

Háskóli Íslands

Hugvísindasvið

Viking and Medieval Norse Studies

# The Fall of the Burgundians

*Continuity in Legend and History*

Ritgerð til MA-prófs í Viking and Medieval Norse Studies

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## Abstract

The Migration Period of the 4-5<sup>th</sup> century marked a dramatic shift in Western Civilization. The arrival of the Huns on the eastern fringe of Europe set off a chaotic chain of events that would radically change the ethnic, linguistic, and political landscape. By the time the dust had settled the classical world that was dominated by the Romans had vanished and a new age dawned. Amid this transitional period occurred the basis of a legend that would later be known as the *Völsunga saga*. This fall of the Burgundians event would become a foundational story, with varying traditions, and perhaps the most significant legend in Germanic tradition. The following paper is an attempt to show a continuity in the details and themes, by examining the survival of the wide (and often contradictory) source material. The goal of which is to develop insights upon the shadowy historical event and improve the historicity of the literary accounts.

## Ágrip

Þjóðflutningatímabil 4. og 5. aldar setti svip sinn á þróun vestrænnar siðmenningar. Innrás Húna á austurjaðri Evrópu hrinti af stað röð óreiðukenndra atburða sem bundu enda á heimsveldi Rómverja. Á meðan á þessu öllu stóð áttu sér stað atburðir sem lögðu grunninn að sögu Niflunganna, eða sögnin um fall Búrgunda. Atburðirnir urðu að e.k. bakgrunnssögn, sem er ef til vill ein sú mikilvægasta í germanskri sagnahefð. Eftirfarandi ritgerð er tilraun til að sýna samhengi þráða og þema þessara sagna, með því að skoða og greina upprunalegar heimildir, sem eru víðtækar og oft mótsagnakendar. Markmiðið er að skýra og bæta sögulegt samhengi varðveittra bókmenntatexta frá miðöldum.

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## Table of Contents

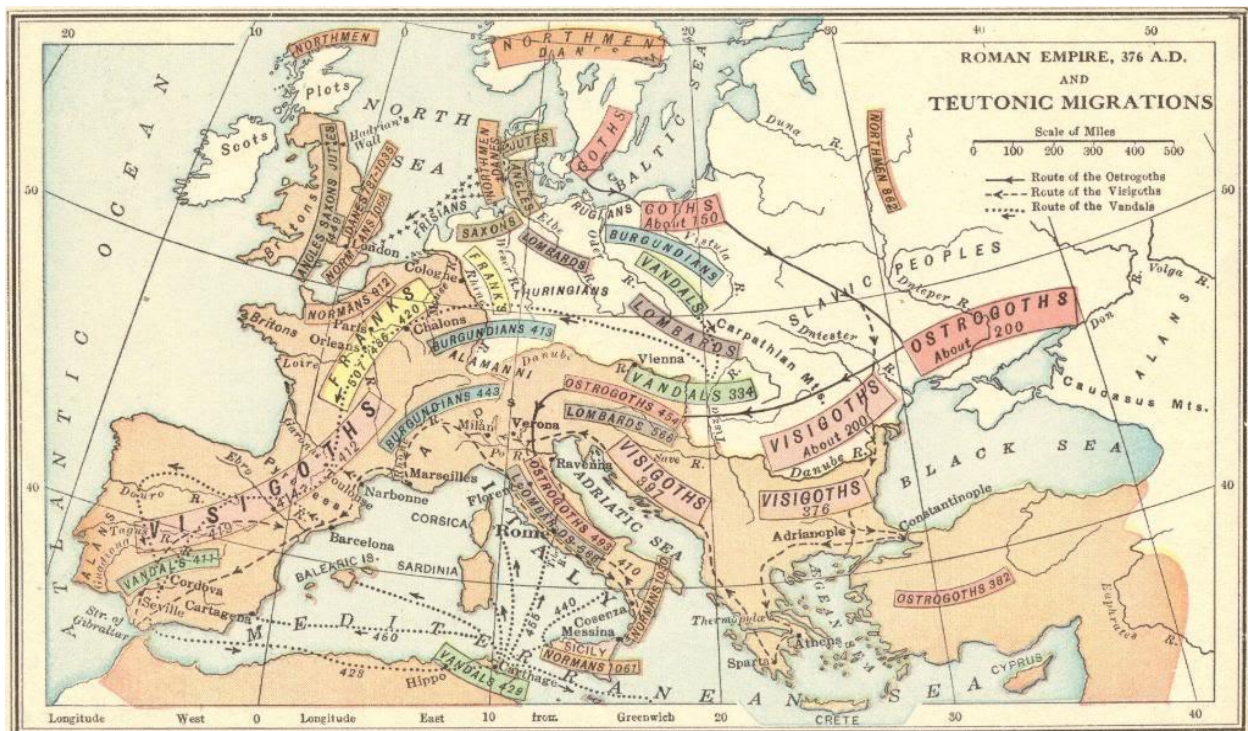
<b>Abstract .....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Table of Events .....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Figure 1&amp;2:.....</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 <i>Method of approach: Historicity – Literary Sources versus Historical Sources.....</i>	<i>1</i>
1.2 <i>Early Writings of History - Primary Sources &amp; Historical Texts .....</i>	<i>3</i>
1.3 <i>History of Research .....</i>	<i>12</i>
<b>2. Historical Background – The historical event that created a legend .....</b>	<b>16</b>
2.1 <i>Pre-Fall of the Burgundians.....</i>	<i>18</i>
2.2 <i>Historical Characters .....</i>	<i>20</i>
2.2.1 <i>Attila .....</i>	<i>21</i>
2.2.2 <i>Gundaharius.....</i>	<i>22</i>
2.2.3 <i>Ildico.....</i>	<i>22</i>
2.2.4 <i>Hogni.....</i>	<i>23</i>
<b>3. Introduction to <i>Atlakviða, Atlamál, Völsunga saga, Piðreks saga, and Nibelungenlied</i>.....</b>	<b>25</b>
3.1 <i>Historicity of Atlakviða, Atlamál, Völsunga saga, Piðreks saga, and Nibelungenlied .....</i>	<i>25</i>
<b>4. Analysis .....</b>	<b>27</b>
4.1 <i>Invitation.....</i>	<i>27</i>
4.2 <i>Route: Journey to the Hun Court.....</i>	<i>30</i>
4.3 <i>Hun Ambush.....</i>	<i>32</i>
4.4 <i>Death of Attila .....</i>	<i>40</i>
<b>5. Conclusion.....</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>47</b>

## Table of Events

Date (A.D.)	Important Events: Emphasis on Individuals, Events, Religion, and States
370-6	Ermaneric dies, Goths flee from the Huns to the Roman Empire
c. 390	The Goths and Vandals convert to Arian Christianity
395	Theodosius the Great who was the last Emperor of a united Rome bans pagan worship across the empire.
c. 406	Burgundians cross the Rhine into the Roman province Germania I and take their capital at Worms
410	Sack of Rome by the Visigoths
436/7	Huns defeat Burgundians inspiring the fall of the Burgundians legend
453	Attila is found dead with his Germanic bride
496	The Franks convert to Catholicism
455	Vandals sack Rome
526	Theoderic the Great dies
534	Vandal Kingdom ends, and the Burgundian Kingdom is annexed by the Franks
553	Ostrogoth Kingdom ends
567	Sigebert I marries Brunhilda
589	Visigoths convert to Catholicism
686	Last pagan Anglo-Saxon King
700	Lombards convert to Christianity
711	Visigoths Kingdom ends
804	Saxons are forced to convert to Christianity by Charlemagne
814	Lombard Kingdom ends
842	Oaths of Strasbourg – text written in Latin, Old High German, and Gallo-Romance (French). I insert this here as an arbitrary marker for the decline of Germanic languages spoken in Gaul.
c.1000	Scandinavia converts to Christianity
c.1300	<i>Atlamál</i> , <i>Atlakviða</i> , <i>Völsunga saga</i> , <i>Þiðreks saga</i> , and <i>Nibelungenlied</i> earliest manuscripts are found

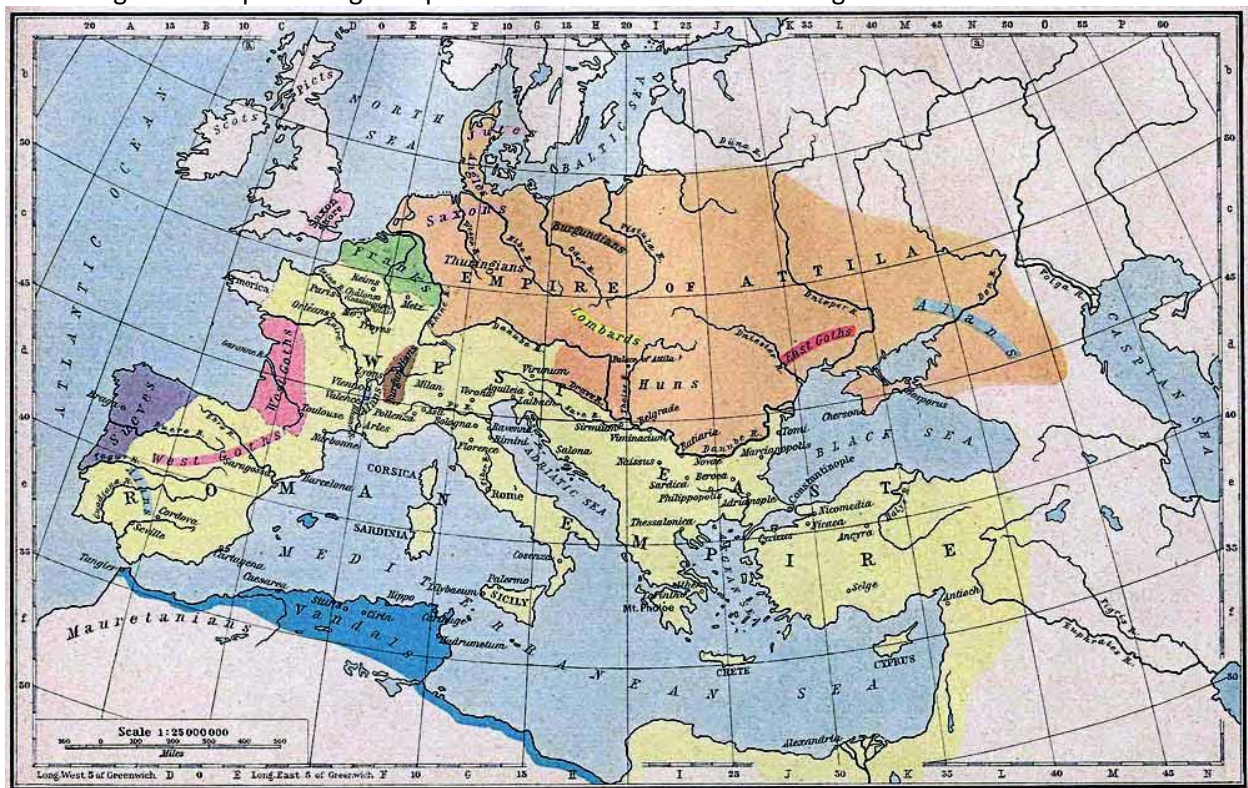


Figure 1&2:



