural en *Völsunga saga*

Resumen:

El propósito de este artículo es analizar la relación entre la toma de decisiones y determinaciones contextuales representadas en *Völsunga Saga*, producida en Islandia o Noruega durante el siglo XIII. Mostraremos que la estructura social y el sistema de parentesco imponen obligaciones que los individuos aceptan normalmente como algo inexorable. Veremos que la influencia de la presión estructural se manifiesta no solo en las cualidades físicas de los individuos, sino también en sus comportamientos. Nuestro objetivo es demostrar que las constricciones estructurales son comparadas con la inexorabilidad del destino y el carácter destructivo de la codicia y del tesoro maldito de Andvari. Finalmente, discutiremos cómo la idea de intencionalidad es explorada en la saga y puede justificar ciertas acciones que van en contra de las expectativas sociales. Argumentaremos que estas dinámicas están relacionadas con la teología de la intención presente en el pensamiento cristiano y refleja los esfuerzos del autor de la saga por insertar su narrativa en un contexto ideológico más amplio.

Palabras clave:

Presión estructural, parentesco, destino, intencionalidad, sagas.

1. INTRODUCTION

The *Saga of the Volsungs* is preserved in a single medieval vellum manuscript (Nykgf. saml. 1824 b, 4to) and it appears therein together with *Ragnars saga*

*loðbrókar*¹. Even if they could have been read as a single text, as Carolynne Larrington puts it, the style and narrative structures present noteworthy differences that hinder their interpretation as such². *Völsunga Saga* is taken to have been composed c.1250s-1260s, and was produced for an

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¹ In this article, the bilingual editions of Finch and Grimstad are consulted: FINCH, R. G. (ed.), *Völsunga saga*, London, 1965; GRIMSTAD, K. (ed.), *Völsunga saga: The Saga of the Volsungs*, Saarbrücken, 2005. We have focused on the diplomatic edition of Grimstad although the normalized version of Finch has been finally referred to so as to present the text in a clearer and more accessible way. Unless otherwise specified, all translations are our own. There are also two important editions of *Völsunga saga* translated into Spanish that can be consulted by the readers: DÍAZ VERA, J. (ed.), *La Saga de los Volsungos*, Madrid, 1998 and NUEZ, J. A. (ed.), *Historia de los descendientes de Volsungr (Völsunga Saga) / El relato de Volsi. Un fragmento de la vida de san Olao (Völsa Þattr)*, Madrid, 2017.

² LARRINGTON, C., «Völsunga Saga, Ragnars Saga and Romance in Old Norse: Revisiting Relationships», in LASSEN, A., NEY, A. and JAKOBSSON, Á. (eds.), *The Legendary Sagas. Origins and Development*, Reykjavík, 2012, p. 251.

Icelandic or Norwegian audience, both of which were in any case closely related in terms of culture and ideology. While it is generally classified as one of the *fornaldarsögur*, it is unusual within that subgenre given its tragic narrative, and because it is essentially a prose retelling of older poetic material most of which was preserved in the *Poetic Edda* and partially retold in the *Skáldskaparmál* section of *Snorra Edda*³. In this article, comparisons between the saga and its sources are considered as their differences may reveal new concerns and ideologies representative of the context in which they were produced.

The narrative is rich and well-structured, and unsurprisingly it remains a popular saga with modern readers. The aim of this article is to analyze the relationship between individual decision making and contextual determination in *Völsunga saga*. Torfi Tulinius has paved the way for this approach suggesting that the theme of treachery in the saga can be analyzed through two interpretative axes: faithfulness to kin and intention⁴. These can be broadened further by referring to the first as the «axis of structural constraints», where social norms are at stake, and the second an «axis of personal choice», where individual decision-making and subjectivity are at the core of the analysis. We consider structures here as external, social, and institutional frameworks that limit and make possible individual actions. This is just one aspect of structures, which are at the same time «power-conferring» relations (sometimes called the «structural capacity») for those who are in certain places within them. On the other hand, agency can be understood as conscious, goal-directed activity⁵. However, during the first steps of the sociological discipline, the debate on the possibilities of the individual to produce reality in a structured world was largely marked by the contributions of Marx and Durkheim. In opposition to theories that presented a subject free of ties and emphasized his capacity to make decisions, these authors highlighted the constrictive character of society that prevents the individual from making history in his absolute freedom. Our position derives from the Social Sciences, but more specifically we take up the position of Sherry Ortner and the Theory of Practice. According to this author, agency is

the individual disposition to develop projects focused on «becoming» rather than «getting»⁶. As a process of subject constitution, it cannot be decontextualized. In this vein, agency is essential for understanding how individuals act even when they are «acted upon». As Sherry Ortner points out, agency «takes shape as specific desires and intentions within a matrix of subjectivity - of (culturally constituted) feelings, thoughts, and meanings»⁷.

Our approach is closely related to an issue recently highlighted by Andrew McGillivray, who discussed how individual action concerning wealth in the saga is driven by both fate and social norms, which he associates with the high value assigned to wealth accumulation and enduring fame in Western culture⁸. Likewise, our study is complementary to the recent article «Fuerzas externas y agencia individual en el medievo nórdico: los vicios humanos y las actitudes honorables como herramientas del destino»⁹, which provides clues about the dynamics of destiny and prophecies, which are also related to elements such as oaths, honor, moral responsibilities, economics, and kinship obligations. This topic is wide and allows for further research, which will certainly be developed in other studies. In this article, our purpose is to demonstrate that social and kinship structures impose duties and conditions that individuals cannot avoid. The strong influence of these structures is even manifested in personal and physical qualities, most of them hereditary or indebted to social positions. Nonetheless, there are some characters whose agency goes beyond social constraints. The will of Andvari is manifested in the form of a curse and fixes the destiny of those who are in contact with his treasure, causing chaos and destruction. It is our aim to establish that the author of *Völsunga saga* compares these two different patterns and shows that the conditions society imposes on its members are as inexorable as destiny and as disastrous as a curse. Finally, in the last part of the article, we will propose that certain actions that go against social expectations could be in some ways justified by the absence of intention on the part of the protagonists, who act in altered states of consciousness: something that may even reveal theological influence.

³ Moreover, it also shares themes, episodes and characters with a broad number of literary and pictorial sources in the medieval Germanic-speaking world. It is thus related to the *Nibelungenlied* (ca. 1200), which is closely connected to courtly literature. The saga also shows clear links with courtly literature and culture. These are particularly evident in the knightly description of Sigurðr and in the repeated references to the vocabulary of courteous behavior, often expressed through the loanwords «kurteisi» and «kurteis», which appear seven times in the saga. See FINCH, R. G. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, pp. 40-41; GRIMSTAD, K. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, pp. 154, 156.

⁴ TULINIUS, T. H., *The matter of the north: The Rise of Literary Fiction in Thirteenth Century Iceland*, Odense, 2002, pp. 142-143.

⁵ Further discussion can be found in the first chapter and conclusions of CALLINICOS, A., *Making History. Agency, Structure, and Change in Social Theory*, Leiden-Boston, 2009. On the relationship between personal interest and kinship structure, an issue much discussed in this text, see VERDERY, K., «A Comment on Goody's Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe», *Journal of Family History*, 13 (1988), pp. 265-270.

⁶ ORTNER, S., «Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties», *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 26 (1984), pp. 126-166.

⁷ ORTNER, S., *Anthropology and Social Theory. Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject*, Durham-London, 2006, p. 110.

⁸ MCGILLIVRAY, A., «The Best Kept Secret: Ransom, Wealth and Power in Völsunga saga», *Scandinavian Studies*, 87 (2015), pp. 365-382.

⁹ MARTÍN PÁEZ, M., «Fuerzas externas y agencia individual en el medievo nórdico: los vicios humanos y las actitudes honorables como herramientas del destino», *El Futuro del Pasado*, 13 (2021), pp. 1-27.

2. KINSHIP TIES, SOCIAL PRESSURE, AND INDIVIDUAL AGENCY

The early episodes in the saga (before Sigurðr acquires the cursed treasure) show most clearly how kinship obligations take precedence over personal wishes and determine the family's history. This is probably the part of the saga in which the author best demonstrates his creativity, as the poetic material contains few references to the historical past of Sigurðr, apart from the elaborated story of Helgi Hundingsbani. On the other hand, in *Völsunga saga* the god Óðinn plays a prominent role as the first ancestor of the Volsungs. He gives presents to his descendants in the form of objects (the Gramr sword), provides counsel (recommending Sigurðr the best strategy to kill Fáfnir and to pick a horse), facilitates navigation (when he calms the storms while Sigurðr was sailing), and aids in avoiding death and the end of his lineage (by aiding Sigmundr to heal Sinfjötli and giving a fertility apple to Rerir and his wife). This «historical» importance does not seem to exist in Eddic poems, where the sword Gramr lacks this historical framework¹⁰ and these other interventions are not represented, except for the navigational aid Óðinn confers on Sigurðr, which appears in *Reginismál*¹¹.

