# INTRODUCTION

The unknown Icelandic author who wrote *The Saga of the Volsungs* in the thirteenth century based his prose epic on stories found in far older Norse poetry. His sources, which may have included a lost earlier prose saga, were rich in traditional lore. *The Saga of the Volsungs* recounts runic knowledge, princely jealousies, betrayals, unrequited love, the vengeance of a barbarian queen, greedy schemes of Attila the Hun, and the mythic deeds of the dragon slayer, Sigurd the Volsung. It describes events from the ancient wars among the kings of the Burgundians, Huns, and Goths, treating some of the same legends as the Middle High German epic poem, the *Nibelungenlied.* In both accounts, though in different ways, Sigurd (Siegfried in the German tradition) acquires the Rhinegold and then becomes tragically entangled in a love triangle involving a supernatural woman. In the Norse tradition she is a valkyrie, one of Odin's warrior-maidens.

In Scandinavia, during the centuries after the Middle Ages, knowledge of the Sigurd story never died out among the rural population. Full of supernatural elements, including the schemes of one-eyed Odin, a ring of power, and the sword that was reforged, the tale was kept alive in oral tradition. In the nineteenth century, as the Volsung story was discovered by the growing urban readership, it became widely known throughout Europe. Translated into many languages, it became a primary source for writers of fantasy, and for those interested in oral legends of historical events and the mythic past of northern Europe. The saga deeply influenced Wil-

liam Morris in the nineteenth century and J. R. R. Tolkien in the twentieth. Richard Wagner, in particular, drew heavily upon the Norse Volsung material in composing the Ring cycle. In 1851 he wrote to a friend concerning the saga:

> Already in Dresden I had all imaginable trouble buying a book that no longer was to be found in any of the book shops. At last I found it in the Royal Library. It . . . is called the *Völsunga saga*—translated from Old Norse by H. von der Hagen [1815]. . . . This book I now need for repeated perusal. . . . I want to have the saga again; not in order to imitate it . . . , rather, to recall once again exactly every element that I already previously had conceived from its particular features. [Wagner's use of the Volsung material is discussed later in this Introduction.]

One can only speculate about the origin of the saga's dragon slaying and of other mythic events described in the tale. Many of the saga's historical episodes, however, may be traced to actual events that took place in the fourth and fifth centuries A.D., the period of great folk migrations in Europe. In this time of upheaval, the northern frontier defenses of the Roman Empire collapsed under the pressure of barbarian peoples, as Germanic tribes from northern and central Europe and Hunnish horsemen from Asia invaded what is now France and Germany. A seemingly endless series of skirmishes and wars were fought as tribes attempted to subjugate their enemies and to consolidate newly won territories into kingdoms and empires.

The memory of the migrations became part of the oral heritage of the tribesmen, as epic poems about heroes and their feats spread throughout the continent during succeeding centuries. In the far north legends and songs about Burgundians, Huns, and Goths, as well as new or revised stories about indigenous northern families such as the Volsungs, became an integral part of the cultural lore of Scandinavian societies. The old tales had not died out by the Viking Age (ca. 800–1070), that is, several centuries after the migration period had ended. On the contrary, during this new age of movement in Scandinavia the epic cycles of the earlier migration period seem to have gained in popularity. As Norsemen sailed out

from Viking Scandinavia in search of plunder, trade, and land, they carried with them tales of Sigurd and the Volsungs.

One of the places to which the Norsemen carried these epic lays was Iceland, an island discovered by Viking seamen in the ninth century, which soon after its settlement (ca. 870–930) became the major Norse outpost in the North Atlantic. In Iceland, as in the Norse homelands and other overseas settlements, the traditions about Sigurd and the various tribesmen—among them Huns, Goths, and Burgundians—became choice subjects for native poets.

*The Saga of the Volsungs* was written down sometime between 1200 and 1270. Its prose story is based to a large degree on traditional Norse verse called Eddic poetry, a form of mythic or heroic lay which developed before the year 1000 in the common oral folk culture of Old Scandinavia. Eighteen of the Eddic poems in the thirteenth-century *Codex Regius,* the most important manuscript of the *Poetic (or Elder) Edda,* treat aspects of the Volsung legend. (The specific extant poems on which the saga author relied are listed at the end of the book.) This manuscript, which is the only source for many of the Eddic poems, is, however, incomplete. An eight-page lacuna occurs in the middle of the Sigurd cycle, and the stories contained in *The Saga of the Volsungs,* chapters 24–31, are the principal source of information on the narrative contents of these lost pages.