Above: Figure 1. Map showing Europe circa 376 AD. Locate the Burgundians on the Rhine River at approximately the location of Worms.<sup>1</sup>

Below: Figure 2. Map showing Europe circa 450 AD. Huns are at their greatest extent.<sup>2</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Accessed May 1, 2020, <https://www.studenthandouts.com/Games-05/MAP-The-Roman-Empire-in-376-CE-and-the-Teutonic-Barbarian-Migrations-of-Europe-Map-Quiz-DBQ-MC.html>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:450\\_roman-hunnic-empire\\_1764x1116.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:450_roman-hunnic-empire_1764x1116.jpg)

## 1. Introduction

The fall of the Burgundians legend refers to an incident that occurred during the Early Middle Ages, or more specifically, during the Migration Period. This was a time when the Germanic tribes invaded, resettled, and integrated into Roman territory. Historians do not agree on the exact time span of the period but it is generally agreed to have spanned from 4<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century. It corresponds with what historians refer to as the Dark Ages, both as a pejorative and for the paucity of written accounts.<sup>3</sup> Written sources become increasingly sparse as the classical age wanes, leaving open wide gaps, ready for a variety of interpretations.<sup>4</sup> The surviving Germanic material is based heavily on legend and was written down centuries later. My aim with this work is to expand upon the kernels of history that has long been recognized in the legend.<sup>5</sup> My concern here is with continuity and reoccurring themes between the literature first and foremost, then determine how faithful the legend is to the historical memory.<sup>6</sup> This is an ambitious task, and one that cannot be fully completed here. Instead I will narrow my focus on key characters, moments and themes that best illustrate a common thread between the various source material. The following chapters 1.2 and 1.3 will consist primarily of a list of the varied source material, rather than a direct evaluation of the sources.

### 1.1 Method of approach: Historicity – Literary Sources versus Historical Sources

It is not always easy to differentiate between what constitutes as a historical source and that from which is considered literary source. Suffice it to say, at what point does history

<sup>3</sup> Walter Goffart offers criticism on the idea that the migrations overwhelmed the Romans. Causes for the Migration period can be explored in Arthur E.R. Boak, *Manpower Shortage: and the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West*. Michigan: University Press, 1955.

<sup>4</sup> This is in stark contrast to previous and following periods in which our historical record is better documented. Due to this information gap, there are things we can never know.

<sup>5</sup> Clover and Lindow, eds. *Old Norse – Icelandic Literature*, Ithaca: University Press, 1985, 87. They cite that Andreas Heusler was convinced that “heroic legends arose from historical events.”

<sup>6</sup> The field of Memory Studies, introduced to me by Pernille Hermann, has contributed significantly towards my understanding of the interplay between memory and history, and how it contributes to continuity.

become legend?<sup>7</sup> I believe the simplest definition for our purposes is: the intent of a historical source is to record information, whereas a literary source is to tell a story for entertainment. I am mindful that each is not exclusive to the other, and that these are general definitions with considerable overlap. When applicable I will treat literary sources as they were intended, as historical sources, albeit with great caution. As we will notice with written sources, particularly the Germanic material, a written source that is further removed from place and time, the greater probability for embellishment.

The Germanic heroic tradition should first be classified as literature. Meaning, there is an emphasis on artistic and entertainment value; however, it would be remarkably imprudent to write them off as complete works of fiction. These authors had often based their work on older texts and oral history. It is important to keep in mind that many people regarded these traditions as history and at times, it is clear that the writers presented their material as actual history.<sup>8</sup> The transformation of an historical account into legend is an interesting phenomenon. Understanding this process is crucial in aiding us to unpack the subtleties of the texts.

When a historical event occurs, such as the fall of the Burgundians, poets and authors are initially confined to some degree of historical accuracy when retelling what occurred. The present-day audience would be familiar with the details of the event because of lived or second-hand experiences. This accepted tradition creates a cultural memory which in turn constricts creative license.<sup>9</sup> However, as time passes and the cultural memory begins to fade, the poet is granted more creative license to appeal to a changing audience and different preferences. This knowledge allows us to avoid the pitfalls of the fantastical elements to the detriment of the historical elements when analyzing the texts. However, challenge remains of distinguishing between the two.

<sup>7</sup>Babcock, Michael A. *The Night Attila Died*. New York: Berkeley Books, (2005): 292. This concept is further explored in Shoolbraid, G.M.H. *The Oral Epic of Siberia and Central Asia*. Bloomington: Indiana University, 1997.

<sup>8</sup> I am not suggesting we blindly accept every word factual, but it is important to understand that this is what the author did express.

<sup>9</sup> Concepts articulated in Jan Assmann, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," trans. John Czaplicka, *New German Critique* 65, *Cultural History/Cultural Studies*, (1995): 130-133; Halbwachs, Maurice, *On Collective Memory*. Chicago: University Press, 1992.



When a story exists as oral memory for an extensive period of time, a process of adaptation and appropriation is likely to occur.<sup>10</sup> Ethnic distinctions tend to lose importance and the audience begins to care less about the political and cultural dynamic that originated with the story.<sup>11</sup> This may explain why in some texts, that are considerably more removed from the initial event, the Huns are no longer perceived as the 'other' but as 'another' Germanic tribe. The audience has become increasingly interested in the personal drama between the characters, rather than the political and cultural dynamic that is no longer relevant to them.<sup>12</sup> In this way we can deconstruct literary sources that are otherwise seen as works of fiction, and supplement the meager historical narrative.

## 1.2 Early Writings of History - Primary Sources & Historical Texts

In the following, I present a wide array of historical and literary texts related directly or indirectly to the fall of the Burgundians story. Primarily written in Latin, they reflect a variety of perspectives, although predominately from Christian viewpoints. I will provide a brief summary of the text, and when necessary particular information relevant towards this work.

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Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* (4<sup>th</sup> c.)<sup>13</sup> – Ammianus was a Roman soldier and historian. He is noted for being a reliable source and provides dating for *Ermanaricus* (ON Jǫrmunrekr; EN Ermaneric).

Paulus Orosius, *Historiae Adversus Paganos* (early 5<sup>th</sup> c.)<sup>14</sup> – Theologian from Hispania. He wrote a *History Against the Pagans* in response to the sack of Rome by the Visigoths in 410

<sup>10</sup> For more: Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire." *Representations* 26, (1989): 7-24.

<sup>11</sup> This is why in the time line above, I noted such things as when the Visigoth Kingdom ends and when it converts to a new religion. A new people may not be as interested in the stories of an old Kingdom or an old belief system.

<sup>12</sup> A similar process occurred in the retellings of the Greeks versus Persians during the Persian Wars.

<sup>13</sup> Croke, Brian. *The Chronicle of Marcellinus, A translation with commentary*. Leiden: Brill, 2007.

<sup>14</sup> Here is an online resource for further information: "Christian historical documents," accessed April 29, 2020, <https://sites.google.com/site/demontortoise2000/>.

AD., as many believed that the Romans were being punished for abandoning their ancestral gods.

Olympiodorus of Thebes (early 5<sup>th</sup> c.)<sup>15</sup> – A poet of Eastern Roman Emperor Theodosius II (401-450 AD). He was a pagan, who went on a diplomatic mission to the Huns in c. 412 AD. His work survives in fragments.

Socrates of Constantinople, *Historia Ecclesiastica* (5<sup>th</sup> c.)<sup>16</sup> – Written in Greek, he follows the histories of Eusebius from (305-439 AD). He provides an Eastern Church history, in which talks about the conversion of the Burgundians, (also mentioned by Orosius), and the death of “Uptaros” (Uncle of Attila) by the Burgundians.

Prosper of Aquitaine, *Epitoma Chronicon* (5<sup>th</sup> c.)<sup>17</sup> – (Prosper of Tiro) A continuation of Jerome’s Chronicle to 455 AD. He says: *Eodem tempore Gundicharium Burgundionum regem intra Gallias habitantem Aetius bello obtrivit pacemque ei supplicanti dedit, qua non diu potitus est, siquidem illum Chuni cum populo suo ab stirpe deleverint.*<sup>18</sup> (“At the same time Aetius, crushed Gundaharius King of the Burgundians by means of war who was living in Gaul, and offered him the peace he begged for, which did not last a long time, since the Huns destroyed his people and their descendants”).<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Chaffin, Christopher. *Olympiodorus of Thebes and the Sack of Rome: A Study of the Historikoi Logio, with Translated Fragments, Commentary and Additional Material*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1993.

<sup>16</sup> Schütte, Gudmund. “The Nibelungen Legend and Its Historical Basis” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* Vol. 20 No. 3 (Jul., 1921), 291-327, 307; Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, 35-36; An English translation by A. C. Zenos can be found here: “Church History,” accessed April 29, 2020, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2601.htm>.

<sup>17</sup> See more: *From Roman to Merovingian Gaul: A Reader* ed. & trans. A. C Murray. Ontario, 2003, 62–76.

<sup>18</sup> Prosperi Tironis *Epitoma Chronicon*, in: *Chronica minora saec. IV. V. VI. VII*, vol. 1, ed. By T. Mommsen, Hanover 1892 (*Monvmenta Germaniae AA 9*), 341-349, 1322.

<sup>19</sup> English translation is the work of myself and Jonathan Correa.

Hydatius, *Chronicon* (5<sup>th</sup> c.)<sup>20</sup> – He was a Bishop in Hispania and continues Jerome's *Chronicle of the World* to 468 AD. He writes that the Burgundians rebelled and 20,000 Burgundians fell to Aetius.

Sidonius Apollinaris (5<sup>th</sup> c.)<sup>21</sup> – A well connected Gallo-Roman diplomat and latter bishop in Gaul. His various letters survive. He mentions Burgundian songs, possible oral history of the fall of the Burgundians legend.

*Chronica Gallica of 452* (5<sup>th</sup> c.)<sup>22</sup> – Compiled by an unknown author. It focuses on Gaul and includes the events from Theodosius in 379 AD to the activities of Attila in 452 AD. It records: (Bellum contra Burgundionum gentem memorabile exarsit, quo universa paene gens cum rege peretio Aetium deleta),<sup>23</sup> (The war against the race of the Burgundians came to an unforgettable end by which the entire race with their king was almost extinguished by Aetius).<sup>24</sup>

*Chronica Gallica of 511* (5<sup>th</sup> c.)<sup>25</sup> – Likely a continuation of *Chronica Gallica* of 452. Echoes that the Burgundians were defeated by Aetius.