These modifications do not seem to be a mere coincidence, as they emphasize the importance of the ancestor in the saga and highlight an overestimation of the importance of the kin group. Certainly, Óðinn's gifts create dependency ties and require a counter-gift, something that resembles the vertical friendship between chieftains and followers in Medieval Iceland¹². This is clearly seen in the scene of Sigmundr's death. The hero was in battle and had good omens, luck¹³, and the protection of spirits known as «spáðísir»¹⁴, but suddenly Óðinn appears and breaks the hero's sword, which he had originally bestowed upon Sigmundr. His intervention changes the course of events: «Síðan sneri mannfallinu, ok váru Sigmundi konungi horfin heill, ok fell mjök liðit fyrir honum. Konungrinn hlífði sér

ekki ok eggjar mjök liðit. Nú er sem mælt, at eigi má við margnum»¹⁵.

It is Óðinn's will that which breaks the expected result of battle, Sigmundr's luck, and the protection given to him by less powerful supernatural beings, the «ðísir». Sigmundr accepts the change of fate immediately, reinforcing his subordination to the god, who plays a role akin to a patriarch ruling over his family without being questioned. The strength of the subordination is such that the hero even refuses to accept the offer of help by Hjörðís: «Vill Óðinn ekki, at vér bregðum sverði, síðan er nú brotnaði. Hefi ek haft orrostur, meðan honum líkaði»¹⁶.

Sigmundr is paying with his own life and finally accepts his obligations. In the poem *Eiríksmál* (st. 7) Óðinn takes the victory from the kings in order to strengthen forces in his fight against Fenrir, but here, these obligations are also related to kinship, as both Sigmundr and Óðinn belong to the same family and are related vertically. Nonetheless, the paternal control over the lives of the children appears also in the death of Sinfjötli. Borghildr, Sigmundr's wife and Sinfjötli's stepmother, wants to take revenge for his earlier killing of her brother. She gives Sinfjötli a poisoned drink, but he rejects it twice. On the third attempt, she incites him to drink «ef hann hefði hug Völsunga»¹⁷. He wants to reject the drink again, certain that it is poisoned. Sigmundr, drunk, orders his son to take the poisoned drink, Sinfjötli obeys and dies. Parental pressure and obedience to the rules of kin appear again as dominant over the basic individual will to survive.

The same pattern reappears at Signý's wedding, which is built upon the model of Guðrún's marriage¹⁸. In the case of Signý, it is clear from the beginning that individual will clashes with the demands of kinship structure. Signý explicitly says to her father, Völsungr, that she does not wish to marry the Gautish king, Siggeirr. But Völsungr ignores the wishes of his daughter and decides to give her

¹⁰ *Hyndluljóð* (st. 2) simply states that Óðinn gave a certain sword to Sigmundr.

¹¹ This power is also attributed to the god in strophe 154 of *Hávamál*. See KRISTJÁNSSON, J. and ÓLASSON, V. (eds.), *Eddukvæði II. Hetjukvæði*, Reykjavík, 2014, p. 353.

¹² Cf. SIGURÐSSON, J. V., *Viking friendship: the social bond in Iceland and Norway, c. 900-1300*, Ithaca, 2017.

¹³ Jón Viðar Sigurðsson argues that such concepts as «gæfa» or «hamingja» were closely attached to the king, and that his luck was an icon for his followers and connects him to the divine world. SIGURÐSSON, J. V., *Chieftains and power in the Icelandic Commonwealth*, Odense, 1999, p. 187; SIGURÐSSON, J. V., «The appearance and personal abilities of goðar, jarlar, and konungar: Iceland, Orkney and Norway», in SMITH, B. B., TAYLOR, S. and WILLIAMS, G. (eds.), *West over Sea. Studies in Scandinavian Sea-Borne Expansion and Settlement before 1300*, Leiden-Boston, 2007, pp. 101–102. Moreover, Gurevich asserts that when the luck of a king fails him, a battle becomes unwinnable for his supporters. GUREVICH, A., *Historical Anthropology of the Middle Ages*, Chicago, 1992, p. 105.

¹⁴ This concept refers to protective supernatural female entities («ðísir») associated here with predictions («spá»).

¹⁵ «Then the battle changed its course, and king Sigmundr lost his luck, and many in his army fell beside him. The king did not seek cover and encouraged his army much. But as it is said, there is no might against the many». FINCH, R. G. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 20; GRIMSTAD, K. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 116.

¹⁶ «Óðinn does not want me to wield the sword, thus now it is broken. I have battled while he wished». FINCH, R. G. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 21; GRIMSTAD, K. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 118.

¹⁷ «If he had the temperament/courage of the Volsungs». FINCH, R. G. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 18; GRIMSTAD, K. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 112.

¹⁸ As Boyer has pointed out, both cases have plenty of similarities: lack of women's consent, the presence of bad omens and negative prophecies, a betrayal of the in-laws, the death of the wife's kin, etc. BOYER, R., *La saga de Sigurdr ou la parole donnée*, Paris, 2007, pp. 119–120.

away¹⁹. However, beyond the obedience to an ancestor, structural pressure can also be manifested as honour, compelling individuals to act in favour of family reputation above their individual survival. After the wedding, Signý warns her father that the king of the Gauts will destroy them if they go to war. Vǫlsungr answers:

«Þat munu allar þjóðir at orðum gera at ek mæltá eitt orð óborinn, ok strengda ek þess heit at ek skylda hvárki flýja eld né járn fyrir hræzlu sakir, ok svá hefi ek enn gert hér til, ok hví munda ek eigi efna þat á gamals aldri? Ok eigi skulu meyjar því bregða sonum mínum í leikum, at þeir hræðisk bana sinn, því at eitt sinn skal hverr deyja, en má engi undan komask at deyja um sinn»²⁰.

In the examples discussed above, an obligation held towards elder male kinsmen hampers individual decision-making and defines certain actions as unavoidable. This theme reappears when the need for revenge (as a response to previous offenses) is not presented as a rational choice but as a compulsive demand for preserving family honor.

This leads to a paradoxical situation lived by Signý: after her husband kills her father, two structural determinations loom over her at once, and these contradict each other: she must obey the imposition of honor to avenge Vǫlsungr by killing her husband, yet at the same time be loyal to him, given her duties as a wife. Her solution is to participate indirectly in the first duty, inciting and providing means to her brother, Sigmundr, so he can avenge their father. Her individual decision plays a role, as she prefers her original kin to the acquired one. However, it must be noted that this is not strictly a matter of blood versus affinity, as Signý commands Sigmundr to kill the sons she had with Siggeirr, a necessary step to prevent any further cycle of vengeance. However, she is unable to withstand the tension between the two contradictory duties and succumbs to obey the duties imposed by her marriage. Her death beside her husband (after Sigmundr and Sinfjötli burnt the hall of the Gauts) balances her previous actions and allows Signý to keep her honor, albeit tragically.

The role played by Sinfjötli in the revenge for Vǫlsungr further illuminates the relationship between structural imposition and individual agency. He, son of the incestuous union between the twins Signý and Sigmundr, plays a crucial role in the scene. What is meaningful here is that even if he did not know his true ancestry but thought of himself as one of the Gauts, he is the one who takes the main role in the revenge and goads Sigmundr into acting against Siggeirr. Thus, the structure of kinship is presented as being so strong that it can guide the decision-making even of unknowing individuals. Blood seems to generate wills that exist before choice.

The revenge of Sigurðr against the killers of his father Sigmundr is also significant. Again, the compulsion of revenge is evident: Sigurðr does not meditate much on whether to act or how to do so, he simply does it. This decision is not just demanded by social norms, but also an explicit choice made by the young hero, and contrasts with the weak structural determination of pseudo-kinship²¹, reflected in Sigurðr's decision to postpone the quest against Fáfnir until he has avenged his own father²². When his foster-father Reginn succeeds in re-forging the sword Gramr, and incites Sigurðr to kill the serpent, he answers: «Efna munu vér ok þó annat fyrr, at hefna fǫður míns»²³.

Moreover, the failure of pseudo-kinship to impose duty is also manifested in the reluctance of Sigurðr to enact vengeance when the dwarf-smith Reginn tries to trick the hero. Reginn promotes the killing of his brother, the parricide Fáfnir, who seizes the wealth owned by their father, Hreiðmarr. At first, the smith fails to impose a duty on the young hero to help him in his quest for revenge, but he insists. The insufficiency of the compulsion generated by pseudo-kinship is highlighted by the promise of wealth, fame, and honor used by the Reginn to entice Sigurðr into killing Fáfnir: «Of litit fé eigu þér. Þat harmar oss er þér hlaupið sem þorpara sveinar, en ek veit mikla féván at segja þér, ok er þat meiri ván at þat sé sómi at sækja ok virðing, ef þú næðir»²⁴.