So popular was the subject matter of the saga in the period of oral transmission that, if we are to believe later Icelandic written sources, some of the stories traveled as far as Norse Greenland. Someone in this settlement, founded in 985 by Icelanders led by Erik the Red, may have composed the Eddic poem about Attila (Atli) the Hun called "The Greenlandic Lay of Atli." This poem of heroic tragedy and revenge was later written down and preserved in Iceland.

Written Icelandic material builds on a long oral tradition. By the tenth century the Icelanders had already become renowned as storytellers throughout the northern lands, and Icelandic poets, called skalds, earned their keep in the royal courts of Scandinavia and Anglo-Saxon England. We may assume that, along with many other stories, they told the Sigurd cycle just as German poets told the story of Siegfried. It is noteworthy that about the year 1200, the *Nibelungenlied,* with its poetic version of the Siegfried

story, was written, probably in Austria. At approximately the same time or within seven decades, *The Saga of the Volsungs* was compiled in Iceland with far fewer chivalric elements than its German counterpart.

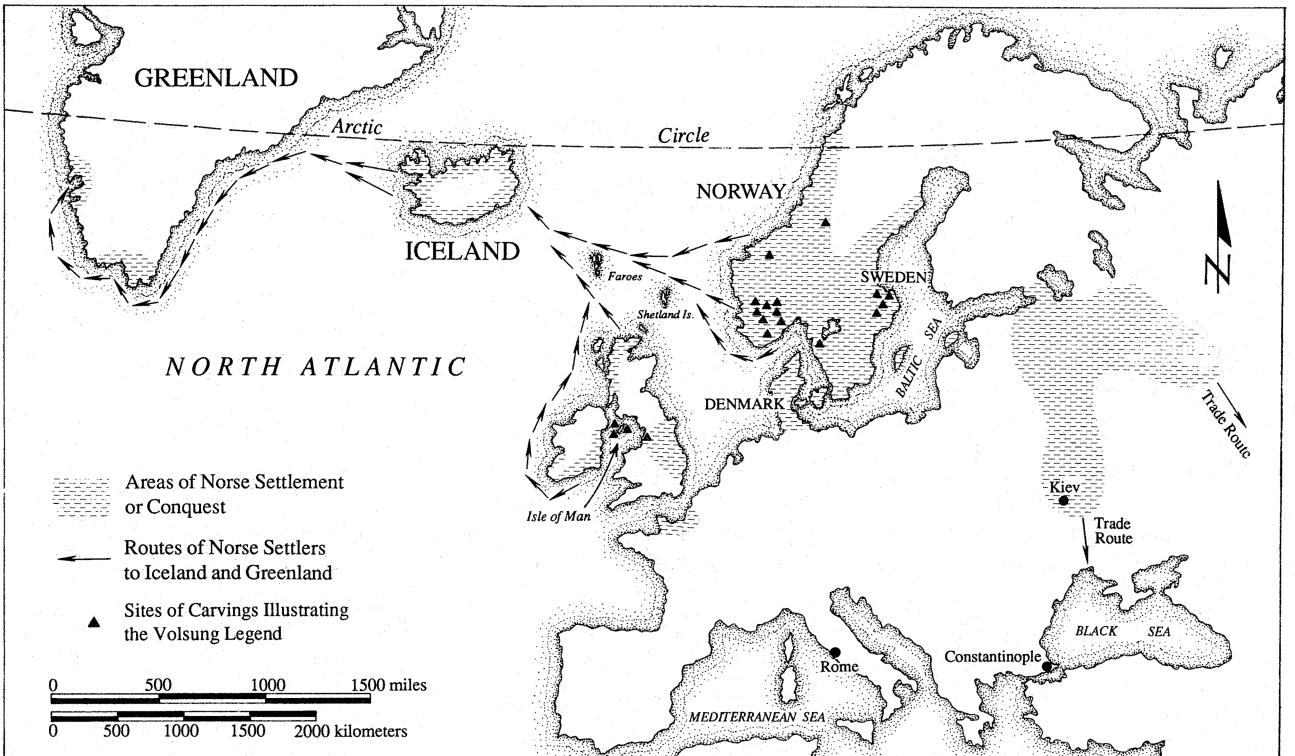
It is not by chance that in Scandinavia so much of the narrative material about the Volsungs was preserved in Iceland. This immigrant society on the fringe of European civilization, like frontier societies in other times and places, preserved old lore as a treasured link with distant homelands. Fortunately for posterity, writing became popular among the Icelanders in the thirteenth century, when interest in old tales was still strong. Almost all the Old Norse narrative material that has survived—whether myth, legend, saga, history, or poetry—is found in Icelandic manuscripts, which form the largest existing vernacular literature of the medieval West. Among the wealth of written material is Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda,* a thirteenth-century Icelandic treatise on the art of skaldic poetry and a handbook of mythological lore. The second section of Snorri's three-part prose work contains a short and highly readable summary of the Sigurd cycle which, like the much longer prose rendering of the cycle in *The Saga of the Volsungs,* is based on traditional Eddic poems. Although Snorri and the unknown author of *The Saga of the Volsungs* were treating the same material, there is no indication that the latter was familiar with Snorri's *Prose Edda.*