*Leges Burgundionum* (early 6<sup>th</sup> c.)<sup>26</sup> – Burgundian Law code of King Gundobad. Lists as their former kings (Gibicam, Gundomarem, Gislaharium, Gundaharium) which has correlations to the epic texts. This would make Gundobad the Grandson of Gundaharius, (ON Gunnarr, MHG Gunther).

<sup>20</sup> See more: Burgess, R.W. *The Chronicle of Hydatius and the Consularia Constantinopolitana*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

<sup>21</sup> See more: Harries, Jill. *Sidonius Apollinaris and the Fall of Rome, AD 407-485*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995.

<sup>22</sup> *Chronica Gallica of 452* was first edited by Theodor Mommsen in the 19<sup>th</sup> c. Recent scholars include; Steven Muhlberger, Richard W. Burgess, and Michael E. Jones and John Casey, *The Gallic Chronicle Restored*.

<sup>23</sup> Richter, Gustav. *Deutschen Geschichte im Mittelalter*. Halle, 1873, 22.

<sup>24</sup> English translation is the work of myself and Jonathan Correa.

<sup>25</sup> See More: Burgess, R. *The Gallic Chronicle of 511: A New Critical Edition* with a Brief Introduction. *Society and Culture in Late Antique Gaul: Revisiting the Sources*. eds. R. W. Mathisen and D. Shantzer. Aldershot, 2001, 85–100.

<sup>26</sup> Translation by Katherine Fisher Drew, *The Burgundian Code*, (1972).

Marcellinus Comes, *Annals* (6<sup>th</sup> c.)<sup>27</sup> – Chronicler following Eusebius covered from (379-534 AD) of Illyrian birth. Worked in Constantinople under Justinian I. He cites that Attila was stabbed by his Germanic bride during the night.

John of Malalas, *Chronographia* (6<sup>th</sup> c.) – Greek chronicler from Antioch. He preserves three versions of Attila's death.<sup>28</sup>

Procopius, *Wars of Justinian* (6<sup>th</sup> c.) – Greek scholar, considered the last major historian of the Antiquity.

Jordanes, *De Origine Actibusque Getarum* (6<sup>th</sup> c.)<sup>29</sup> – Jordanes was a Roman of Gothic descent. He wrote the *Origins and Deeds of the Goths (Getica)* around 551 AD in Constantinople. He borrowed heavily from people who wrote detailed histories, many of which came from first hand experiences such as; Cassiodorus (6<sup>th</sup> c.) and Priscus (5<sup>th</sup> c.), unfortunately those sources only survive in fragments. Luckily for us, Jordanes was well read and knew of both so it is possible to reconstruct several important events.

Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum* (6<sup>th</sup> c.) – Bishop and Gallo-Roman historian, he is a contemporary source for the Merovingians.

Marius Aventicensis, *Chronicon Imperiale* (6<sup>th</sup> c.) – Bishop of Aventicum, his chronicle is a good source for Frankish and Burgundian history.

Venantius Fortunatus (late 6<sup>th</sup> c.)<sup>30</sup> – Court poet, he provides a unique view into the court of King Sigibert and Brunhild, who are the likely inspirations of the Norse Sigurðr and Brynhildr.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup> See More: Brian Croke, *The Chronicle of Marcellinus*, (2001).

<sup>28</sup> Babcock, *The Night Attila Died*, 128.

<sup>29</sup> Jordanes. *The Gothic History of Jordanes: In English with an Introduction and a Commentary*. Translated by Charles Christopher Mierow. Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 1915.

<sup>30</sup> *Venantius Fortunatus: Personal and Political Poems*. Translated by Judith George, Liverpool: University Press, 1995.

<sup>31</sup> See for more information: Niels Lukman, *Sagaen om Brynhild og Gudrun*. København: Gyldendal, 1974.

*Chronicon Paschale* (early 7<sup>th</sup> c.) – Unknown author, Greek chronicle. The text follows Priscus but adds that the bride was suspected of murder.<sup>32</sup>

Isidore of Seville (early 7<sup>th</sup> c.) – Scholar and Archbishop in Spain under the Visigoths. He wrote a *Chronica Majora* (Universal History), and *Historia de regibus Gothorum, Vandalorum et Suevorum* (History of the Kings of the Goths, Vandals, and Suevi).

*Origo Gentis Langobardorum* (7<sup>th</sup> c.) – Myth and origins of the Lombards. Contains a very old narrative of Óðinn.

*Chronicle of Fredegar* (7<sup>th</sup> c.) – It describes the inner dealing of the Burgundian court, and provides possible sources for several characters of the epics.

Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* (8<sup>th</sup> c.) – Source for early history of the Lombards. He also writes about Attila and “*Gundicarius*” or ON Gunnarr.

Einhard, *Vita Karoli Magni* (8<sup>th</sup> c.) – Frankish scholar wrote the biography of Charlemagne. He notes that Charlemagne preserved old songs in his native language (Old High German).<sup>33</sup>

*Liber Historiae Francorum* (8<sup>th</sup> c.) – Anonymous Neustrian perspective. It provides information on the dealings of the Merovingian’s, particularly similar is the marriage and wooing by Merovingian Chlodwig, and to that of Attila and his bride.

*Heliand* (early 9<sup>th</sup> c.) – Old Saxon epic poem with a biblical theme.

<sup>32</sup> Schütte, “The Nibelungen Legend and Its Historical Basis,” 306; *Chronicon Paschale* 284-628. Trans. by Michael Whitby. Liverpool: University Press, 1990.

<sup>33</sup> Babcock, *The Night Attila Died*, 100. This is very important to note. The umlaut vowel shift began in the 6<sup>th</sup> c. i.e. changing the [a] to [e]. This is why Attila appears as Atli in the Norse and Etzel in German. This would suggest continuation of the name rather than a reintroduction, supporting the idea that the Germanic texts are copies or reinterpretations of older, now lost material.

*Hildebrandslied* (9<sup>th</sup> c.) – Old High German heroic poem. Survives as a single manuscript. Not yet linked to a historical person, but is connected to other heroes, Hildebrand trained and accompanied *Piðrekr*.

*Waltharius* (9<sup>th</sup> c.) – Latin text of a Germanic epic hero, Walter of Aquitaine. Several manuscripts and fragments survive. He is a Visigoth hero and battles *Guntharius* (Gunnarr), who is portrayed negatively. In this story, the distinction between Franks and Burgundians is lost. Perhaps, his historical counterpart is Wallia (385-418 AD), King of the Visigoths, who clashed with a Gunderic.

*Ynglingatal* (9<sup>th</sup> c.) – Written in Old Norse and is preserved in Snorri's, *Heimskringla*. Provides Scandinavian lineages, that may be traced back to the Migration Period.<sup>34</sup>

Poeta Saxo, *Annales de gestis Caroli magni imperatoris libri quinque* (9<sup>th</sup> c.) – Anonymous Saxon poet, the author writes about Charlemagne. He also records that poems and songs were sung about Germanic heroes, and notes that Attila was killed by a woman who murdered her father.<sup>35</sup>

Thegan of Trier, *Gesta Hludowici Imperatoris* (9<sup>th</sup> c.) – Biography of Louis the Pious. States that he learned pagan songs, and would later renounce them.

*Ludwigslied* (9<sup>th</sup> c.) – Old High German, Christian heroic poem about Louis III.

*Codex Exoniensis* (10<sup>th</sup> c.) – Old English, also known as the Exeter Book, contains a wealth of information of Germanic myth and legend.

Widukind of Corvey, *Res gestae saxonicae sive annalium libri tres* (10<sup>th</sup> c.) – Saxon chronicler he wrote about the early history of Saxony and their struggles with France.

<sup>34</sup> Claus Krag, *Ynglingatal og Ynglingesag: en studie i historiske kilder*, 1991. See also on lineages traced back to the Migration Period: Niels Lukmann, *Skjoldunge und Skilfinge*, 1974.

<sup>35</sup> Schütte, "The Nibelungen Legend and Its Historical Basis," 306.

Aimoin, *Historia Francorum* (10<sup>th</sup> c.)<sup>36</sup> – He is concerned with early Frankish history. Important for the marriage and wooing similarity as found in *Liber Historiae Francorum* (8<sup>th</sup> c.).

*Saxonicae Annales Quedlinburgenses* (11<sup>th</sup> c.) – Written in Germany, contains substantial saga material.<sup>37</sup> Attila was murdered by a woman after the killing of her father.

*Chronicon Novaliciense* (11<sup>th</sup> c.) – Written in Northern Italy, it contains a summary of *Waltharius*.

*Gesta Danorum* (12<sup>th</sup> c.)<sup>38</sup> – Written by Saxo Grammaticus about early Danish history and provides a lot of information on Norse myth and legends.

*The Poetic Edda* (13<sup>th</sup> c.)<sup>39</sup> – A collection of Norse mythological and heroic poetry, and one of the most significant sources of myth and heroic material of the Germanic world. Several copies survive, most notably is the *Codex Regius* (GkS 2365s 4<sup>to</sup>). During the late 13<sup>th</sup> century it was written down by a single unknown compiler in Iceland. The material reflects events that occurred several centuries earlier, and the texts themselves are thought to be copies of older works. There are two poems from within the *Edda* that we'll be working with directly, *Atlakviða*, and *Atlamál in grænlensku* (*Atlamál*). *Atlakviða* is considered very old, perhaps as far back as the ninth century.<sup>40</sup> *Atlamál* seems to be later as it has lost its heroic and mythical elements. It has kept family names, lost national character (Burgundians/Huns), downplayed the Niflung hoard and Attila's greed for it and is more interested in human intrigue.

<sup>36</sup> Later published in the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* (19<sup>th</sup> c.).

<sup>37</sup> Felice Lifshitz, review of *Die Annales Quedlinburgenses*, by Martina Giese (trans.), MGH SRG in Usus Scholarum Separatim Editi 72: Hanover, 2004. Accessed April 29, 2020, <https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/tmr/article/view/16073>.

<sup>38</sup> Grammaticus, *Saxo The History of the Danes*. Edited by Hilda Ellis Davidson. Translated by Peter Fisher. St. Edmundsbury Press Ltd., 1979.

<sup>39</sup> Larrington, Carolyne, *The Poetic Edda*. Oxford: University Press, 1996.

<sup>40</sup> Dronke, *The Poetic Edda: Heroic Poems*, vii.