¹⁹ FINCH, R. G. (ed.), *Vǫlsunga saga...*, pp. 4-6; GRIMSTAD, K. (ed.), *Vǫlsunga saga...*, p. 84.

²⁰ «All the people shall know these words, that I unborn spoke a certain word, and I made the vow that I will not flee from fire or iron for the sake of fear, and I have thus far done so, and why should I break this in my old age? And the maidens should not taunt my sons while playing, saying that they fear their deaths, because everyone must die sometime, and no one can avoid death when it comes upon him». FINCH, R. G. (ed.), *Vǫlsunga saga...*, p. 6; GRIMSTAD, K. (ed.), *Vǫlsunga saga...*, p. 86.

²¹ On pseudo-kinship, see PITT-RIVERS, J., «Pseudo-Kinship», in SILLS, D. (ed.), *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences* 8, United States, 1968, pp. 408-413.

²² Mikueionis argues that, beyond deeds, choices oriented by moral values are important for making Sigurðr a hero in the saga. He also notices that the motivations for killing Fáfnir differ markedly in *Snorra Edda*, which focuses on the desire to acquire the hoard. See MIKUEIONIS, U., «The Hero and His Values», *Scandinavistica Vilnensis*, 14 (2009), pp. 87-110.

²³ «I will do it, but first there is something else, to avenge my father». FINCH, R. G. (ed.), *Vǫlsunga saga...*, p. 27; GRIMSTAD, K. (ed.), *Vǫlsunga saga...*, p. 132.

²⁴ «You own little wealth. It harms us that when you go around like a cottager lad, but I know of a great chance of wealth that I can tell you about, and that there is much hope that you obtain it with honor and worth if you acquire it». FINCH, R. G. (ed.), *Vǫlsunga saga...*, p. 24; GRIMSTAD, K. (ed.), *Vǫlsunga saga...*, p. 124.

However, this is not enough, Sigurðr makes his choice and refuses. Reginn then appeals to Sigurðr's compassion while telling his family story. His victimization strategy is successful, as empathy moves Sigurðr, who says that he understands the great loss suffered by the smith («Mikit hefir þú látit...») and the great evil («stórrillir») in Reginn's family²⁵.

The weakness of pseudo-kinship relationships is further highlighted by the omission in *Völsunga saga* of Hreiðmarr's daughters: Lyngheiðr and Lofnheiðr. In strophe 12 of *Reginismál*, Hreiðmarr orders Lyngheiðr to give birth to the mother of the avenger of his family²⁶. In this Eddic poem the sister of Reginn is thus presented as the would-be grandmother of Sigurðr. Consequently, one of the functions of their omission in *Völsunga saga* could be to erase the possible consanguineal relationship between Sigurðr and Reginn, something that would facilitate a comparison between pseudo-kinship and consanguine kinship. Nonetheless, the omission of these sisters also serves to emphasize the unavoidable duties imposed by natal kinship. In strophe 10, while Hreiðmarr was dying, he orders his daughters to take revenge on Fáfnir, but he is refused by Lyngheiðr:

«Fá mun systir,
Þótt fōður missi,
Hefna hlýra harms»²⁷.

In clear contrast to Signý, Guðrún, Sinfjötli and Sigmundr (among others), who accept their ancestors will, Lyngheiðr disobeys her father. The omission of Hreiðmarr's daughters can be viewed as necessary not only to avoid internal contradictions, but also to emphasize the vertical and structural obligations within consanguine kinship²⁸. Thus, it can be seen that revenge and other duties that blood kinship demands need no justification and leave little room for doubt in the *Saga of the Völsungs*. Considering this, we can now ask if personal qualities are also derived from structural determination.

3. ON PERSONAL QUALITIES AND HEREDITABLE CONDITIONS

While there are some qualities that appear to be inherited through family lines, the saga shows that other traits depend on social standing, and some depend on individual nature, or even on the influence of external elements. The attribution and naturalization of the relatives' characteristics favor an identification between the subject and his family that will condition the individual to act according to social expectations. This construction of the subject involves hierarchical components not only within the same social group, but also in comparison with others. Indeed, we will see that these differences are essentialized and can turn a family into a group «naturally» superior to another, justifying violence and oppression of the former over the latter.

A considerable number of the references in the saga to the impact of lineage on personal qualities refer to members of the family of the Völsungs. This is highlighted when Sinfjötli, unlike his Gautish brothers, succeeds in the trials proposed by Sigmundr and Signý to show his courage; such outcome displays the superiority of the Völsungs over the Gauts²⁹. In a similar vein, when Reginn doubts that Sigurðr has the expected virtues of his family, he says: «Ok þótt Völsunga ætt sé at þér, þá mun þú eigi hafa þeira skaplyndi, er fyrst eru talðir til alls frama»³⁰. Such an emphasis on the natural courage of the Völsungs shows greater relevance here, in comparison to *Poetic Edda*. The development of the trials of Sinfjötli cannot be seen in the poetic sources, while in *Reginismál* its namesake character does not blame Sigurðr for the lack of the temperament expected in his family. Neither in *frá dauða Sinfjötla* does Borghildr appeal to the courage of the Völsungs when she incites her stepson to take the poisonous drink; she just uses reproaches³¹. Thus, the author of the present saga not only characterizes the family as a courageous dynasty, but also attributes a natural origin to that quality.

²⁵ FINCH, R. G. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 25; GRIMSTAD, K. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 128.

²⁶ KRISTJÁNSSON, J. and OLASSON, V. (eds.), *Eddukvæði II...*, p. 299.

²⁷ «A sister will take, though the father is missing, little revenge on the damage to a brother». KRISTJÁNSSON, J. and ÓLASSON, V. (eds.), *Eddukvæði II...*, p. 298.

²⁸ MARTÍN PÁEZ, M., «Sobre el destino, la maldición y la obediencia en el ciclo de los Völsungos: la representación de la estructura de parentesco como condena», *Revista de Literatura Medieval*, 32 (2020), pp. 215-229.

²⁹ During these trials, Sinfjötli and his half-brothers had their clothes sewed into their own arms. While the half-brothers could not bear the pain, Sinfjötli did not even flinch. Moreover, he did not show fear when confronting the poisonous snake (*eitormr*) that he found in the flour (FINCH, R. G. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 10; GRIMSTAD, K. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 94). Curiously enough, this episode coincides with the encounter between Sigurðr and the serpent (*ormr*) Fáfnir. The lack of fear towards the same animal highlights a family distinction and separates them from the rest of the society (cf. MARTÍN PÁEZ, M., «Liminaridad y licantropía: sobre los ritos de paso y la ascendencia en *Völsunga saga*», *Memoria y Civilización*, 24 (2021), pp. 1-24.).

³⁰ «And even if you belong to the family of the Völsungs, you might not have their courage, as they have long been first in all deeds of fame». FINCH, R. G. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 24; GRIMSTAD, K. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 124.

³¹ KRISTJÁNSSON, J. and ÓLASSON, V. (eds.), *Eddukvæði II...*, p. 284.

There is also mention of other inheritable traits that involve a certain temperament in *Völsunga saga*, as can be seen when Sigmundur labels the evil nature of Sinfjötli as inherited from his father, Siggeirr³². This suggests that the saga reflects a mentality in which lineage defines the personality of the individual; the idea of an inheritable (and exceptional) nature is the defining myth of aristocratic thought³³. However, this can also be read as a comment on the limits of this mentality, as readers would know that such an inference is wrong, given that Sinfjötli is in reality the son of Sigmundur himself, and therefore could not have inherited any trait from Siggeirr or the Gauts.

But we can find clearer expressions of how kin is seen as vital in individual nature when considering the motif of the wolf. Sigi, the first human ancestor of the Volsungs, is called «varg í véum» (A wolf in sacred space), and it seems that a lupine trait is inheritable within the family³⁴. Such features are present in the famous section in which Sigmundur and Sinfjötli turn into wolves (chapter 8). In this episode, the creativity of the author of the saga was in play, though influenced by his contemporary framework and poetic sources. Certainly, even though we can find no more representations of this detailed transformation, there are allusions to Sinfjötli's wolfish nature in the *Poetic Edda* that the author could have used to build this motif. In the exchange of insults between Sinfjötli and Guðmundr in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, it is revealed in strophe 36 that Sinfjötli murdered his own brother and ate the same food as wolves³⁵. But a wolfish characteristic also appears in the way in which some characters are defined. As Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir has noted, when Sigurðr is asked by Fáfnir about his identity, he answers: «ek heiti gofugt dýr» (my name is noble beast), arguably an allusion to his wolfish nature. Indeed, Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir

states that the wolfish nature of Sigurðr is reinforced by the fact that in *Reginismál* Reginn calls him «frékan úlf» (aggressive wolf)³⁶. Nonetheless, the omission of this direct allusion in *Völsunga saga* is probably an attempt by its author to avoid an association between wolves and the hero. Thus, the enigmatic words Sigurðr gave Fáfnir could probably refer to a stag, as «dýr» also means «deer». This is reinforced by the dreams Guðrún had in *Völsunga saga*, where Sigurðr appeared in the shape of a stag. Moreover, in *Guðrúnarkviða II* (st. 2), the Volsung is also referred to as a deer. If we consider that this animal was related to nobility³⁷, this strategy could have been taken to present the hero in a more positive light. However, the family of the Volsungs does not escape from a wolfish characterization because, apart from the examples mentioned above, the son of Sigurðr is called «wolf cub» («úlfhvelp») by Brynhildr³⁸.