In the Middle Ages, when most narrative traditions were kept alive in verse, the Icelanders created the saga, a prose narrative form unique in Western medieval culture. Why the Icelanders became so interested in prose is not known, but it is clear that they cultivated their saga form, developing it into a suitable vehicle for long tales of epic quality, one of which is *The Saga of the Volsungs.* At times it seems as if its anonymous author was consciously trying to make history from the mythic and legendary material of his sources. It is also possible that he was drawing upon an earlier prose saga about the Volsungs. He may have been influenced by *The Saga of Thidrek of Berne,* a mid-thirteenth-century Norwegian translation of tales from north and west Germany about King Theoderic the Ostrogoth, a heroic figure from the migration period later called Dietrich of Berne. This saga is a rambling collection of stories about the king, his champions, their ancestors, and several renowned semimythic heroes, including Sigurd.

Along with tales of Sigurd and those of historical peoples and events, *The Saga of the Volsungs* recounts eerie stories whose roots reach back into European prehistory. When Sigurd's father Sigmund is driven from society by his enemy the king of Gautland (in southwestern Sweden), Sigmund finds a companion in his son Sinfjotli. Away from other humans, the two live in an underground dwelling, clothe themselves in wolfskins, and howl like wolves. They roam the forest as beasts of prey, killing any men they come upon. This section of the tale may be interpreted in light of traditions concerning some of Odin's warriors who, according to Snorri Sturluson, behaved like wolves. The description of Sigurd's kinsmen living like werewolves may also shed light on the "wolf-warriors." Helmets and sword scabbards decorated with these strange figures, perhaps werewolves or berserkers, date from the sixth through the eighth century and have been found widely in northern and central Europe. The account of Sigmund and his son Sinfjotli in the forest, and others like it in the saga, reflect the uncertain boundaries between nature and culture and between the world of men and the world of the supernatural. The saga's frequent descriptions of crossings of these borders reveal glimpses not only of fears and dreams but also of long-forgotten beliefs and cultic practices. Not least among these is Sigurd's tasting the blood of the dragon, thereby acquiring the ability to understand the speech of birds. The mixture of arcane knowledge and oral history in the Volsung material proved a potent lure for Norse audiences.

## Representations of the Volsung Story in Norse Art

The story of Sigurd and the lost treasure of the Burgundians was a favorite subject for artists as well as for storytellers in medieval Scandinavia. The many existing wood and stone carvings of scenes from the story testify to its extraordinary popularity in the Viking world, a cultural area that by the year 1000 stretched from Greenland to Scandinavian settlements in Russia (see map 1). The most frequently illustrated scenes are the reforging of the sword Gram, the killing of the dragon Fafnir, the roasting of the dragon's heart, the birds giving Sigurd advice, and Sigurd's horse Grani, often




MAP 1. The world of the Vikings (ca. 1000)

loaded with treasure from the hoard. A frequently depicted episode from the second part of the saga shows Sigurd's brother-in-law King Gunnar bound in the snake pit, playing a harp with his toes.

Most extant carvings of the Sigurd legend appear on Christian artifacts such as stone crosses, baptismal fonts, stave church portals, and Christian rune stones. The earliest carvings that clearly portray scenes from the Sigurd legend are found on tenth- and eleventh-century stone crosses from the Isle of Man. Because of its central position in the Irish Sea, with easy access to England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, the Isle of Man served as a major Viking base and trade center. It was a meeting place during the Viking Age for Norse and Celtic cultures, including pagan and Christian religions. Baptismal fonts, like the one in the Horum church in Bohuslan, often portray King Gunnar in the snake pit playing the harp with his feet. Farther to the east, in Sweden, a number of clear representations of the Sigurd story include the famous rune stone from Ramsund showing Sigurd slaying the dragon from underneath.