*Völsunga saga* (13<sup>th</sup> c.)<sup>41</sup> – Old Norse *fornaldarsaga* that was written by an unknown author. (Ny kgl. Saml. 1824b 4to) currently in Det Kongelige Bibliotek in København. It offers one of the most developed Old Norse narrations of the fall of the Burgundians tale. It includes parts of the *Poetic Edda*, which the author listed as one of his sources.<sup>42</sup>

*Þiðreks saga af Bern* (13<sup>th</sup> c.)<sup>43</sup> – *Þiðreks saga* is an Old Norse prose composition. The earliest variant is believed to be written sometime in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>44</sup> It has characteristics of the contemporary *riddarasögur* (similar to the *Nibelungenlied*), and of the old *fornaldarsögur* (like that of the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*) which makes it difficult to categorize. The saga is primarily concerned with events surrounding Þiðrekr, who is based on the historical king of the Ostrogoths, Theoderic the Great (early 6<sup>th</sup> c.). It encompasses many other stories and characters of the Germanic heroic age. *Þiðreks saga* survives in three principal manuscripts; a Norwegian parchment copy written by Icelandic and Norwegian scribes, from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, two later 17<sup>th</sup> century paper copies from Iceland, and Swedish translation /redaction from the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>45</sup> The author is unknown, and there is no reference to the work in other texts.<sup>46</sup> The fall of the Burgundians episode or as it is known here, The Saga of the Niflungs is more than just an episode and forms a sort of mini saga within the *Þiðreks saga*. It is a short read of about twenty-two pages, taking place after the death of Young Sigurðr.

*Nibelungenlied* (13<sup>th</sup> c.) – Middle High German lay by an unknown author. The work adapts Germanic Heroic material to the Romance genre of that time. The *Nibelungenlied* seems to

<sup>41</sup> Kaaren Grimstad, *Volsunga Saga / the Saga of the Volsungs: The Icelandic Text According to MS Nks 1824 B, 4o*. Bibliotheca Germanica Series Nova Vol.3, 2005. Accessed April 29, 2020, <https://www.book2look.com/vBook.aspx?id=5nYjPDbWBd&euid=1224797&ruid=0&referURL=http://book2look.de>.

<sup>42</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 3.

<sup>43</sup> Henrik Bertelsen, *Þiðriks saga af Bern*, 1905-11.

<sup>44</sup> For more information concerning dating and the origin of the manuscripts of Þiðreks saga see: The Introduction of Edward Haymes, *The Saga of Thidrek of Bern*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1988.

<sup>45</sup> For more information on the Old Swedish version see: Heinz Ritter-Schaumburg, *Dietrich von Bern: König zu Bonn* (1982). Some of Ritter-Schaumburg's ideas have been critiqued by Henry Kratz in his Review of Heinz Ritter-Schaumburg, *Die Nibelungen zogen nordwärts*, 1981.

<sup>46</sup> For more information see: Roswitha Wisniewski, *Die Darstellung des Niflungenunterganges in der Þiðreks saga*. Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1961.

have been quite popular as it survives in some 35/37 manuscripts,<sup>47</sup> the oldest dating from 1195-1205.<sup>48</sup> The story itself can be broken up into two main parts. The first half details the story of Siegfried (Chapters 1-19), and the second half deals with the fall of the Burgundians (Chapters 10-39). It should be noted that on nearly all of the manuscripts of the *Nibelungenlied* was attached the *Klage*. The *Klage* is a Middle High German poem of 4,000 verses which describes the aftermath of the fall of the Burgundians. For our purposes, we will be dealing with the second half of the *Nibelungenlied*, the fall of the Burgundians, not the life of Sigurðr, nor the aftermath of the fall of the Burgundians, the *Klage*.

*Chronicon Boguphali Episcopi* (13<sup>th</sup> c.) – Chronicle from Poland, it contains the Waltharius story.

Simon of Kéza, *Gesta Hunnorum et Hungarorum* (13<sup>th</sup> c.) – Latin text from Hungary. Simon records the Huns arrival into Pannonia, their exploits of many nations, Ethele's (Attila) battles with Rome, his marriage with Kriemhild and death, etc.

*Der Rosengarten zu Worms* (13<sup>th</sup> c.) – Several versions survive. It connects various Germanic Heroic stories together.

*Heldenbuch* (13<sup>th</sup> c.)<sup>49</sup> – The hero books of Germany. Several variants survive, most importantly is the Ambraser hero book. It contains numerous epics, written during the 12-13<sup>th</sup> c. Notably are: *Biterolf und Dietleib*, where the heroes (Visigoths) goes to Etzel's court, and *Kudrunlied*, which follows the characters Kudrun and Hagen after the events of the *Nibelungenlied*.

*Dukus Horant* (14<sup>th</sup> c.) – Middle High German poem written with Hebrew characters. It was found in Cairo, Egypt and is similar to *Kudrunlied*.

<sup>47</sup> For more information on the poetic language, differences in redactions, and the author's identity see: W. Hoffmann, *Das Nibelungenlied*, 1982. An annotated list of first readings is provided by W. McConnell, *The Nibelungenlied*, 132-37.

<sup>48</sup> Hatto, *The Nibelungenlied*, 293.

<sup>49</sup> Here is a handy website for more information: "Deutsches Heldenbuch," accessed April 30, 2020, <http://www.germanicmythology.com/works/heldenbuch.html>.

Johannes Aventinus, *Annales Bojorum* (16<sup>th</sup> c.) – Philologist and historian, he wrote an early history of Bavaria. He tells us that the Huns invaded Burgundy and defeated Gundaric and Sigismund.<sup>50</sup>

*Hveenske Krønike*<sup>51</sup> (17<sup>th</sup> c.) – Originally a Latin text from the 16<sup>th</sup> c., but only survives in a Danish translation. Here Hagen (his wife is actually named, Gluna) is the killer of Sigfrid, mixing of Grímhildr /Bryhildr and Hagen/Gunther/Sigfrid in the wooing scene.

Others that I could only find in name, or have been unable to investigate but would like to include for further research are: Norse, *Nornagests þáttur*; Danish Ballads, *Grimilds hævn*; Danish History, *Chronicon Lethrense*, Sven Aggesøn, *Brevis Historia Regum Dacie*; and from other Faeroese ballads, *Sjúrdarkvæði*, *Högnatáttur*, and *Færöiske Kvæder Faeroese*.

### 1.3 History of Research

The fall of the Burgundians story resonated strongly across Europe. Its popularity was wide spread, reaching; Spain, Italy, France, England, Germany, Iceland, Scandinavia, Poland, Hungary, Constantinople, and recorded in several languages, so the memory had been kept alive, in various forms. Inquiry of these legends as history can be seen as early as the 12<sup>th</sup> c. The chronicler Godfred di Viterbo says this: “It is not true that Dietrich von Bern and Ermanic [sic] and Attila were contemporaries, as it is related.”<sup>52</sup> However, this was the exception and not the rule. Interest began to wane, manuscripts were lost, and language changed, making inquiry very difficult for centuries. This is until the *Nibelungenlied* was rediscovered in 1755, and interest proliferated in the following century. Perhaps inspired by the nationalism of neighboring France, curiosity in their own roots soon followed in the various German states. *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* (early 19<sup>th</sup> c.)<sup>53</sup> was created and provided the foundation for such interest. This series collected a vast number of primary

<sup>50</sup> Schütte, “The Nibelungen Legend and Its Historical Basis,” 303.

<sup>51</sup> Schütte, “The Nibelungen Legend and Its Historical Basis,” 321.

<sup>52</sup> Schütte, “The Nibelungen Legend and Its Historical Basis,” 291.

<sup>53</sup> Knowles, “The Monumenta Germaniae Historica,” 129-150.

sources selected for the study of German history. It is at this time we can really begin to trace the history of research. The following is a brief list surveying the academic achievement concerning the fall of the Burgundians, much of which is in context of the *Nibelungenlied* and German philology.

Friedrich Heinrich von der Hagen – A German philologist who significantly contributed to the early the study of Germanic heroic poetry. In 1810 he produced an early critical edition of the *Nibelungenlied*.

Karl Lachmann, *Über die ursprüngliche Gestalt des Gedichtes von der Nibelungen Noth* (1816) – This was the first publication of the historical study of the *Nibelungenlied*.

Amédée Thierry, *History of Attila and His Successors* (1856) – This was the first major historical study of Attila. He was suspicious that Attila may have been murdered.<sup>54</sup>

August Giesebrecht (19<sup>th</sup> c.) – The first who identified Sigfrid and Bryhild with King Sigbert and Queen Brunhild of the 6<sup>th</sup> c.<sup>55</sup>

Sophus Bugge and Carl Voretzch are the first to identify the similarities between the love stories of the Merovingian Chlodwig and Attila.<sup>56</sup>

Gudmund Schütte, *The Nibelungen Legend and Its Historical Basis* (1921) – He perhaps presents the strongest case that the *Nibelungen* legend from beginning to end is derived from historical inspirations. He presents a strong theory that the Merovingians form a basis for the *Nibelungen* legend. He also makes a strong case of the similarity between Priscus and *Nibelungenlied*, particularly the journey of the Burgundians to the court of Attila. He believed that the myth is a giant conglomeration of different events dating from the 4<sup>th</sup> c. – the 11<sup>th</sup> c.

<sup>54</sup> Babcock, *The Night Attila Died*, 246.

<sup>55</sup> Schütte, "The Nibelungen Legend and Its Historical Basis," 293 cf. Von der Hagen's *Germania*, 1837.

<sup>56</sup> Schütte, "The Nibelungen Legend and Its Historical Basis," 311. Cf. *Studier over de nordiske Gude-og Heltesagns Opindelse*, II p 260, ff.; and *Zeitschrift f. D. A.*, 1909, 50, ff.

claiming even the most subordinate characters can be traced to have historical representation.<sup>57</sup>

Julius Moravcsik, *Attilas Tod in Geschichte und Sage* (1932) – A Hungarian philologist and scholar of Byzantine history. He believed Attila was not murdered.<sup>58</sup> He also believed that the King Alboin legend was a source for Guðrún's revenge.<sup>59</sup>

Andreas Heusler, *Nibelungensage und Nibelungenlied* (1929) – Swiss scholar whose work culminated in the understanding of the Nibelung saga and its relation to pre-history. He made significant strides to our understanding of the story as a conglomeration of different sagas. He divided the *Nibelungenlied* into two parts "Sigfried's death" and "Kriemhild's Revenge". He believed the first part was based on a single oral source while part II is based on a written epic "Ältere Not." Heusler's work has received much skepticism but his argument was strong enough to place the burden of proof on his skeptics.<sup>60</sup>

Unable to make much headway scholars turned away from the pre-history aspect in favor of examining the texts itself. As a result, research turned to literary and oral concerns, and understanding the text in the context of the literature tradition of the period.<sup>61</sup>

Interest in the *Nibelungenlied* has largely been left behind in English scholarship. Mary Thorp, *The Study of the Nibelungenlied: Being the History of the Study of the Epic and Legend from 1175 to 1937* (1940) provides a comprehensive study of the legend. Otherwise interest has waned considerably in recent times with a few exceptions.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Schütte, "The Nibelungen Legend and Its Historical Basis," 327.