This runs parallel to the case of some members of the family of Egill Skalla-Grímsson, who have a wolfish, trollish nature and are appreciably antisocial³⁹. Indeed, monstrosity is better understood as related to social otherness than to a physical quality⁴⁰. But the analogy goes further than that: «paranormal hybridity and social transgression are therefore features necessary to establish a character's potential for monstrosity»⁴¹; and we certainly find social transgressions by some of the Volsungs. This is particularly clear in the case of Sigi, who fell into outlawry after committing murder⁴². Moreover, «the terms *vargr* («outlaw») and *vargdropi* («son of an outlaw») connect outlawry with wolfish behaviour; this is the social status of these young hounds as they await their moment of vengeance»⁴³. Along similar lines, Marion Poilvez remarks that «the criminal (most of the time a killer) holds a long-lasting association with otherness and especially

³² FINCH, R. G. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 10; GRIMSTAD, K. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 96.

³³ As repeatedly highlighted by DOYLE, W., *Aristocracy. A very short introduction*, Oxford, 2010. This ideology can also be detected in *Heimskringla*, where, as Sverre Bagge points out «There is some connection between charisma and descent: noble blood will normally produce a noble character». BAGGE, S., *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla*, Los Angeles, 1991, p. 126.

³⁴ FINCH, R. G. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 1; GRIMSTAD, K. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 76.

³⁵ KRISTJÁNSSON, J. and OLASSON, V. (eds.), *Eddukvæði II...*, p. 254.

³⁶ GUÐMUNDSDÓTTIR, A., «The Werewolf in Medieval Icelandic Literature», *JEGP*, 106 (2007), pp. 285-286.

³⁷ BAMPI, M., «Göfugt dýr ec heiti: Deer Symbolism in Sigurðr Fáfnisbani», in NEY, A., WILLIAMS, H. and CHARPENTIER, F. (eds.), *Á austrvega. Saga and East Scandinavia: Preprint Papers of the 14th International Saga Conference Uppsala, 9th-15th August 2009*, Gävle, 2009, pp. 78-84.

³⁸ FINCH, R. G. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 57; GRIMSTAD, K. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 190. This could be strengthened by the arguments of Stefanie Gropper, who states that fate and good and bad luck are inherited within families: a man and his fate are part of his family, and his fate will also influence his family's. GROPPER, S., «Fate», in JAKOBSSON, Á, and JAKOBSSON, S., *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, London, 2017, p. 201.

³⁹ JAKOBSSON, Á., «Beast and Man: Realism and the Occult in Egils saga», *Scandinavian Studies*, 83 (2011), pp. 29-44.

⁴⁰ MERKELBACH, R., «The Monster in Me: Social Corruption and the Perception of Monstrosity in the Sagas of Icelanders», *Quaestio Insularis*, 15 (2014), p. 23; «Engi maðr skapar sik sjálf: Fathers, Abuse and Monstrosity in the Outlaw Sagas», HAHN, D. and SCHMIDT, A. (eds.), *Bad Boys and Wicked Women: Antagonists and Troublemakers in Old Norse Literature*, Munich, 2016, pp. 62-65; NEVILLE, J., «Monsters and Criminals: Defining Humanity in Old English Poetry», in OLSEN, K. and HOUWEN, L. A. (eds.), *Monsters and the Monstrous in Medieval Northwest Europe*, Leuven, 2001, pp. 103-122; OLSEN, K., «Bragi's Boddason's Ragnarsdrápa: A Monstrous Poem», in OLSEN, K. and HOUWEN, L. A. (eds.), *Monsters and the Monstrous in Medieval Northwest Europe*, Leuven, 2001, pp. 123-140.

⁴¹ MERKELBACH, R., «Eigi í mannligu edli. Shape, Monstrosity and Berserkism in the Islendingasögur», in BARREIRO, S. and CORDO RUSSO, L., *Shapeshifters in Medieval North Atlantic Literature*, Amsterdam, 2019, p. 92.

⁴² FINCH, R. G. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 1; GRIMSTAD, K. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 76.

⁴³ BREEN, G., «The Wolf Is at the Door. Outlaws, Assassins, and Avengers Who Cry Wolf!», *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 114 (1999), pp. 32-33.

wilderness»⁴⁴, further underlining the association between wolfishness, transgression, and loss of human agency.

Indeed, there are more heritable conditions to be found within this family relating to physical attributes. As the author of *Völsunga saga* states after Sinfjötli made bread with a snake inside, Sigmundur is so resilient that he can take poison with no negative effects, while his son Sinfjötli is only immune to it on the outside. This is in line with *frá dauða Sinfjötla*, which states that poison could not harm Sigmundur neither on the outside nor the inside («útan né innan»), while all his descendants were only able to endure poison on their skin⁴⁵. Indeed, in *Fáfnismál* the head of the young hero Sigurðr is covered by Fáfnir's poison with no appreciable effect on him⁴⁶.

But this is not the only ability reproduced in this family. The capacity to instill fear through special eyes is clearly a privilege of the Volsungs. In the courtly description of Sigurðr (Ch. 23), borrowed from *Þiðreks saga af Bern*, this hero is depicted with sharp eyes: «Augu hans váru svá snör at fár einn þorði at líta undir hans brún»⁴⁷.

Certainly, the notoriety of a character can be reflected through his eyes. For example, in strophe 36 of *Sigurðarkviða in skamma*⁴⁸, Brynhildr values Sigurðr over the Gjukung brothers establishing a distinction in the qualities of their eyes. Nonetheless, either in poetic sources or *Völsunga saga* the eyes are also linked to a heritable condition and can reveal a noble nature. In *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, Helgi, the son of Sigmundur, tries to conceal his identity by pretending to be a slave of Hagall. Despite his efforts, he is discovered by Blindr, who states that:

«Hvöss eru augu
í Hagals þýju,
era þat karls ætt
er á kvernum stendr,
steinar rifna,
stökkur lúðr fyrir»⁴⁹.

Thus, it seems impossible for a bondswoman to have such eyes, as they are sign of belonging to a good family. This ideology is also present in *Völsunga saga*. The description of Sigurðr's eyes, also present in similar terms at the moment of his death⁵⁰, is identical to the one given to her daughter Svanhildr: «Hon [Svanhildr] var allra kvenna vænst, ok hafði snör augu sem faðir hennar svá at fár einn þorði at sjá undir hennar brýnn»⁵¹.

But the abilities of the eyes transcend their mere description and have a role in the narrative. When Guttmormr tried to murder Sigurðr, he needed three attempts, for in the first two attempts the eyes of the Volsung frightened him such that he was not able to kill him until he fell asleep⁵². Significantly, neither *Poetic Edda* nor *Snorra Edda* describe the role of Sigurðr's eyes in his murdering, and the same can be applied to the case of Svanhildr. She was condemned to death by king Jörmunrekr, who tried to use the horses to trample her. But the horses did not dare to act against her when she opened her eyes. It was only when she had her face covered that the horses succeeded in killing her. In another version of the same story recounted in *Hamðismál*, nothing is said about the terror that Svanhildr's eyes infuse. Thus, it seems that the author of *Völsunga saga* made an effort to link a natural and family origin not only to physical aspects, but also to a fear-invoking capacity that, like courage, is the result of the influence of former generations over the characterization of a descendant.

On the other hand, social standing is also presented as a relevant factor in the definition of personal characteristics. The clearest example appears at the beginning of the saga, when it is said that king Sigi is above his most direct antagonist, king Skaði⁵³. However, a slave of Skaði, Breði, shows great skill in any task he undertakes. While hunting with Sigi, it is said that he manages to catch better quarry than the king, and he is murdered and concealed in the snow for that reason. Even if Sigi is introduced in a favorable light, his contest with the slave reveals a tension between individual skill and social status,

⁴⁴ POLIVEZ, M., «Those Who Kill: Wrong Undone in the Sagas of Icelanders», in HAHN, D. and SCHMIDT, A. (eds.), *Bad Boys and Wicked Women: Antagonists and Troublemakers in Old Norse Literature*, Munich, 2016, p. 31.