The most numerous Sigurd carvings, however, are found on portals from twelfth- and thirteenth-century Norwegian stave churches. Norway in the Middle Ages had between a thousand and twelve hundred of these sometimes towering wooden structures, many of which survived until the early part of the nineteenth century. Today only about thirty stave churches remain standing. Of the portals that are preserved from churches, many of them demolished in the nineteenth century, three represent biblical scenes; all other carvings portraying human figures are based on the legends of Sigurd and King Gunnar. The portrayal of the legend on church entryways in Norway is particularly intriguing. An Old Norwegian sermon (dated ca. 1200) concerning the consecration of stave churches suggests that for these buildings, as for many other churches, the door symbolically represented a spiritual defense of the interior. Dragon slaying was suitable for representation on church portals and on other Christian carvings because in medieval Christian thought the dragon and the serpent were often connected with Satan. Cast from heaven, Satan is depicted in medieval art as a voracious monster who angrily consumes his victims.

Sigurd crossed the threshold from pagan to Christian hero because of his dragon-slaying characteristics and, perhaps, his associ-

ation with the Norwegian royal house. Until other warrior-saints became popular in the High Middle Ages, the archangel Saint Michael was the foremost dragon slayer and defender against Satan and chaos. His cult developed early in Scandinavia, and as a dragon slayer he was represented in carvings on church portals in medieval Denmark. In Norway no pre-1200 representations of Michael have been preserved, and there is no mention of carvings of this saint on Norwegian stave church portals. Can the reason for the Norwegian choice of Sigurd over Michael as dragon slayer lie in the politics of the time? Michael was a guardian angel of the Danes, the Baltic Germans, and the Ottonian rulers of the Holy Roman Empire. Since Norway may have regarded him as the symbol of aggressive foreign powers, both lay and ecclesiastic, he would be seen as an inappropriate guardian of Norwegian interests. Sigurd, meanwhile, through the tradition that his daughter Aslaug was married to the legendary ninth-century Viking hero Ragnar Lodbrok ("Hairy Breeches"), was regarded as an ancestor of the Norwegian royal house and thus a suitable champion for Norwegian Christians.

## Myths, Heroes, and Social Realities

*The Saga of the Volsungs* falls into two distinct parts. The first part, ending with Sigurd's arrival among the Burgundians, is studded with mythic motifs, although their religious meaning and their coherence are often lost. Characters in this section include many supernatural beings: gods, giants, a valkyrie, a dwarf, and a dragon. It is difficult to discern historical precedents even for the human characters in this section. By contrast, the second part of the saga takes place in a human world with recognizable social problems. Nearly all the characters in this section may be identified with historical figures.

The first part of the saga is a valuable source of information about Odin, the one-eyed god of war, wisdom, death, and ecstasy. Odin appears here as ancestor and patron of the Volsung line and its scion, the dragon slayer Sigurd. Many of the god's characteristics described in the saga are corroborated by other sources. For example, Odin appears in other Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon

traditions as a progenitor of royal families. He also often bestows gifts on warrior-heroes, a function that he fulfills several times in the saga. It is Odin who first provides the magical sword that Sigurd later inherits from his father Sigmund. Odin also advises Sigurd how to identify the special horse Grani, a descendant of the god's own eight-legged steed Sleipnir.

Sigurd is an Odinic hero, and at crucial moments for Sigurd's ancestors, Odin's intervention assures the continuation of the family that is to produce the monster slayer. Thus when the marriage bed of Sigurd's great-grandfather, King Rerir, is barren, Odin sends Rerir an apple of fertility. The token is carried by a "wish-maiden," one of Odin's supernatural women who flies in the guise of a crow, a carrion bird similar to Odin's ravens. This divine intervention results in the miraculous birth of King Volsung. Later Volsung further reinforces the progenitorial link with the god by marrying the wish maiden who brought the apple that precipitated his own birth. The implied incestuousness of this marriage is echoed later in the saga by the sexual union of Volsung's twin children, Sigmund and Signy. Volsung has an additional connection with fertility cults: his name corresponds to an Old Norse fertility god called Volsi, whom Norwegian peasants represented as a deified horse phallus in *The Tale of Volsi.* This short Christian satire on pagan beliefs probably contains elements of actual pagan ritual. The tale was inserted into *The Saga of Saint Olaf* found in *Flateyjarbók,* a major fourteenth-century Icelandic manuscript named for the island Flatey in western Iceland where the book was found.