<sup>58</sup> Babcock, *The Night Attila Died*, 18.

<sup>59</sup> Babcock, *The Night Attila Died*, 107.

<sup>60</sup> Andersson, *The Legend of Brynhild*, 6. See Introduction for a detail history of the Scholarship of the Nibelung Saga.

<sup>61</sup> Andersson, *The Legend of Brynhild*, 17.

<sup>62</sup> Lars Lönnroth, *Det germanska spåret: En västerländsk litteraturtradition från Tacitus till Tolkien*. Stockholm: Natur & kultur, 2017; Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, "The Origin and Development of the *Fornaldarsögur* as Illustrated by *Völsunga Saga*, "The *Legendary Sagas: Origins and Development*. University of Iceland Press, 2012, 59-81. And forthcoming by Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, *Arfur aldanna*, vols. 1-2. Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2020.

Looking for a historical reality in a unique way Klaus Mai traces coat of arms and comes to the conclusion that there are two Siegfried's. One is Childebert II and the other is King Henry the IV.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Mai, *Siegfrieds Wappen und Heldentaten im Nibelungenlied - Legende oder geschichtliche Wirklichkeit?*; Siegfried Schmied und Drachentöter, 2005.

## 2. Historical Background – The historical event that created a legend

In years 436/437 AD the Burgundian tribe, located along the Rhine River, suffered a massive defeat by the *magister militum* Aetius using his Huns mercenaries.<sup>64</sup> It was recorded that 'the Huns destroyed the Burgundians root and branch.'<sup>65</sup> Contemporaries described the massacre as an act of ethnic cleansing, the Huns butchered some 20,000 people, including the king and all his family.<sup>66</sup> This event shocked Europe and quickly entered in the Germanic world as legend.

The Huns are a non-Indo-European speaking nomadic Steppe confederation. They began their encroachment into Europe in the late 4<sup>th</sup> c. Arriving from the east, they bumped into a large Gothic kingdom on the north shores of the Black Sea, roughly the modern-day area of Ukraine. In 376 AD they defeated king Ermaneric, and the oldest historically identifiable king of Germanic legend.<sup>67</sup> In response, several Germanic tribes began to desperately flee the advance of the Huns, and many sought security within the Roman Empire. However, the Roman Empire was ill-prepared to deal with the situation, and tried to settle some tribes within the Empire. This tumultuous arrangement often resulted in Germanic successor states carving out small kingdoms for themselves while remaining nominally allied to Rome as *foederati*, a sort of mercenary client state.<sup>68</sup> One of these groups was to be the Burgundians who were settled in the Rhine valley in 406/408 AD. They quickly gained power, seizing more territory along the Rhine, and establishing their capital at Worms. They even gained enough influence to briefly propel a puppet emperor over Roman Gaul (modern day France). This rising power could no longer be tolerated by the Romans. The general Aetius sent a mercenary Hun army to bring the Burgundians back under control. In 436/7 AD as recorded by historians like; Hydatius, Prosper of Aquitaine, *Chronica Gallica 452*, Sidonius Apollinaris, the Burgundians with their King Gundaharius were soundly defeated.

<sup>64</sup> The position of the *magister militum* was second only to the Roman Emperor and during the late Empire this position often acted independently of the Emperor. Curiously, cognates of the name Aetius have not been identified in the Germanic Heroic material, nor does his role appear either.

<sup>65</sup> Kelly, *Attila the Hun: Barbarian Terror and the Fall of the Roman Empire*, 85 cf. Prosper of Aquitaine.

<sup>66</sup> Kelly, *Attila the Hun: Barbarian Terror and the Fall of the Roman Empire*, 85.

<sup>67</sup> Caroline Brady, *The Legends of Ermanaric*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1943.

<sup>68</sup> *foederati* or client state was mutually beneficial arrangement. The client state received legitimacy, land, and economic benefits while Rome created a buffer state with cheap mercenaries.



Attila is not directly mentioned, but given the scarcity and unreliability of the sources it is not enough reason to believe that he could not have been involved directly or indirectly. Attila was active at this time and certainly it is plausible that his role would be conflated.

Similar to the Romans at this time, the Hun empire was divided into two halves. There was the Western half and the (more prestigious) Eastern half. Octar, the leader of the Western half of the Hunnic Empire was defeated and killed by the Burgundians in 430 AD. Octar's brother, Rua leader of the Eastern half, then assumed rule.<sup>69</sup> Rua died in 434 AD. It is not known when Attila first took control. We do know that following Rua, and certainly by 439 AD, Attila ruled the Western half, and Attila's brother Bleda ruled the Eastern half. Later Attila would take full control after Bleda was assassinated in 445 AD.<sup>70</sup>

Attila would become to the Romans, 'the scourge of god' and 'shook the world to its foundations'.<sup>71</sup> At the height of his power, he died suddenly, on his wedding night Attila drunk heavily, the next morning he was found in his bed drenched in blood with his new germanic bride.<sup>72</sup> An apparent blood clot, and almost immediately conspiracy stories arose. Just 80 years later Marcellinus Comes wrote that Atilla was murdered by his wife, a position that is also maintained in the Germanic literature, notably, *Atlamál*, *Atlakviða*, and *Völsunga saga*.

There is considerable overlap to be found in the vast variety of sources. We find that several major events do align, we also see many similar traits following the characters, and familiar patterns among story archs. The Huns are paid mercenaries working for Aetius, supporting the view that they are motivated by wealth. It is possible that Attila was involved in the attack on the Burgundians. The Huns travel to meet the Burgundians (reversed in legend, but compare to Priscus), their route is unknown but their homeland was in Pannonia suggesting a route along the Danube through southern Germany and along the Rhine to Burgundian territory. The Burgundians did have their captial at Worms. They were 'overwhelmed' by the Huns and many perished including the royal family. The death of Attila is disputed, but it is very likely that he did marry a Germanic princess, and he did die on his wedding night. Most scholars like to follow Priscus, and believe Attila died after heavy

<sup>69</sup> Octar and Rua, are Attila's Uncles.

<sup>70</sup> Dates are provided by Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns* (1973).

<sup>71</sup> Jordanes, *Origins and Deeds of the Goths*, 103; Jordanes, *Origins and Deeds of the Goths*, 107, 111. The familiar moniker 'Scourge of God' and 'shake the world to its foundations' comes from the *Getica*.

<sup>72</sup> Priscus cf. *Getica*. Refuted by Michael A. Babcock, *The Night Attila Died* (2005).

drinking from a blot clot. However, this is still disputed today and it is known very early that people believed Attila was murdered by his new bride. Given these major similarities I would argue that it is very reasonable to suggest that we could use the literary texts to supplement what is missing in the historical narrative. In the following, we will see many more elements in the legendary material that do show continuity with the historical record.

## 2.1 Pre-Fall of the Burgundians

A great hostility existed between the Huns and Burgundians. The Burgundians spoke an East Germanic Language and crossed the Rhine in 405/406 AD, likely due to the encroachment of the Huns. The Huns were a non-Indo-European speaking people who had already subjugated East Germanic groups, the Ostrogoths and had displaced the Visigoths from their powerful kingdom north of the Black Sea.<sup>73</sup> The Burgundians, however, had defeated an invading Hun army in 430 AD.<sup>74</sup> The *Völsunga saga* may echo this event, since we are told that, “[the sons of Gjúki] killed the king of the Danes *and* a great prince, the brother of King Budli (Peir (syir Gjúka) drápu Danakonung ok mikinn höfðingja, bróður Buðla konungs).”<sup>75</sup> Could this be referring to Octar, an uncle of Attila? The reference to the Danes is clearly anachronistic and may provide other inferences, however the reference to “bróður Buðla konungs” may not, as it corresponds to the Burgundians defeating an Uncle of Attila’s at the time.

After a significant battle between warring groups in ancient societies it was not uncommon for peace negotiations to conclude with marriage alliances.<sup>76</sup> It may be that a similar arrangement is suggested in the *Völsunga saga*. This is not without precedent in other Germanic groups, the theme is explored in the epic of Beowulf as, peace-weavers. Brynhildr is the sister of Atli, and she is married to Gunnarr. The Burgundians, under the leadership of

<sup>73</sup> cf. Jerome; Prosper of Aquitaine. See more Michael Kulikowski, *Rome’s Gothic Wars: From the Third Century to Alaric* (2006).

<sup>74</sup> Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns* (1973)cf. Socrates of Constantinople, and Jordanes: the defeat of Uptar/Octar.

<sup>75</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 87 (*Völsunga Saga* 31) Budli (Buðli) is Attila’s father is Norse tradition. In the *Nibelungenlied* Etzel is the son of Botelung; Old Norse provided by Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, “Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda,” *Völsunga saga*, ch XXIX.

<sup>76</sup> Marriage alliances for economic and political reasons were very common. Gunnarr had taken Brynhildr as a wife, the sister of Atli. Attila had succeeded the Western Hunnish Empire, sometime after Octar died in 430 AD. Perhaps the marriage was arranged to broker a peace?

Gunnarr had recently defeated a Hun army. The marriage alliance would be to ease tensions between the groups, as you would be less likely to war against family. In consequence, the later betrayal would amplify the *treacherous* characterization of the Huns. There is a sense of this in the historical record. Aetius defeats the Burgundians in 436 AD and a treaty is negotiated, but the following year the Huns arrive and decisively defeat them. The *Atlamál* offers a similar notion of hostility: “People have enmity which happened long ago” (Frétt hefir öld óvu ... er váru sannráðnir).<sup>77</sup> The exact relationship between the Burgundians and Huns cannot be known for certain, but the depiction of the Huns as treacherous, with some kind of previous ties to the Burgundians remains a reoccurring theme, in both history and legend.<sup>78</sup>

The ethnic differences between the Huns and Burgundians is difficult to sort out between the narrative accounts. The *Völsunga saga* and *Atlamál* make no distinction between the Burgundians and the Huns as a people. The Burgundians live somewhere along the Rhine.<sup>79</sup> King Atli lives through a dark forest.<sup>80</sup> The children of King Gjúki, Gunnarr, Högni, and Guðrún are known as the Nifungs.<sup>81</sup> They come “...Rosmufjöll Rínar,/rekka óneissa.”<sup>82</sup> Gunnarr is described as “Gotna þjóðann”.<sup>83</sup> Brynhildr is the sister of Atli<sup>84</sup> and they are children of King Budli,<sup>85</sup> and Budli is more powerful than Gjúki.<sup>86</sup> Whereas in *The Poetic Edda*,

<sup>77</sup> Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 217 (*Atlamál* 1). Jónas Kristjánsson and Ólason Vésteinn, eds., “*Atlamál* in Grœnlenzku,” in *Eddukvæði*, vol. 2, Íslensk fornrit Eddukvæði (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2014), 383.