⁴⁵ KRISTJÁNSSON, J. and ÓLASSON, V. (eds.), *Eddukvæði II...*, p. 284.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 303.

⁴⁷ «His eyes were so sharp that few people dared to look under his eyebrows». FINCH, R. G. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 41; GRIMSTAD, K. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 154. Compare with *Þiðreks saga*: «hans augu eru svá hvöss, at fáir menn munu vera svá djarfir, at þori at líta undir hans brýnn». JONSSON, G. (ed.), *Þiðreks saga af Bern*, Reykjavík, 1951, ch. 158.

⁴⁸ KRISTJÁNSSON, J. and ÓLASSON, V. (eds.), *Eddukvæði II...*, p. 342.

⁴⁹ «Sharp are the eyes of Hagall's slave, from a good family is the one who stands at the grindstone. The stones are breaking, the frame is splitting». KRISTJÁNSSON, J. and ÓLASSON, V. (eds.), *Eddukvæði II...*, p. 270.

⁵⁰ FINCH, R. G. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 58; GRIMSTAD, K. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 192.

⁵¹ «She [Svanhildr] was the most promising among women and had the same sharp eyes as her father, and few people dared to look under her eyebrows». FINCH, R. G. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 74; GRIMSTAD, K. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 226.

⁵² We find a similar episode in *Gesta danorum*, where Starcatherus did not manage to kill king Olo while he was being observed by him. KROESEN, R., «Hvessir augu sem hildingar. The awe-inspiring eyes of the King», *Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi*, 100 (1985), p. 53.

⁵³ FINCH, R. G. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 1; GRIMSTAD, K. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 76.

which is violently repressed by the aristocrat. This proves that individual skill does not appear to be as strictly derived from social structures, yet that primacy can be given to another person through violent assertion, which in turn can be read as a sign of weak domination⁵⁴.

The saga thus offers a balanced picture of the interplay between personal traits and social standing, which is further expanded in a later scene (ch. 12) where Hjördis exchanges her name and clothes with her servant; the two aim to fool approaching vikings who might put the noble lady at risk. A mistake reveals their ruse, as their captors notice that the supposed servant has more rings than the supposed princess, confirming the earlier suspicion derived from the way they greeted the leader of the vikings, king Álfr. The king then proceeds to test them on their morning habits, and their differing behavior reveals their diverging social standing. This is a clear example of what Bourdieu called the «habitus»⁵⁵. This scene again shows the delicate tension between individual decision and social constraints, which is here solved by social determination: the message, with obvious aristocratic undertones, is that social standing exists beyond external looks, extending into the disposition of manners, mind, and body.

The description of several characters makes clear that there is a link between social status and the virtues embodied by an individual character. It is common that major characters, such as Atli or the main members of the Volsungs and Gjúkungar are given strong features. Sigurðr is perhaps the best example. Already at birth he is described as having a piercing gaze, «hann engum mundu líkan verða eða samjafnan»⁵⁶. Moreover, comparisons are used to differentiate these people from the rest of society: «Ok þá er nefndir eru allir inir ágæztu menn ok konungar í fornsögum, þá skal Sigurðr fyrir ganga um afl ok atgervi,

kapp ok hreysti er hann hefir haft um hvern mann fram annarra í norðrálfu heimsins»⁵⁷.

As most characters of high social standing are described in similar terms, we can infer that there is a strong link between personal virtue and social status, a link that is related to a conception of innate nature which differentiates nobles from the rest of men, through their inborn qualities. The Russian medievalist Aron Gurevich noticed that there is a close association between the words for «noble» and the idea of inalienable rights to allodial land (the «óðal») ⁵⁸. Thus, it is not surprising that a common Norse word for «nature, disposition, inborn quality», «aðal», is etymologically the same as the Anglo-Saxon «ethel» and German «edel», both meaning «nobility». Yet while in the saga this word has been generally replaced by the Latin loanword «náttúra» and the related form «eðli»⁵⁹, the idea of a link between nobility and better features is still evident, but it seems to have all but faded away. For example, it appears when it is said of the sons of Gjúki that: «Báru þau börn mjök af qðrum konunga börnum um alla atgervi, bæði um vænleik ok vöxt. Þeir váru jafnan í hernaði ok unnu mörq ágætisverk»⁶⁰.

Finally, the saga mentions ways to acquire virtues and knowledge which derive from the acquisition of external elements. The most obvious example is the ingestion of Fáfñir's blood, which enables Sigurðr to understand the language of birds. By contrast, the ingestion of meat from the heart of the dragon makes Guðrún acquire two of the traits that characterized the monster: she becomes «grimmari» (grimmer) and «vitrari» (wiser)⁶¹. In any case, even when the skills are acquired rather than inborn, they again help to underline social differences, as none of the characters who acquire new skills are distinguished by lineage and nobility before they do so⁶².

⁵⁴ Godelier argues that in early societies domination depends mostly on consensus, and that violent coercion is typically a symptom of weak domination. GODELIER, M., *The Making of Great Men: Male Domination and Power among the New Guinea Baruya*, Cambridge, 1986. However, Claessen has shown that in fact, extensive use of coercion can coexist with forms of domination based on consensus. CLAESSEN, H., «Consensus and coercion – prerequisites for government in early states», *International Journal of Anthropology*, 9 (1994), pp. 41-51. A recent reassessment of theoretical views insists that recurrent uses of coercion are typically a sign of weak domination: «no political regime can survive for a long time based on coercion exclusively or even primarily»: BONDARENKO, D., «On the Nature and Features of the (Early) State: An Anthropological Reanalysis», *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, 139 (2014), p. 225.

⁵⁵ BOURDIEU, P., *The Logic of Practice*, Sanford, 1980, p. 53; BOURDIEU, P., *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Harvard, 1984, p. 170.

⁵⁶ «No one would be like him or his equal». FINCH, R. G. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, pp. 22-23; GRIMSTAD, K. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 122.

⁵⁷ «And then when all the most illustrious men and kings of the old stories are named, Sigurðr is [considered] above them in strength and prowess, zeal and valor, and he was superior in such qualities to each man in the northern parts of the world». FINCH, R. G. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 23; GRIMSTAD, K. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 122.

⁵⁸ GUREVICH, A., *Historical...*, p. 92.

⁵⁹ «Náttúra» appears three times in the saga (in chapters eight, twelve, and fourteen), though sometimes meaning «strange power» as in the case of the wolfskins. «Eðli» appears twice (both in chapter twenty-nine), but we have not been able to find any use of «aðal». «Eði» appears in chapter eleven and twenty-two, both referring to suitable marriages where the couples (Sigmundur-Hjördis and Brynhildr-Sigurðr) share the same nature.

⁶⁰ «These children were above the children of other kings in every aspect, both in stature and beauty. They were always harring and accomplished many great deeds». FINCH, R. G. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 44; GRIMSTAD, K. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 162.

⁶¹ FINCH, R. G. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 48; GRIMSTAD, K. (ed.), *Völsungasaga...*, p. 170. The acquisition of the abilities of an animal through the consumption of its heart is by no means something particular to this saga. In *Ynglinga saga*, Snorri Sturluson states that Ingjaldr, right after eating a wolf's heart, became the grimmest («grimmast») and the worst ill-disposed («verst skaplundaðr») person among all men. AÐALBJARNARSON, B. (ed.), *Ynglinga saga*, Reykjavík, 1941, p. 64.

⁶² This clarifies the reasons that Sigi had to kill the slave Breði, as such anomaly of a slave who was skilled above a king was at odds with the expected superiority of kings in virtue, symbolically endangering a hierarchical version of the social order frequent in Norse sources and epitomized in the Eddic poem *Rígsþula*.

Nonetheless, there are characters whose qualities, acts, and decisions are not determined by social structure; their agency is above it. A case already noted is the one of Óðinn, who intervenes in the development of the narrative in an arbitrary and capricious way, ending the life of some and favoring others seemingly at random. But probably the most evident case here is the one of Andvari, which deserves further explanation.

4. WHEN AGENCY CONSTRAINTS: ON THE CURSE OF ANDVARI, THE CIRCULATION OF WEALTH, AND FATE

Andrew McGillivray considered the possibility that Andvari did not curse the treasure and proposed instead that his speech would serve as a warning of the negative effects of the treasure on its owner⁶³. Nonetheless, it would seem clear from the work of anthropologists that such a gift is infused with the essence of its first owner⁶⁴. Items like Andvari's treasure act as what anthropologists call inalienable possessions, that is, objects which appear inextricably linked with their original possessor and thus can never be fully alienated from them. In his unwillingness to give away his treasure, Andvari was forced by the gods to surrender it. As a reciprocal response to this aggression, the «dvergr» unleashes a curse that marks the fates of all those who are in contact with the treasure: «hverjum skyldi at bana verða er þann gullhring ætti ok svá allt gullit»⁶⁵. The element that links Andvari with his treasure is nothing other than the curse, that is, a manifestation of his agency.