Odin, together with the silent god Hoenir and the trickster Loki, sets in motion the events that bring a great treasure from the chthonic world of the dwarves into the world of men. The treasure, which passes through the hands of nearly all classes of beings in the Norse cosmos—dwarves, gods, giants, a dragon, and humans—carries a curse and serves to link the human tragedy of the second part of the saga with the supernatural prehistory of the first part. A particular item in the treasure is a special ring called Andvaranaut, a cursed magical object that even Odin is not able to keep for himself.

What purpose, we may ask, do Sigurd's supernatural advantages and Odin's patronage serve? Although Sigurd has many semidivine attributes, he does not thirst after immortality as do

many heroes. The patronage of the highest god and Sigurd's special equipment make him formidable among men but not invincible. The issue of immortality is more clearly drawn in the *Nibelungenlied,* where Siegfried bathes in the blood of the dragon and, like Achilles, becomes invulnerable to weapons except in one part of his body. Furthermore, unlike the exploits of such monster slayers as Beowulf and the heroes of creation epics, Sigurd's dragon slaying and subsequent knowledge do not bring order or safety to the world. On the contrary, his memorable deed has disastrous consequences: almost all persons who come in contact with Sigurd or his family experience tragedy.

Sigurd's susceptibility to the opposing attractions of the real and supernatural worlds is perhaps heightened by the ambivalence of his own nature. Though finally incorporated by marriage into the real world of the Burgundians, he retains certain supernatural abilities, such as the power to assume the shape of others. He uses his otherworldly powers of shape-changing to trick Brynhild by appearing in the guise of his brother-in-law. For reasons that are not explained, Odin distances himself from Sigurd after the monster has been slain. Perhaps Sigurd is no longer of use to the god. It is noteworthy that, after the killing of the dragon, Odin appears only once more in the saga, at the tale's end, when he counsels Jormunrek the Gothic king on how to kill Gudrun's sons.

An overriding theme of tension between marriage and blood bonds runs through the saga. For generation after generation, strife with kin by marriage brings a series of misfortunes upon the Volsungs. Marriage creates new kinship alliances, which are vital for survival in societies like the one pictured in the saga, where there is no effective central order and only a rudimentary judiciary. Many of the saga's major characters are kings or noble retainers, individuals prepared to fight regularly to maintain their status. Even though pledges were exchanged between lord and retainer, the most trustworthy defense lay in the family. Yet villainy often arose from within that social unit, especially in the weak link of the in-law relationship.

In the saga, the Volsungs seldom have dependable blood relations. Sigurd grows up without a father, an element of his upbringing for which the dragon mocks him. The absence of the support that blood relations might supply exacerbates Sigurd's problems

with in-laws, who are often untrustworthy. Germanic societies tended to be patrilocal: that is, a man married a woman outside his group and brought her to live with his family instead of their living with hers. Sigurd breaks the usual social pattern after marrying the Burgundian princess Gudrun by settling among his in-laws at Worms. There the protection of both his person and his treasure is dependent upon the goodwill of his wife's Burgundian kinsmen.

The saga makes much of the disturbing fact that Sigurd's brothers-in-law plot against him, even though two of them have increased their obligations to him by establishing blood brotherhood. It is the third Burgundian brother, not bound to the outsider by a ritual blood tie, who carries out the attack on Sigurd. In part the recurring pattern of strife among in-laws comes from the sources available to the saga author. Many of the poems he drew upon for his prose narrative were small tragedies that, like the saga, focused on intrafamily rivalry over treasure and status. Linked together one after the other, the small tragedies weave a larger tale of horror.