<sup>78</sup> To be fair, we do know that the Huns were not the masterminds behind the attack on the Burgundians. That designation belongs to Aetius, general of the Western Roman army. The Burgundians had become a powerful nation controlling the trade route on the Rhine at Worms. Aetius wanted to bring that area back under control of the Roman Empire and hired the Huns as mercenaries to take out the Burgundians, in return the Huns received gold and land. Aetius is not mentioned in the *Völsunga saga* or in any other Germanic source. Perhaps he was known by another name. His omission will not concern us.

<sup>79</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 103 (*Völsunga saga* 39).

<sup>80</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 100 (*Völsunga saga* 37).

<sup>81</sup> Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, 8: (Niflungr): *Atlakviða* 11,17,25,27; Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 224 (*Atlamál* 47,52).

<sup>82</sup> Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, 7; Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 213 (*Atlakviða* 17); Jónas Kristjánsson and Ólason Vésteinn, eds., “*Atlakviða*,” in *Eddukvæði*, vol. 2, Íslensk fornrit Eddukvæði (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2014), 376.

<sup>83</sup> Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, 7; Oddly also of the Goths (*Atlakviða* 20); Brynhildr is also described as ‘Queen of the Goths’; Jónas and Ólason, “*Atlakviða*,” 377.

<sup>84</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 75 (*Völsunga saga* 26).

<sup>85</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 74 (*Völsunga saga* 25).

<sup>86</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 75 (*Völsunga saga* 26).

the descendants of Budli *and* Gjúki were from Hunmark,<sup>87</sup> they are both called Huns. The Huns are descendants of Budli.<sup>88</sup> But ‘Huns’ are rarely mentioned at all in the *Völsunga saga*. When Grímhildr goes to reconcile with Guðrún after Sigurðr is slain, she offers her treasures from her father’s legacy, ‘precious rings and bed hangings of the most gracious Hunnish maids.’<sup>89</sup> Sigurðr is referenced as a Hun on two occasions.<sup>90</sup> Once by Högni, “no Kings are our equal as long as this king (Sigurðr) of Hunland lives.” The second time by Brynhildr, the sister of King Atli. How can it be that the distinction of being a Hun is lost on Atli, but given to Sigurðr, one of the most renowned figures of the Germanic lands?!<sup>91</sup> The ethnic difference between the Huns and the Burgundians has been almost completely obscured.<sup>92</sup> There is only one instance Atli is referred to as a Hun, when Gunnarr says that the Rhine will rule the gold and not the Huns.<sup>93</sup> On the other hand, outside of the historical sources, only *Atlakviða* maintains distinct cultural differences.<sup>94</sup> For example, the Huns’ long mustaches<sup>95</sup> is remembered and is historically accurate. Further, throughout the poem there is a sense that on one side is the Burgundians, and the *other*, that being the Huns. But, apart from the *Atlakviða*, the differences between the Burgundians and the Huns has largely become a dispute between families.

## 2.2 Historical Characters

As Gudmund Schütte recognized, even the most subordinate characters in the Nibelung tradition can be traced to have historical representations.<sup>96</sup> Here I will provide a summary of significant characters as it relates to the fall of the Burgundians legend, including information from both literary sources and historical sources.

<sup>87</sup> Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, 5: Huns cf. Hunmark (*Atlakviða* 13); Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 212,213 (*Atlamál* 15,16).

<sup>88</sup> Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 215,228 (*Atlamál* 42,76,96); his son in: Sturluson, *Skáldskaparmál*, 99. Atli is the son of Budli.

<sup>89</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 95 (*Völsunga saga* 34).

<sup>90</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 89,92 (*Völsunga saga* 32,33).

<sup>91</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 93 (*Völsunga saga* 34) ON “þýðverskri”.

<sup>92</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 12: This is something Jesse Byock also points out.

<sup>93</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 103 (*Völsunga saga* 39).

<sup>94</sup> Jordanes, *Origins and Deeds of the Goths*, 71,103: Jordanes has them descended from witches

<sup>95</sup> Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 215 (*Atlakviða* 34).

<sup>96</sup> Schütte, “The Nibelungen Legend and Its Historical Basis,” 327.

### 2.2.1 Attila

Attila (ON Atli, MHG Etzel) was hated, feared, respected, and loved. Jordanes describes Attila as “...lord over all the Huns and almost the sole earthly ruler of all the tribes of Scythia; a man marvelous for his glorious fame among all nations.”<sup>97</sup> He also claims that Attila was the “king of all the barbarian world,”<sup>98</sup> and “fiercer than ferocity itself.”<sup>99</sup> He further believes that “Attila was born to ‘shake the nations, [and was] the scourge of all lands’.”<sup>100</sup> Continuing the image of Attila, we can also cite Priscus: “The chief of the Huns, King Attila, born of his sire Mundiuch, lord of bravest tribes, sole possessor of the Scythian and German realms—powers unknown before—captured cities and terrified both empires of the Roman world and, appeased by their prayers, took annual tribute to save the rest from plunder...”<sup>101</sup> The *Völsunga saga* is similar. In several instances Atli is noted for his power. When Gunnarr threatens to kill Atli before Brynhildr, she replies, “King Atli does not care about your threats or your anger. He will outlive you and be mightier.”<sup>102</sup> When Grímhildr wants Guðrún to marry Atli she refers to him as ‘the powerful’.<sup>103</sup> Again Atli is referred to as, ‘a great and powerful King; he was wise and had a large following.’<sup>104</sup> He is described as having the predatory instincts as an eagle.<sup>105</sup> In *Atlamál*, Atli is also described as an eagle.<sup>106</sup> On two separate occasions Atli is referred to as a ‘brave man’, and this is after Atli ambushes his guests Gunnarr and Högni.<sup>107</sup> This is in stark opposition to *Atlakviða*, which offers the worst depiction of Atli, as he embodied by as Huns are pejoratively associated with dogs.<sup>108</sup> However, throughout *The Poetic Edda* Atli is characterized more mildly, and often with greed.<sup>109</sup> *The Poetic Edda* offers two vastly different perspectives of Atli. In the *Atlakviða* he is absolutely despised, whereas in the *Atlamál* the poet treats Atli much kinder. This trend

<sup>97</sup> Jordanes, *Origins and Deeds of the Goths*, 101.

<sup>98</sup> Jordanes, *Origins and Deeds of the Goths*, 101.

<sup>99</sup> Jordanes, *Origins and Deeds of the Goths*, 71 (XXIV).

<sup>100</sup> Jordanes, *Origins and Deeds of the Goths*, 103, 107, 111: Attila is again repeated as “victories over diverse races”.

<sup>101</sup> Jordanes, *Origins and Deeds of the Goths*, 143.

<sup>102</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 91 (*Völsunga saga* 32).

<sup>103</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 95 (*Völsunga saga* 34).

<sup>104</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 96 (*Völsunga saga* 35).

<sup>105</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 98 (*Völsunga saga* 35).

<sup>106</sup> Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 220 (*Atlamál* 19); island fornir 396:19.

<sup>107</sup> Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 225,231 (*Atlamál* 54,90) (*Röskv*).

<sup>108</sup> See more on this theme: James V. McMahon, *Atli the Dog in the Atlakviða* (1988).

<sup>109</sup> Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 180 (*Guðrúnarkviða* I 26) kenning referencing Fafnir/gold.

continues into the *Völsunga saga* until we reach *Þiðreks saga* and *Nibelungenlied* where Attila will be absolved any wrongdoing. I will go into more depth here when I discuss the Hun ambush and Attila's death. To conclude, Attila's reoccurring character traits are broadly; powerful, greedy, and treacherous.

### 2.2.2 Gundaharius

Gundaharius (ON Gunnarr, MHG Gunther) was leader of the Burgundians from 411-437 AD. Under his leadership the Burgundians expanded their territory, he raided neighboring lands, and set up Worms as his capital. He was even responsible for setting up a puppet emperor in Gaul.<sup>110</sup> These antics got him in a lot of trouble with Aetius, and a Hun army was sent to destroy the Burgundian royal family<sup>111</sup> and 20,000 people.<sup>112</sup> His father was Gibica (ON Gjúki MHG Gibeche). His brothers were Gundomar I, and Giselher.<sup>113</sup> Under his leadership the Burgundians successfully defeated a Hunnish invading army killing their leader Ostar in 430 AD.<sup>114</sup> He is a central character and the portrayal of a him in history as brave and competent is echoed in the fall of the Burgundians legend.<sup>115</sup>

### 2.2.3 Ildico

Ildico was one of Attila's many wives. His principle wife was Kreka (MHG Helche ON Herkia/Erka), and famously Attila tried to marry Honoria and claim half the Roman Empire. Ildico was a Germanic Princess last wife to the pagan Attila. It is unknown if she was Burgundian or not but her name suggests an East Germanic language group to which the

<sup>110</sup> Chaffin, Christopher. *Olympiodorus of Thebes and the Sack of Rome: A Study of the Historikoi Logio, with Translated Fragments, Commentary and Additional Material*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1993.

<sup>111</sup> Prosper of Aquitaine. *From Roman to Merovingian Gaul: A Reader*, ed. & trans. A. C Murray. (Ontario, 2003, 62–76.

<sup>112</sup> Burgess, R.W. *The Chronicle of Hydatius and the Consularia Constantinopolitana*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

<sup>113</sup> *Lex Burgundionum*. Translation by Katherine Fisher Drew, *The Burgundian Code* (1972).

<sup>114</sup>cf. Socrates of Constantinople. Schütte, "The Nibelungen Legend and Its Historical Basis," 301; Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, 35-36; An English translation by A. C. Zenos can be found here: "Church History," accessed April 30, 2020, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2601.htm>.

<sup>115</sup> This is in contrast to the Gunnarr we see prior to the events of the Fall of the Burgundians, the Sigurðr story. This was explored by Andreas Heusler, and can be explained as a merging of an initial two separate legends.

Burgundian did belong. On their wedding Attila drank heavily and died of a blood clot. According to Jordanes, in the morning Attila's guards found Ildico weeping, and on the off chance she poisoned him, they killed her. The most authoritative historian of the time doesn't record any foul play however; others strongly suspect such was the case. Following Attila's death chaos would breakout and the Hunnic empire would quickly dissolve. Her character corresponds to the protagonist Guðrún in the *Atlakviða* and *Atlamál*. However, in the *Nibelungenlied* she is the antagonist Kriemhild<sup>116</sup> and similar in *Þiðreks saga* as Grímhildr (not to be confused with the Grímhildr of *The Poetic Edda* who was the mother of Guðrún, however, both share a particular trait of nastiness).