Theoretical studies on gift-giving highlight a tension between the wish to keep an inalienable possession and the need to make it circulate⁶⁶. Such tension is portrayed in the saga as unresolvable, causing the death not only of those excluded from access to it, but also of those who most strongly keep it. The tension between keeping and giving Andvari's treasure causes the destruction of the whole of Hreiðmarr's kin: Fáfnir, driven by greed, is directly responsible for his father's death. In turn, Reginn is (indirectly) guilty of fratricide, as he incites Sigurðr to kill his brother. Here, the omission of Lyngheiðr and Lofnheiðr plays another role. In the Eddic poems they seem to survive

the kin-strife. Their omission gives a stronger message of the structurally disruptive effect of the cursed treasure: the implosion of Hreiðmarr's lineage prefigures the legacy of death in the later parts of the saga, where many are brought to their ends by its power. The hoard not only corrupts the individual who possesses it, but it also destroys family relationships. As Judy Quinn has pointed out, «during the course of *Völsunga saga*, the ring *Andvaranautr* passes from the hand of Sigurðr to Brynhildr and then to Guðrún, damning their lives and snuffing out their dynastic lines»⁶⁷.

Thus, Andvari's agency carries on his existence within the gift and provokes consequences akin to its nature, binding the fate of those attached to it. Furthermore, the curse on the treasure not only affects the individual who owns it, for the distribution of the treasure unleashes tragic events that dissolve all ties of kinship. As discussed above, the first victims are Hreiðmarr's family: it causes his death and alienates both of his sons, whose lives, in turn, will be ended by Sigurðr when trying to acquire the gold. This pattern reappears when Sigurðr places the treasure again into circulation thereby causing the curse to inflict severe damage on three different lineages: *Volsungs*, *Budlungs*, and *Gjukungs*.

Not surprisingly, Andvari's curse (and thus, his agency) is linked with fate, a fact which is highlighted in several prophecies in the saga. Even if the first prophecy is made in relation to the treasure's curse itself, later there are other predictions that anticipate and reinforce it. In these, however, the prophetic agent does not add any of his own intentions or traits, but simply repeats Andvari's original aim. For example, when Sigurðr has wounded Fáfnir mortally, the dragon tells him that if he owns the treasure, he will end up dead, and he tells him to return home instead: «Ríða muntu þar til er þú finnr svá mikit gull at ærit er um þína daga, ok þat sama gull verðr þinn bani ok hvers annars er þat á»⁶⁸.

However, one of the factors that allows the treasure to reproduce its lethal effect is its power to attract the avarice of individuals. This is strongly highlighted in *Völsunga saga*, where in contrast to *Reginsmál*, Andvari specifically curses

⁶³ MCGILLIVRAY, A., *Best Kept Secret...*, p. 369.

⁶⁴ MAUSS, M., «Essai sur le don: Forme et Raison de l'échange dans las sociétés archaïques», *L'Année Sociologique*, 1 (1925), pp. 30-179; WEINER, A., *Inalienable possessions: the paradox of keeping-while-giving*, Berkeley, 1992; GODELIER, M., *L'Enigme du Don*, Paris, 2002; STRATHERN, A., *The rope of moka: big-men and ceremonial exchange in Mount Hagen, New Guinea*, Cambridge, 1971. In addition, action and intention are typically connected in speech. See MALINOWSKI, B., *Magic Science and Religion and other essays*, Illinois, 1948, and ONG, W., *Orality and Literacy; The technologizing of the world*, London-New York, 1982, even if both limit their argument on societies without writing systems. Vésteinn Ólason points out that there is a strong belief in the power of the word in sagas, often seen in the impact of prophecies. ÓLASON, V., *Dialogues with the Viking Age: Narration and Representation in the Sagas of Icelanders*, Reykjavík, 1998, pp. 120-121.

⁶⁵ «Whoever possesses this gold ring will die, and the same for all the gold». FINCH, R. G. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 26; GRIMSTAD, K. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 128.

⁶⁶ WEINER, *Inalienable Possessions...*; GODELIER, M., *L'énigme...*

⁶⁷ QUINN, J., «Trust in Words: Verse Quotation and Dialogue in *Völsunga saga*», in JAKOBSSON, Á., LASSEN, A. and NEY, A. (eds.), *Fornaldar-sagnar nas struktur och ideologi, handlingar fran ett symposium I Uppsala 31.8-2.9 2001*, Uppsala, 2003, p. 92.

⁶⁸ «You shall ride there, where you will find so much gold that will be plentiful on your days, but that same gold will become your death and that of each other who owns it». FINCH, R. G. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 23; GRIMSTAD, K. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 122.

the last ring, which he is reluctant to give up. In this way, it is more evident that Hreiðmarr's death is the cause of both the curse and his greediness, since he insists that the gods cover the last single whisker left exposed on the otter's skin with the ring *Andvaranautr*. But this avarice does not apply to Sigurðr, who is driven to kill Fáfnir to redeem the injustices that Reginn apparently suffered at his brother's hand, rather than to gain anything for himself. However, it does apply to Grímhildr: when she finds out that Sigurðr obtained the treasure and asked Brynhildr in marriage, she mentions him as a potential ally for the Gjúkungar⁶⁹. Grímhildr's greed-driven strategy sets the stage for trickery and treason: through her potion, she makes Sigurðr unknowingly break his promise to Brynhildr and marry her daughter instead. However, this remains hidden until the cursed ring of Andvari makes the situation clear and sets the deadly revenge plot in motion, revealed in the middle of the quarrel between Guðrún and Brynhildr.

To further complicate the issue, this outcome also derives from Sigurðr's decision to exchange Brynhildr's rings: he takes Andvari's ring from her and places another ring from Fáfnir's hoard on her finger. The saga does not explain why Sigurðr acts in this way, and it seems hard to explain rationally why he would want this. In terms of narrative development, this action triggers the feud between both women and the doom of most characters that are dragged into the feud⁷⁰. It is possible that the compulsion behind Sigurðr's ring-exchange is an effect of the curse on *Andvaranautr*, bending his fate towards a tragic end.

An inexorable fate is also initiated when Atli, anxious for the treasure, tries to trick the Gjúkungar by inviting them to a feast and murdering them there. Both greediness and the curse weave the destiny of the Gjúkungar, as is reflected in the prophetic dreams of Gunnarr's and Hęgni's wives. Following *Atlamál*, they warn their husbands about their bad omens, but the men reject their warnings. Nonetheless, Gunnarr finally accepts his wife's interpretations although he decides to keep his promise to attend the feast, claiming no one can avoid his fate: «Vant

gerisk nú at ráða, ok má ekki forðask sitt aldrag, en eigi ólíkt at vér verðum skammæir»⁷¹.

The outcome is not only death for the Gjúkungar, but also for Atli, killed by Guðrún and Hęgni's surviving son Niflungr to avenge their kinsmen. Broadly speaking, Andvari's agency created a curse powerful enough to decimate three lineages: no one among the Buðlungar survives, and of the Volsungs only two survive. One of these is Svanhildr (daughter of Sigurðr and Guðrún), but she dies shortly thereafter, and the other is Áslaug, daughter of Sigurðr and Brynhildr, who plays no role in the saga. Finally, all the Gjúkungar but Guðrún also die. It is only then that the treasure is lost, its legacy of destruction being fulfilled.

As Finch has argued, *Völsunga saga* is a unified narrative with a «considerable consistency»⁷². Considered in this light, it will be argued that the different elements represented in the saga that are discussed here are in some way related. Certainly, we do find clear parallels between Andvari's agency (a cursed fate) and the social constraints we have been analyzing in the first part of this article. We have argued that the overestimation of the importance of the kin group led to disastrous consequences. Accepting her father's will, Signý married king Siggeirr against her will and finally commits suicide, while Gautish family and most of the Volsungs die violently. In a similar vein, the effects of Andvari's curse and greediness obliterate life and family lineage. But apart from these negative consequences, the inexorability that characterizes destiny equates with the certainty of social constraints. This can be seen in a saying that appears twice in the saga: «eitt sinn skal hverr deyja»⁷³. It appears when Völsungr refuses the advice of his daughter Signý and decides to practice war against Siggeirr to prevent the loss of his family's honor. Secondly, without appearing in *Fáfnismál*, this saying is pronounced by Sigurðr right after the dragon stated that the cursed treasure will put an end to the hero's life. As we see, both honor and destiny deserve the same acceptance as if there were no other possible action⁷⁴. This might have been a saying circulating

⁶⁹ FINCH, R. G. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 47; GRIMSTAD, K. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, pp. 166, 168.

⁷⁰ The way in which Brynhildr achieves her revenge is not by physical violence «but through performative speech-acts of goading»: JOCHENS, J., *Old Norse Images of Women*, Philadelphia, 1996, p. 162.