## History and Legend: Burgundians, Huns, Goths, and Sigurd the Dragon Slayer

Because verifiable information about the migrations era is limited, the period is a historical snake pit that requires scholars to act much like King Gunnar, who in the saga played the harp with his toes. The writings of Greeks and Romans about their barbarian opponents and neighbors have in modern times come under increasing scrutiny, and the old assumption that tribal names necessarily denote significant or continuing ethnic, cultural (archaeological), or political grouping is questionable. Differing views that often depend on interpretation cannot be proved or disproved by reference to irrefutable fact, since the sources are often uncritical or incomplete and at times are contradictory. For example, four different accounts in ancient writings record the destruction of the Burgundians. It is possible that "Burgundians" becomes a topos in classical sources and in Germanic material, the equivalent of disaster to a family through betrayal. To whatever degree this idea may or may

not be valid, connecting the saga and poetic references with historical events is certainly speculative.

The element of speculation is further increased by an awareness of the way in which legends grow. The process of taking root in oral memory tends to obscure their origins, and this observation is true regarding the deadly clash between the Burgundians, led by Gunnar and Hogni, and the Huns under King Atli (Attila, called Etzel in German sources). The most that can be said about Gunnar, for example, is that the historical king of the Burgundians, Gundaharius, is one of the main sources for the fictional King Gunnar; the two are by no means identical. In some instances a legend may develop so fully that its hero shares only a name with the historical figure with whom he is identified. In other instances, legendary and historical events may correspond without any association between the names of the figures involved.

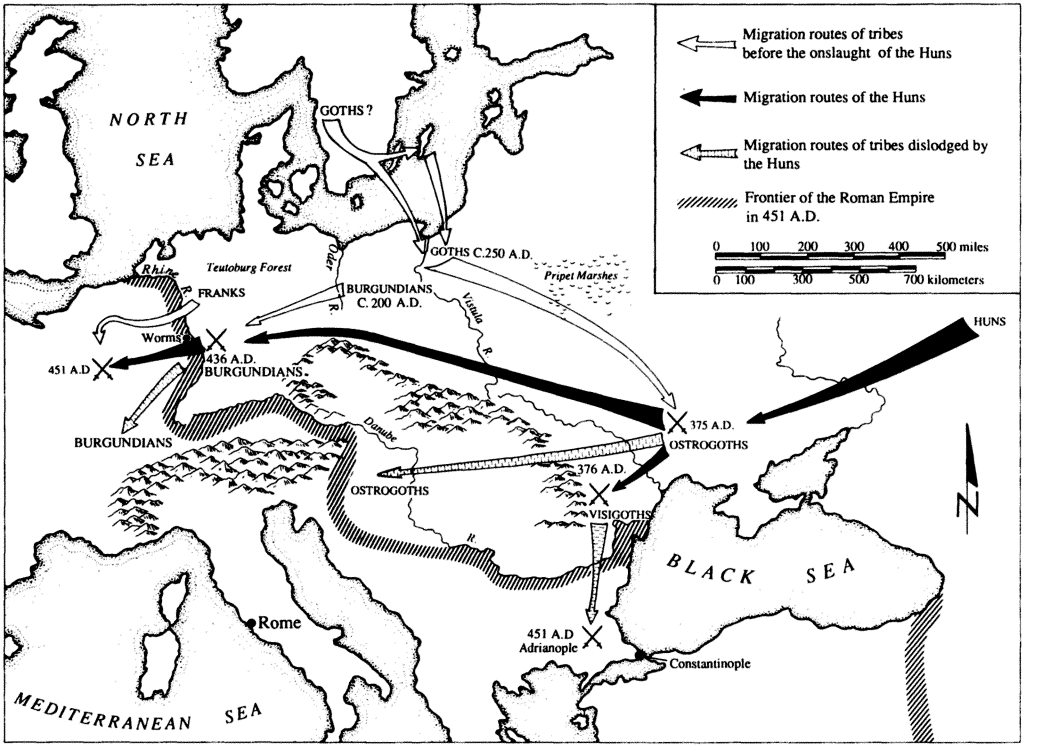
Often characters who lived centuries or decades apart become contemporaries in legend. In *The Saga of the Volsungs,* for instance, Gundaharius (d. 437), Attila (d. 453), and Ermenrichus (king of the Goths, d. 375) are presented as the contemporaries Gunnar, Atli, and Jormunrek. Conflicts between nations or tribes are often reduced to quarrels between families, as witnessed by the way the saga treats the struggle between the Burgundians and the Huns. The absence of evidence that the Icelandic saga audience understood or gave any thought to the ethnic difference between the Huns and the Germanic tribesmen is noteworthy. The oriental origin of Attila is forgotten, and he is treated as one of several competing leaders in the migration period.