#### 2.2.4 Hǫgni

(MHG Hagen, ON Hǫgni) is the last main character of the story. He is a mysterious and important figure. He is bold, cunning, and grim. The information surrounding him is very contradictory and difficult to sort out. He is the brother or half-brother or uncle to Gunnarr, depending on the source. Some variants describe Hǫgni's father as an elf. His wife is Kostbera (*The Poetic Edda*), or Gluna (*Hveenske Krønike*). He has several children one of which is Aldrian and in some versions Aldrian is responsible for killing Attila.<sup>117</sup> Hagen (*Þiðreks saga*, *Nibelungenlied*) has a particular hatred for his sister Kriemhild that does not appear in other variants. We know that he had some prior relationship with the Huns, but it's only eluded to.<sup>118</sup> When reading about this figure we cannot help but to feel as though we are missing a substantial part of his story. Hagen's historical equivalent is unknown. It has been suggested that it could be Aetius, as Aetius was a dominate personality in this period and has not been placed in Germanic legend.<sup>119</sup> Despite some similarities between

<sup>116</sup> Schütte, "The Nibelungen Legend and Its Historical Basis," 306. Schütte suggest Kriemhild is Helche whose etymology means Greek woman. Andreas Heusler disagrees. Omeljan Pritsak, *The Hunnic Language of the Attila Clan* (1982) also disagrees.

<sup>117</sup> There are several people with the name "Aldrian" who are associated with Hǫgni, particularly one who strikes Hǫgni to initiate the battle between the Burgundians and Huns (*Þiðreks saga*).

<sup>118</sup> *Atlamál* 56 "Getr þú þess, Atli, /gerðir svá fyrri, /móður tókt mína/ok myrðir til hnossa, /svinna systrungu/sveltir þú í helli;" Later Attila is again connected to being starved to death in a cave cf. *Þiðreks saga*.

<sup>119</sup> Schütte, "The Nibelungen Legend and Its Historical Basis," 305. Similarities include: 1) Aetius commanded Burgundian troops at the battle of Chalons 2) both were hostages of the Huns 3) both rival of a Sigbert/Sigurðr slayer. See more: Babcock, *The Night Attila Died*, 295. Gareth Morgan, *Hagen and Aetius*, *Classica et Medaevia* 30 (1974):440-50.



Aetius and Hagen, we must remain doubtful that this is his representative.<sup>120</sup> It would seem more plausible that the figure of Hogni is related to the Alan king Goar, who was closely allied to Gundaharius. The Alans were a non-Germanic tribe from the East that had also be forced to flee from the Huns. Finally, we should mention that the name “Hagan” very similar to title “Khagan.”<sup>121</sup> However, this is a mystery that is unlikely to be resolved.

<sup>120</sup> It is also possible that Agnarr (*Völsunga saga*) is a candidate for Aetius, although this is a minor character.

<sup>121</sup> I am also interested in the name Hagen and I speculate if it is related to Khagan.

### 3. Introduction to *Atlakviða*, *Atlamál*, *Völsunga saga*, *Þiðreks saga*, and *Nibelungenlied*

*Atlamál*, *Atlakviða*, *Völsunga saga*, *Þiðreks saga*, and *Nibelungenlied* are the texts that will be more closely examined in this chapter. This is because of the popularity and fullness of their accounts relating to fall of the Burgundians. These texts provide a strong continuity with 'history', and to each other. The variations may help to show not only the age of when they were written, but of those who kept the tradition alive. These texts offer a substantial amount of material but I will narrow my effort as it is highly probable that the fall of the Burgundians had functioned as a separate entity before being coalesced with other legends. For this reason, I will be narrowing the scope specifically relating to the portion concerning the fall of the Burgundians, and not the adventures of Young Sigurðr, nor the death of Sigurðr that are often included in terms of the Niflungs cycle.

#### 3.1 Historicity of *Atlakviða*, *Atlamál*, *Völsunga saga*, *Þiðreks saga*, and *Nibelungenlied*

To extract any historical value from the Germanic literature is complicated. The work is heavily based in myth and legend. There are several conflicting accounts within just the *Poetic Edda*, not to mention among themselves. Not only that, the surviving copies were written down several hundred years after the Huns defeated the Burgundians. With this in mind, I will focus on *Þiðreks saga*, as it has the most to say and can be used as an example for the other texts.

What makes *Þiðreks saga* unique is that this account has a lot to say on where it got its source material from. This is particularly true where we are concerned, the fall of the Burgundians legend, or referred here to as, The Saga of the Niflungs, which includes more of the narrative. The author of *Þiðreks saga* tells us with greatest detail that if you go to different parts of Germany, people will tell you the same story, and will even point out specific scenes where certain events took place! <sup>122</sup> *Þiðreks saga* closely resembles the *Nibelungenlied*, which makes sense considering the fact that *Þiðreks saga* derives from a German source. The author tells us that The Saga of Niflungs was known consistently throughout various parts of

<sup>122</sup> Haymes, *The Saga of Thidrek of Bern*, 236, 239.

Germany, and there were physical markers in the landscape to point out specific parts of the saga. For instance, when Högni drives his spear through his opponent Irung, the wall is still known for that moment (oc þesse [steinuegr heitir irungs vegr en i dag]).<sup>123</sup> This is also pointed out for the tower that they threw Gunnarr into when he died in the snake pit.

Before the author concludes the Saga of the Niflungs in *Þiðreks saga*, here is what he has to say in Old Norse:

(394) her ma nu hœyra frasogn þyðæskra manna huæerso farit hafa þæssi tidinde [þæira nockorra er fæddir [hafa værit i susat [þar er þæssir atburdir hafa orðit oc margan dag hafa set staðina en obrugðna [þa somo er tiðindin urðo huar haugni fell eða Jrungr var væginn eða orma turninn er Gunnarr *konungr* fecc bana oc garðinn er enn er kallaðr niflunga garðr oc [stændr vallt a somu læið [sem þa var er niflungar voro drepner oc hliðin [hit forna hlidit hit eystra er fyrst hofz orrostan oc hit væstra hliðit er kallat er haugna hlið er niflungar bruto a garðinum [þat er en kallat a samu læið sem þa var. Þæir menn hafa [oss oc sagt ifra þesso er fœddir hafa værit i [brimum eða mænstr borg oc engi þæira vissi dæili a adrom oc sagðu allir a æina læið fra. oc [er þat mæst epter þui sem sægia fornkvæði i þyðæskri tungu [er gort hafa storir menn um þau stortiðinde er i þæsso landi hafa orðit.<sup>124</sup>

(394) One can hear from German men how these stories happened. Some of these stories come from men who were born in Susa, where these events took place. They have often seen the places unchanged where these things took place, where Högni fell or where Irung was killed, the snake tower where Gunnarr died, and the courtyard, still called the Niflungacourtyard. One can see the gates: the east gate where the fighting started and the west gate, called the Högnigate, which the Niflungs broke in the wall and is still called the same as then. Men have also told us these things who were born in Brymun [Bremen] or Mynsterborg [Münster], and none of them knew the others, but they all tell the story about the things that happened in that land the same way, and that is mostly according to the way things are told in old songs in the German language.<sup>125</sup>

Here, he is referring specifically to the Saga of the Niflungs not the other tales within *Þiðreks saga* and he is placing them in the real world. The author is constantly blurring the legend with reality. The place names coincide with historical ones, arguably some more than others.<sup>126</sup> Susa coincides with Soest in Germany; Vernisa with Worms on the Rhine; and so on. He ends the Saga of the Niflungs, as “German men have said that no battle has been more famous in old tales than this one” (sva segia þyðeskir menn. at engi orrosta hevir verit frægri i [fornsogum helldr enn þessi.)<sup>127</sup> Here the author clearly represents the story as a historical fact.

<sup>123</sup> Bertelsen, *Þiðreks Saga af Bern*, 320. *Þiðreks saga* Ch. 387.

<sup>124</sup> Bertelsen, *Þiðreks Saga af Bern*, 328. *Þiðreks saga* Ch. 394.

<sup>125</sup> Haymes, *The Saga of Thidrek of Bern*, 239.

<sup>126</sup> See more: William J. Paff *The Geographical and Ethnic Names in the Þiðreks Saga* (1959).

<sup>127</sup> Bertelsen, *Þiðriks saga af Bern*, 327. *Þiðreks saga* Ch. 393.

## 4. Analysis

In order to analyze the fall of the Burgundians story it will be divided into four main parts. (1) The invitation scene. This is when a messenger is sent from the Hunnish court to the Burgundian court. The leaders of the Burgundians are then offered gifts and are invited to the Huns court. The scene reveals the motive(s) for the Burgundians coming to the Hun's lands. (2) The Route. Which route do the Burgundians take to the lands of the Huns? Here I will look at the importance of place names. The journey is shown with significantly more detail in *Piðreks saga* and *Nibelungenlied*, and compares strikingly with Priscus' journey. (3) Hun Ambush. Here I will look into who instigated the engagement, the cause, the duels, and who bears the responsibility of the villain. (4) Death of Attila. Historically we know when and where this event took place. I will go over the varied accounts and support the theory that Attila was murdered.

### 4.1 Invitation

This scene allows us to ask several important questions. Here we will examine; who is the messenger, what did he propose as motives of the Huns, how were the Burgundians warned? Why did the Huns attack the Burgundians and what motive propelled Attila to act so treacherously?

The invitation scene is the opening scene of legend of the fall of the Burgundians. A messenger is sent by Attila to the court of the Burgundians encouraging them under false pretexts to come to the court of Attila. There are various differences between the accounts here, such as the motivations behind the invitation and who the messenger is, but by and large it is relatively the same. The scene is very important as it sets up the proceeding events of the drama, and there are several things we should take notice. *The Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga* are more akin than *Piðreks saga* and *Nibelungenlied*. Here we can see our first significant separation between the texts. In one camp we have, as I will call, the 'Norse' group of *The Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*, versus the 'German' group. The major difference seen here will be the motive of the antagonist, and the nature between the Huns and Burgundians which will serve to emphasize treachery.

The Burgundian stronghold is traditionally placed at Worms on the Rhine and the Huns of Attila were in Pannonia (roughly present-day Hungary). The degree which each story recognizes these details varies, as we see with the routes taken to the Burgundian court. The messenger of *Atlakviða*, Knefrod, arrives from the South. In the *Atlamál*, Atli's messenger Vingi has to cross the Limfjord to reach Gunnarr and Hogni suggesting a route from the North.<sup>128</sup> He offers the plain of Gnitaeath, farms on the Dnieper, and the famed Mirkwood. The identity of these locations is very obscure. Gnitaeath is where Fafnir lived. Dnieper may refer to the prominent river in modern-day Ukraine north of the black sea. Mirkwood has long been a mystery and has referred to many wooded areas.<sup>129</sup> There does seem to be a constant 'other' theme that belongs to it. It is the woods that separate Asgard and Muspelheim cf. *Lokasenna*,<sup>130</sup> and it is these woods that separate the Goths and the Huns in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*.<sup>131</sup> Here, it represents the divide between the Huns and the Burgundians. After the Burgundians accept the offer, the *Atlakviða* quite literally tells us is that the Burgundians travel over a mountain, and through the woods to the plains of the Huns.<sup>132</sup> The description of plains is also an accurate representation as the Huns were located on the Pannonia plains.