⁷¹ «It is difficult now to make good counsel, but nobody can avoid death, and it is not unlikely that we turn out to be short-lived». FINCH, R. G. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 67; GRIMSTAD, K. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 112.

⁷² FINCH, R. G., «The Treatment of Poetic Sources by the Compiler of *Völsunga Saga*», *Saga-Book* 16 (1962-65), p. 353; FINCH, R. G., «*Atlakviða*, *Atlamál*, and *Völsunga Saga*: A Study in Combination and Integration», in DRÖNKE, U., HELGADÓTTIR, G., WOLFGANG, G. and BEKKER-NIELSEN, H. (eds.), *Speculum Norroenvm: Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, 1981, p. 138.

⁷³ «Everyone must die sometime». FINCH, R. G. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, pp. 6, 31; GRIMSTAD, K. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, pp. 86, 140.

⁷⁴ On the relationship between honor, revenge, and destiny, see BEK-PEDERSEN, K., *The norms in Old Norse Mythology*, Edinburgh, 2013, pp. 165-193.

at the time of production, as it appears also in *Íslendinga saga*, when Þórir pronounced these same words shortly before dying in battle⁷⁵.

5. ABOUT INTENTIONALITY AND INDIVIDUAL ACTIONS THAT OPPOSE SOCIAL NORMS

As we have seen, the agency of certain supernatural characters, such as Óðinn and Andvari, goes beyond social chains and succeeds in exercising power and creating the conditions in which individuals make their decisions. Brynhildr presents an interesting case of a character who moves between excessive liberty and the absolute obedience to social duties. Indeed, her agency has been considered so powerful that it is also present at the moment of her death⁷⁶. Nonetheless, we cannot erase the role of social structure in the decisions taken by this character. It may be the case that Brynhildr's «in-between» characterization could arise from a fusion between the valkyrie Sigrdrífa and the human Brynhildr, daughter of Budli.

Like in *Sigrdrífumál*, Brynhildr tells of two kings, Hjálmgunnarr and Ágnarr. Óðinn had promised victory to the first, but she killed him and was therefore punished by the god: «Óðinn stakk mik svefnþorni í hefnd þess ok kvað mik aldri síðan skyldu sigr hafa ok kvað mik giptask skulu»⁷⁷.

Even if Brynhildr was able to overcome Óðinn's will, she was later punished for this decision. Still, while she is unable to reject the punishment, she was able to modify it to a certain degree and add a personal condition to it: she will marry no man who knew fear.

By contrast, when non-supernatural individuals act to overcome social constraints, the narrative typically involves elements which help to blur the possibility of conscious action, and thereby diminish individual agency; this might involve magical potions, intoxication by alcohol or the change of shape into an animal form. The last is particularly evident in the scene in which Sigmundr and Sinþjötli shapeshift into wolves and begin to act like beasts: when Sinþjötli boasts his skills, Sigmundr loses his temper and bites him, but he repents and succeeds in healing him, aided by Óðinn. Their agency is thus, if not fully lost, diminished by their transformation: Sigmundr does not act willingly when breaking the social norm, but merely acts

as a beast. His conscious action, however, is to do what is prescribed by the social expectations, that is, help his son.

Strathern has shown that the influence of magic on human subjectivity could introduce a violent or dangerous action into an amoral state, thus blurring the intentionality of the aggressor and his culpability⁷⁸. The key is not the magic itself, but rather the unintentional character of the action. This ideology might be present when Sigmundr, drunk, orders his son to drink a poisoned beverage. This again shows that an altered state can be called upon in a saga if a mortal human has to break social constraints.

A sort of forgiveness afforded drunk people can also be found in a later writing, *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*. Here, its eponymous character asks king Eiríkr for his daughter's hand but gets an unfriendly answer and gets angry. After that, they went to sleep and Eiríkr received the counsel of the queen, who implored him to restore their relationship. The next morning king Eiríkr speaks with Hrólfr and asks him about the reasons for his journey. At first, Hrólfr answers that he has already talked about his intention and complains about the response the king gave him the previous day. Eiríkr replies that he remembers nothing about the proposition of Hrólfr and that «ef vér höfum þat nokkut talat, at yðr mislíki, þá mun þat satt sem mælt er, at öl er annarr maðr»⁷⁹. After this, Hrólfr sees that the king has changed and again brings up the proposal of marriage.

Nonetheless, it seems that another intention of the author of *Völsunga saga* is to highlight the negative consequences alcohol produces. If we compare the episode in which Atli invites the Gjukungs to his kingdom in *Atlakviða*, *Atlamál*, and *Völsunga saga*, we will notice that alcohol plays a more prominent role in the latter source. By contrast, in the former, there is no sign or reference to the drunkenness of the Gjukungs when they decided to accept Atli's proposal. The motivation of Gunnarr is not very clear, though we may infer he is moved by honor and pride. In strophe 5 of *Atlamál* they simply were not aware of the treacherous plan of Atli and it was only when they accepted the invitation that they became drunk (st. 8). Indeed, once the treacherous plan was revealed through prophetic dreams, Gunnarr does not change his mind as the decision has already been taken. Even if in *Völsunga saga* the motif of destiny is also present, there is a strong emphasis on alcohol. Once the brothers Hëgni and Gunnarr get very

⁷⁵ JÓHANNESSON, J., FINNBOGASON, M. and ELDJÁRN, K. (eds.), *Sturlunga saga*, Reykjavík, 1946, p. 438. We would like to thank Torfi Tulinius for bringing up this reference in discussion.

⁷⁶ KANERVA, K., «Female Suicide in Thirteenth-Century Iceland: The Case of Brynhildr in Völsunga Saga», *Viator*, 49 (2018), pp. 129-154.

⁷⁷ «Óðinn stabbed me with the thorn of sleep in revenge for this, and said I shall never achieve victory, and said I should marry». FINCH, R. G. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 35; GRIMSTAD, K. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 146.

⁷⁸ STRATHERN, M., «Double Standards», in *The Ethnography of Moralities*, London, 1997, pp. 240-245.

⁷⁹ «If we have said anything that you dislike, then what is said must be true, that ale is another man». JÓNSSON, G., and VILHJÁLMSOHN, B., (eds.), *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, Reykjavík, 1944, ch. 8-9.

drunk («gerðusk allmjök drukknir»), Vingi notices this and suggests that they accept Atli's proposal. After that, the drunkenness of the king is again emphasized («Gunnar var mjök drukkin») and he finally promises to make the journey⁸⁰.

The saga insists on the dangers of drinking, when Brynhildr tells Sigurðr not to act against what a drunken man does: «Ok ef þú heyrir heimslig orð drukkinna manna, deil eigi við þá er víndrukknir eru ok tapa viti sínu»⁸¹. This might be interpreted as meaning that a drunken man is seen as unable to have intention, and thus his actions are less meaningful. Significantly, this contrasts with another piece of advice Brynhildr gives him earlier, as she encourages Sigurðr to kill all those who have insulted him. The difference between the two pieces of advice is the drunkenness of the subjects, whose absence or presence modifies the response they deserve. Such a suppression of intentionality thus serves to exempt individuals from responsibility⁸². In the example of Sigmundr, even if his action causes the death of his son, there is no consequence or punishment⁸³.

But another determining factor for this lack of consequence for those actions might be found in the network of relationships that surrounds those involved in the events, rather than the actions being unintentional. This is clearly seen when Sigurðr, tricked by Grímhildr, drinks the potion that makes him lose his memory and forget his feelings and oath to Brynhildr, and thus marry Guðrún. Again, his altered state of mind explains why he is able to overcome the social norm, but in this case, the consequences are dire. In fact, this action ultimately leads to his death at the hands of Brynhildr, who, even if she realizes that Sigurðr was tricked, decides to take revenge on him, goading her husband, Gunnarr, into killing the hero. As both Gunnarr and his brother Högni are oath-bound to Sigurðr, they in turn incite the younger sibling Guttormr to kill Sigurðr. Not only was he unbound by any oath to his brother-in-law, but was also presented as «ungr» (young) and «fás vitandi» (lacking wisdom or knowing few things)⁸⁴.

Even considering those factors (which presumably eased the path to persuade him), he is made to taste wolf meat to fully persuade him to take the risk to kill Sigurðr.

If we compare the context between the wounding and then the death of Sinfjötli and the death of Sigurðr several differences emerge. In the first case, Sigmundr acts within the context of vertical blood ties. He twice harms his son without consequence, as there is no external structural compulsion that can punish Sigmundr: his position as a father exempts him from any revenge. Moreover, his son's passive behavior and obedience to his father are thus structurally predictable. Filicide was not an expected part of social relationships, and there was no expected, normative way to deal with it.