If we have come to question classical writings, the writers themselves, especially in the period of the late Roman Empire, seem to be secure in their views: those who mention the Burgundians perceived them as a historical people. The Roman historian Tacitus, writing about the Germanic tribes beyond the Rhine frontier at the end of the first century A.D., unfortunately does not mention the Burgundians, and we have no certain knowledge about their earliest history. In late classical and early medieval sources they are associated with the island of Bornholm in the Baltic Sea. Scholars now generally doubt such a connection, and attempts to demonstrate archeologically a postulated migration from Scandinavia to the mainland in the first century B.C. have been unsuccessful. Nev-

ertheless, a Scandinavian origin for the Burgundians is at least as logical as any other possibility. By the second century A.D. Burgundians are reported to have been living in the area between the Vistula and Oder rivers, in what is today western Poland. Sometime afterward they began their migration westward, arriving in the mid-third century in the region on the upper and middle Main River in southwestern Germany (see map 2).

The next major move of the Burgundians, to the region around Worms, where the saga places them, is better documented. In the unusually severe winter of 406–407 the Rhine froze, making the border indefensible and enabling large numbers of barbarians to cross into Roman territory. Chief among these invaders were the Vandals, who were themselves under pressure from the Huns farther to the east. The Vandals destroyed the previously important Roman garrison town of Worms in the northern part of the upper Rhine Valley before continuing a migration that took them through France and Spain and eventually into North Africa. On the heels of the Vandals other tribes also passed through Worms, but they too had already moved deeper into Gaul when, around 413, the Burgundians crossed the Rhine and first entered the area. By diplomatic means Roman agents detached the newly arrived Burgundians from alliances with other major intruders, and the Burgundians became *foederati* (client-allies) of the Roman Empire. In the fertile region surrounding Worms (some have argued for Koblenz) they established a short-lived kingdom under the aegis of the Romans. Despite the absence of conclusive archaeological evidence, it has long been supposed that the Burgundians established their royal fortress in the old Roman forum in Worms.

The Romans probably hoped that the Burgundians, once settled, would prove to be a bulwark against the incursions of tribes living east of the border. When in the next decades the Burgundians tried to expand northward into neighboring Roman territory, they incurred the wrath of Aetius, the last great Roman general in Gaul. Aetius knew the barbarian peoples well. He had once been a hostage of the Huns and often enlisted these horsemen as his allies. Relying on a Hunnish mercenary army, Aetius, then the effective leader of the Western Empire, attacked the Burgundians in 436 and completely routed them. The Burgundians, it is said, lost their king Gundaharius, his whole family, and 20,000 men. After the Huns




MAP 2. Migrations of the tribes central to *The Saga of the Volsungs* up to the death of Attila the Hun

withdrew from the region around Worms, the area was occupied by the Alemanni, another Germanic tribe, who in turn were conquered by the Franks in the late fifth century.

But the Burgundians did not disappear from history. Under the protection of the victorious Aetius, those who survived the battle migrated south to the region near Lake Geneva. In less than two decades the Burgundians had surprisingly regained enough strength to resume their fight against the Huns. In 451, under the generalship of Aetius, they joined with the Franks, the Visigoths, and the Gallo-Romans to repel an invasion of Gaul by Attila. The victorious alliance, however, soon fell apart. The Burgundians turned on the Gallo-Romans and, by defeating them, quickly became a major power within the crumbling empire. By the latter part of the fifth century they had extended their power over most of eastern Gaul and had established their capital at Lyon. The surrounding region came to be called Burgundy, a name it has kept. The Burgundians, however, were unable to maintain their independence. A series of conflicts with the Franks and the Goths sapped their strength, and in 534 what was left of their kingdom was annexed by the Franks. Thereafter the Burgundians were absorbed into Frankish society, eventually losing their ethnic identity.

The Huns were pastoral nomads who originated in the Altai Mountains of central Asia. Because no written record of their native language has survived, we can only guess at the nature of Hunnish languages from names recorded in other peoples' writings. Probably a substantial group of Hunnish peoples spoke some form of Turkic, a subfamily of the Altaic languages. Little definitive information about the Huns' early history is available, although it has long been supposed that they were related to the Hsiung-nu, against whom the Chinese erected the Great Wall. Until the time of Attila in the fifth century, when rudimentary forms of statehood began to take shape, the Huns were chiefly a loose association of different tribes. They were skillful horsemen who fought as mounted archers. The accuracy of their compound bows and their reputation for cruelty inspired fear among enemies.