With the death of Sigurðr, by contrast, kinship is mostly by alliance (marriage and in-laws, but blood ties unite the avenging brothers) and are all horizontal. This enables Brynhildr to restore her honor through the revenge undertaken on her behalf, enacting a structural demand for negative reciprocity⁸⁵. Each character acts according to what is prescribed and does so through socially acceptable channels: the angered woman goads⁸⁶, the oath-bound keep their oaths, and the free sibling restores the honor of both her sister and his family. That Guttormr needs a potion to dare to act is little but a narrative trait used to show how difficult the deed was, given Sigurðr's heroic strength, which is highlighted in his death-scene.

Our last example, again involving drinks, reaffirms the heavier weight of blood ties over those generated by alliance. After the murder of Sigurðr, Guðrún hides from her siblings, who have just murdered her husband. They find her and Grímhildr prepares another potion, which causes «fagnaðr mikill» (great joy) and forces peace between the siblings, making Guðrún closer to her blood kin⁸⁷. Immediately after this, Grímhildr persuades Guðrún to marry Atli, regardless of her wishes. Guðrún finally

⁸⁰ FINCH, R. G. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 66; GRIMSTAD, K. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 108.

⁸¹ «And if you hear stupid words from a drunken man, do not meddle, because wine-drinking muddles his wits». FINCH, R. G. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 40; GRIMSTAD, K. (ed.), *Völsungasaga...*, p. 152. This is further significant if we consider that the author of *Völsunga saga* reproduces the advice Sigrdrífa gave Sigurðr in *Poetic Edda*. Nonetheless, the saga author modified the present advice in order to highlight the lack or diminished responsibility of drunk people. Certainly, in *Sigrdrífumál*, st. 30, the valkyrja points not to a drunk man in general, but rather to the listener when drunk. KRISTJÁNSSON, J. and ÓLASSON, V. (eds.), *Eddukvæði II...*, p. 319.

⁸² TULINIUS, T. H., *The Matter...*, pp. 146-147.

⁸³ This emphasis on the idea of intentionality could be a reflection of some ideologies developed during the thirteenth century. One of the most valued virtues of the king was his capacity to exercise justice; being just meant to consider the intentions and merits of the people involved. Sverre Bagge has shown how sentences were established according to the intentions, faults, and circumstances surrounding the crime, and clarifies that the distinction between intentional and unintentional acts became more relevant with the emergence of a judge presiding above the parties. See BAGGE, S., *Cross and Scepter. The Rise of the Scandinavian Kingdoms from the Vikings to the Reformation*, Princeton, Oxford, 2014, p. 81; BAGGE, S., *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom: State Formation in Norway c.900-1350*, Copenhagen, 2010, p. 207; BAGGE, S., *The Political Thought of The King's Mirror*, Odense, 1987, pp. 64-65.

⁸⁴ FINCH, R. G. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 56; GRIMSTAD, K. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 190.

⁸⁵ On negative reciprocity see SAHLINS, M., «On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange», in BANTON, M., *The relevance of Models for Social Anthropology*, London, 1965, pp. 139-236.

⁸⁶ Clover remains the main reference on this topic. See CLOVER, C., «Hildigunn's Lament», in LINDOW, J., LÖNNROTH, L. and WEBER, G. W. (eds.), *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature*, Odense, 1986. Her chapter has been reprinted in ANDERSON, S. and SWENSON, K., (eds.), *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Myth*, New York, 2002, that holds many relevant articles on related issues.

⁸⁷ FINCH, R. G. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 63; GRIMSTAD, K. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 202.

obeys, even if she can predict the disastrous consequences her marriage to the Hunnish king will have: «Þetta mun verða fram at ganga ok þó at mínum óvilja, ok mun þat lítt til yndis, heldr til harma»⁸⁸. This scene parallels the one of Signý's wedding to Siggeirr, because a parental tie (here mother-daughter, rather than father-daughter) is obeyed without question even if harm is expected. Individual agency is shown again as unable to break certain norms⁸⁹.

6. CONCLUSIONS

After Andvari's curse on the treasure, the narrative becomes driven by the theme of an unavoidable tragic fate. This, logically, tends to diminish the role of individual agency. In fact, most characters seem to become progressively like pawns in a game played by destiny, losing the ability to enact their own will, even when they know of the tragedy that looms over them. Almost paradoxically, the decline of individual agency is an effect of Andvari's own agency transferred to the treasure in the form of a curse. Nonetheless, we have seen that agency is also limited in the first part of the saga, in which the characters also seem to act as pawns. Thus, Sigmundur, Sinfjötli, and Sigurðr carry out the duties imposed by kinship structure (revenge), while Signý, who also plays a role in the revenge, at the same time submits to her father's will. All of them seem to follow a path built before their own existence. Indeed, this path was fixed by a social structure which is as unavoidable as destiny, and as harmful as a curse.

Óðinn is rather different in his agency compared with the cursed treasure. However whimsical are his decisions and motivations, they are different from the impersonal compulsion within Andvari's wealth. Interestingly, when the treasure is not active in the narrative, it is the god Óðinn who plays the role of the agent of fate. While Andvari's treasure is active, the god fades away from the story and only returns once the hoard disappears. Indeed, in the final scene, Guðrún's sons (sired by her last husband, Jónakr),

Hamdir and Sqrli, are killed because of Óðinn favoring their rival, king Jormunrekr⁹⁰.

It is possible that this difference reflects two distinct historical layers that coexist within the saga narrative. The main theme of the cursed gold and the deaths it brings is certainly a lot older than the saga: it is pictured in the Ramsund, Drävle, and Gök stones from the early eleventh century. Moreover, of the many kennings for «gold» related to the tale of the cursed treasure, some appear in early skaldic verse. For example, the only preserved stanza of a poem made c. 980 by Einarr Skjalaglam for king Haraldr Bluetooth, *Haraldsdrápa blátannar*, calls gold «the rocks of the Rhine» («Rínar grjótt»), referring to the final resting place of the cursed treasure⁹¹. If the theme of a cursed treasure that causes death to those around is ancient, the one that reflects the negative effects of the overestimation of the importance of the kin group and the pressure of social impositions echoes the concerns of the era in which the saga was composed. As Torfi Tulinius has pointed out, one of the intentions of the author was to show «the absurdity of excessive vengeance and the importance of keeping commitments» so as to confront the reality of his society⁹². In order to make the narrative congruent and highlight the disastrous consequences of certain duties, a comparison between both themes was necessary and taken by the saga author. Moreover, in the last part of this article we noted that the saga author found a place to discuss the issues concerning the intentionality of the individuals in the representation of elements that introduce them in an altered state of consciousness. This runs parallel to the theology of intentionality present in Christian thought, where intentions are of central importance⁹³. Indeed, as Gratian puts it in *De poenitentia*, God does not examine men's hands, but rather their hearts⁹⁴. In this way, the re-appropriation of the heroic cycle in *Völsunga saga* makes it both generally faithful in epic tragedy to the older version glimpsed from the poetical sources, but it is also enriched in order to suit a contemporary learned audience that possibly knew about philosophical issues pondered by scholars in continental Europe, at least in terms of the interplay of individual will and supra-individual constraints.

⁸⁸ «This will then turn out to be even if against my will, and it will bring little joy, but rather grief». FINCH, R. G. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 64; GRIMSTAD, K. (ed.), *Völsunga saga...*, p. 204.

⁸⁹ In addition, the disastrous result of these marriages might imply Christian influence. Only marriages by mutual consent are acceptable to Christian doctrine, which was introduced to Iceland already during the twelfth century. See JOCHENS, J., «Consent in Marriage: Old Norse Law, Life and Literature», *Scandinavian Studies*, 58 (1986), pp. 142-76; JOCHENS, J., *Women in Old Norse Society*, Ithaca, 1995, pp. 36-52 and ARNÓRSDÓTTIR, A., *Property and virginity: The Christianization of Marriage in Medieval Iceland 1200-1600*, Aarhus, 2010, pp. 67-77.

⁹⁰This is consistent with a common portrayal of Óðinn in saga literature, where he is humanized in a rather euhemeristic fashion (even if less plainly than in Snorri Sturluson's Edda and *Ynglinga saga*) and shown to be deceitful and capricious. Yet, at the same time, his place as the illustrious ancestor to royal lineages is reaffirmed.

⁹¹ It is likely of course that the Eddic poems on which the retelling of the story in *Snorra Edda* and in *Völsunga saga* are based are also substantially old, but their dating will likely always remain controversial.

⁹² TULINIUS, T. H., *The Matter of the North...*, p. 158.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

⁹⁴ Nonetheless, this topic seems to be more complex, as the intention should be reflected on human activities. For further analysis on the Gratian concept, see MORIN, A., «Creencia y criminalización de la cogitatio en el derecho bajomedieval», in DELL'ELICINE, E., FRANCISCO, H., MICELI, P., and MORIN, A. (eds.), *Tener por cierto. Prácticas de la creencia de la antigüedad romana a la modernidad*, Buenos Aires, 2019, pp. 225-226.