One such enemy was the Ostrogoths, a people represented in the saga by their king Jormunrek. In the fourth century the Ostrogoths ruled a vast empire north of the Black Sea, stretching across the grasslands of Russia from the Don River to the Dniester

and extending from the Crimea to the Pripet marshes. The earliest history of the Goths is shrouded in obscurity, but they almost certainly originated in southern Scandinavia and migrated across the Baltic in the first century A.D., probably giving their name to the Baltic island of Gotland. By the third century the Goths were inhabiting a region near the Vistula, in present-day Poland, before migrating southeast.

By the fourth century the Goths had split into two major groups, the Visigoths, living in present-day Rumania, and the Ostrogoths. How the Ostrogoths acquired their empire and came to dominate the many peoples it included remains a mystery. The Huns fell upon and destroyed the Ostrogothic empire when, around 375, they suddenly invaded the steppes of present-day Russia. Continuing on the offensive, they advanced into central Europe and enslaved the tribes in their path. In 376 they overwhelmed the Visigoths, whose remnants then sought safety within the borders of the Roman Empire. After that victory the Huns settled down on the Hungarian plain, having in three short years wiped out a century-long Gothic expansion.

After destroying the Visigoths, the Huns remained quiet for half a century, but about 430 they were again on the move. It was at this time that the army of Hunnish mercenaries, acting under the orders of Aetius, crushed the Burgundians. At approximately the same time, the Huns, in a series of similar but unconnected raids on other Germanic tribesmen, Romans, and eastern peoples, expanded their own empire until it reached from Europe to the Persian and perhaps even to the Chinese frontier. Beginning in 434, Attila and his brother Bleda ruled the empire jointly. In 445, after murdering his brother, Attila became the sole ruler. His apparently weak control over the eastern part of the empire, however, diminished his ability to acquire sufficient reinforcements of Hunnish warriors and trained horses.

At the heart of the Hunnish empire was its capital, the "Ring," a circular city of tents, wooden palaces, and wagons, at whose center stood Attila's royal residence. Attila's court was a meeting place for hostages, retainers, and warriors from the various subject tribes. Large contingents of the latter were incorporated into the Hunnish armies, whose military organization was modified in Attila's time to reflect the growing importance of units of armored

warriors often drawn from the conquered peoples. Poems such as the Anglo-Saxon "Waldere" and parts of the different Sigurd/Siegfried traditions show traces of what most certainly was a series of heroic cycles about Attila's court and the champions of the period.

After Attila's death in 453, his numerous quarreling sons divided the empire into separate dominions. In 454 an alliance of subjected tribes revolted and inflicted a crushing defeat upon their masters. The Goths remained for the most part neutral in this battle, but over the next decade they too fought a series of mostly successful engagements against the Huns. These reversals reduced the Huns to insignificance, and after the mid-sixth century they are no longer mentioned in the sources. Because of the temporary nature of their buildings and towns, no major archaeological trace of the Hunnish empire has been found. The modern Hungarians are not descended from this group but stem from a later migration of the distantly related Magyars.

What is the connection between the historical Huns, Burgundians, and Goths and the characters who play prominent roles in *The Saga of the Volsungs*? The answer is clouded by time. Obviously Atli, king of the Huns in the saga, is based on Attila, and Gunnar represents Gundaharius, the ill-fated Burgundian king. Without doubt the later Burgundians, even under the Franks, retained knowledge of their ancestors. A sixth-century law code names Gibica, Gundaharius, and Gislaharius as early Burgundian rulers. Gibica corresponds to Gjuki, the father of Gunnar; Gundaharius, to Gunnar; and Gislaharius, to Giselher, who appears in the *Nibelungenlied* as one of the kings jointly ruling Burgundy. Atli's betrayal of Gunnar and Hogni in the saga reflects the historical destruction of Gundaharius's kingdom by the Hunnish mercenary army.

The saga's account, however, is far from historically accurate. Among the many discrepancies is the absence of Aetius, the Roman general who commanded the Hunnish mercenaries. Furthermore, the political reasons for the war are lost; events are portrayed as springing from intrafamily feuds, motivated by greed and jealousy among blood relations and in-laws. A major chronological difference is that the historical Attila did not participate in the war against the Burgundians in 436; at that time he was on the middle