Historically we know that the Roman general Aetius hired the Huns as to put down the Burgundians in the exchange of gold and the province of Pannonia.<sup>133</sup> Atli is also motivated by the pursuit of gold, the legendary gold of Gnitaeath.<sup>134</sup> However, Atli already has vast wealth, as illustrated when his messenger, Vingi, offers to Hogni and Gunnarr; "helmets and shields, swords and mail coats, gold and fine clothes, troops and horses, and a large fief."<sup>135</sup>

Another motive revealed for the betrayal of Gunnarr and Hogni is suggested. Atli doesn't just desire gold, he desires revenge, for the betrayal of Sigurðr.<sup>136</sup> Atli has accused Gunnarr and Hogni for the death of Sigurðr. It may be that by avenging Sigurðr, Atli could

<sup>128</sup> Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 218 (*Atlamál* 4). The Limfjord is located in northern Jutland.

<sup>129</sup> "Mirkwood" is referred to throughout Germanic literature here is a list of some Norse examples: *Sögubrot af nokkrum fornkonungum*; *Helgakviða Hundingbana I & II*; *Styrbjarnar þáttr Svíakappa*; *Völundarkviða*.

<sup>130</sup> Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 91.

<sup>131</sup> Recall that the *Poetic Edda* sometimes refers to the Burgundians as Goths.

<sup>132</sup> Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 212.

<sup>133</sup> Harries, Jill. *Sidonius Apollinaris and the Fall of Rome, AD 407-485*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995.

<sup>134</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 96,100 (*Völsunga saga* 35,38) "for a long time, I have intended to take your lives [Gunnarr and Hogni], to control the gold..." meaning Fafnir's gold, that Gunnarr and Hogni acquired after the death of Sigurðr.

<sup>135</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 97 (*Völsunga saga* 35).

<sup>136</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 100 (*Völsunga saga* 38).

have a claim to his legendary wealth, which is what he really desires. It is interesting that in some versions Atli also condemns them for the death of his sister, Brynhildr.<sup>137</sup>

*Þiðreks saga* and the *Nibelungenlied* differ in significant ways from the Norse variants. The starkest difference is that role of the antagonist has shifted away from Attila to Kriemhild. Greed remains a secondary desire for Attila, however the primary motive for the betrayal of the Burgundians becomes revenge for the slaying of Siegfried. Since differences between *Þiðreks saga* and the *Nibelungenlied* are relatively minor, we will follow the events according to *Þiðreks saga*.

Upon hearing of the death of Young Sigurðr, King Attila sends his nephew Duke Osid [Osiðr] of Herraland<sup>138</sup> to ask for Grímhildr in marriage. Osid leaves Soest [Susa]<sup>139</sup> for Vernisa to meet with the Niflungs.<sup>140</sup> For some comparison, it might be relevant to know that it would be about a three-day journey on foot.<sup>141</sup>

On the behalf of King Attila, Osid asks for Grímhildr in marriage, and with the marriage friendship and a dowry as they determine. Everyone, Gunnarr, Hogni, his brothers, and including Grímhildr, thought it best not to refuse such a powerful king and great leader (maðr rikr oc mikill hofðingi).<sup>142</sup> Grímhildr is then remarried to Attila.

Seven years pass and Sigurðr is still firmly in the heart of Grímhildr. She entices Attila to invite her brothers to his court and reminds him that her brothers have not given her any of Sigurðr's gold, as she would be entitled to inherit her former husband's property. Attila agrees to Grímhildr's request because he is the greediest of men (allra manna fegiarnastr).<sup>143</sup> Attila invites Gunnarr and his kinsmen under the pretext of friendship and in hopes that the Niflung can govern his (Attila's) kingdom because he is too old and his sons are too young.

The messengers deliver the invitation to which the Burgundians heroically accept even though they suspect betrayal. The motives of the antagonist are established. The Norse

<sup>137</sup> Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 225.

<sup>138</sup> Paff, *The Geographical and Ethnic names in the Þiðriks Saga*, 88. He could represent Hosed, a Saxon who fought against the Slavs, however Herraland is most likely linked to Frisia. See more on the link between Osid and Hosed: Waldemar Haupt, *Zur niederdeutschen Dietrichssage* (1914).

<sup>139</sup> Paff, *The Geographical and Ethnic names in the Þiðriks Saga*, 173. Soest was a prominent trading city of old Saxony.

<sup>140</sup> Paff, *The Geographical and Ethnic names in the Þiðriks Saga*, 215. Vernisa [Vernico] likely refers to Worms.

<sup>141</sup> This is reflected in Google Maps, as journey to and from the Burgundian and Hunnish courts.

<sup>142</sup> Bertelsen, *Þiðriks saga af Bern*, 276-277.

<sup>143</sup> Bertelsen, *Þiðriks saga af Bern*, 279.

accounts have greed as a primary motivation of Attila and revenge as *his* secondary motivation. Whereas, *Þiðreks saga* and the *Nibelungenlied* revenge is the primary motivation, that is being pursued by Grímhildr and greed is the secondary motivation, that is pursued by Attila.

#### 4.2 Route: Journey to the Hun Court

The Burgundians have accepted the invitation and now they begin their trek to the court of the Huns. From historical sources we know that it was the Huns who travelled to and then destroyed the Burgundian Kingdom, but in the Germanic texts it's the Burgundians that march into Hun territory. *The Poetic Edda* offers little more detail concerning the journey than when the messengers of Atli arrived at the Burgundian court. *The Völsunga saga*, *Þiðreks saga* and the *Nibelungenlied* are longer works and go into significantly more detail.

The importance of the journey to the Huns is twofold. First, an examination of place names can reveal a process of localization. In which, consistency of known places can suggest some authenticity to the text, and variations may reflect the contemporary audience to either bring familiarity to the text, or to make the story more exotic. Since this part of the story is not significant to the outcome events, it allows for a greater degree of creative license to add or combine additional material.

The *Poetic Edda* offers little information concerning the journey of the Burgundians. So, let's first examine the *Völsunga saga* on the journey and instances of localization. When a tradition exists in oral memory for an extended period of time, it is without much surprise that certain features were susceptible to change. The author may choose to use familiar settings and figures to more effectively engage his audience. This happens throughout the *Völsunga saga*. There are two voyages between the Burgundians and Huns that are described. The first is when the Guðrún is married off to Atli. Here it takes seven days by horse, then seven days by ship, and finally another seven days by land. The second, when the Burgundians leave for their banquet with the Huns, they travel by ship, and then proceed through a dark forest before reaching the Huns' castle.<sup>144</sup>

<sup>144</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 99 (*Völsunga saga* 37).



The *Völsunga saga*'s treatment of geography is similar to what we find in *Atlamál*. It recognizes the Burgundians connection to the Rhine but adds new exotic lands. For instance, why would Gunnarr, whose kingdom is on the Rhine be fighting a king from what is now Russia?<sup>145</sup> Norse settlers did not begin to colonize Russia until much later during the Viking period, which may reflect this addition of the story. After the death of Sigurðr, and before Guðrún is married to Atli, Guðrún exiles herself to Denmark.<sup>146</sup> That isn't extraordinary, however when Grímhildr (Guðrún's mother, not Grímhildr of *Þiðreks saga*) goes to retrieve Guðrún in Denmark they are celebrated with a feast with such dignitaries as; "Valdamar of Denmark, and Eymod and Jarisleif. They entered King Half's Hall. There were Langobards, Franks, and Saxons."<sup>147</sup> Like most things during this period, it is not known for sure who these names refer to but we may find answers when we turn to figures contemporary to when the *Völsunga saga* was written.<sup>148</sup> The *Völsunga saga* echoes the tradition in *Atlamál*, as scenes are relocated to Denmark, the Burgundians must sail to the Huns, and they leave their ships untethered. Another example of localization may have occurred during Kosbera's dream. In her dream, she sees a white bear.<sup>149</sup> This is thought to come from *Atlamál In grænlensku* (*Atlamál*) of the *Poetic Edda*.<sup>150</sup> The author of the *Völsunga saga* knew of the *Poetic Edda*. Perhaps, this part of the story was adapted from the *Atlamál*.

Another anachronism is the connection to Ragnar Lodbrok who was a semi-legendary Viking hero, who lived in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. In the *Völsunga saga*, Brynhildr and Sigurðr have a child, named, Áslaug,<sup>151</sup> and nothing more is said of Áslaug in the saga. However, in the same manuscript (Nks 1824 b 4to), following the *Völsunga saga* is the *Tale of Ragnar Lodbrok*, (*Ragnars saga loðbrókar*). In it Ragnar marries Áslaug connecting his line to legendary figures.

<sup>145</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 81 (*Völsunga saga* 29).

<sup>146</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 93 (*Völsunga saga* 34).

<sup>147</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 94 (*Völsunga saga* 34); Interesting this part also appears in the *Guðrúnarkviða II* of the *Poetic Edda*.

<sup>148</sup> *Valdamar of Denmark*, (who is presumably Valdemar I of Denmark who lived in the 12<sup>th</sup> century), *Eymod* (unknown, maybe an 'Edmund' Ironside, an early 11<sup>th</sup> century king of Anglo-Saxon England), and *Jarisleif* (likely Yaroslav I of Novgorod who lived in the 11<sup>th</sup> century). The inclusion of the Langobards is also interesting. They were known during the age of Attila but by the 13<sup>th</sup> century when the *Völsunga saga* is written the Langobards had long been absorbed by the Charlemagne in the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>149</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 98 (*Völsunga saga* 35).

<sup>150</sup> Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 291.

<sup>151</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 82 (*Völsunga saga* 29).

If we turn from the *Poetic Edda* and the *Völsunga saga* to *Þiðreks saga* and the *Nibelungenlied* we find again that the Burgundians travel across the Rhine (Worms) to Hunland (via the Duna). They travel briefly by land to a crossing, and then sail before taking a final land route to the Huns. Whereas, in the *Poetic Edda* reflects poetic imagery, the *Völsunga saga* reflects place names related to Denmark, and *Þiðreks saga* reflects place names related to Northern Germany. A lot has been written on the place names in *Þiðreks saga*.<sup>152</sup> And this is usually seen as reflecting the origins of the work.

The *Nibelungenlied*, more plausibly, reflects place names in along the Danube, primarily in Austria. The capital of the Burgundians is still Worms, but the capital of the Huns has moved from Susa to Gran. Gran has been identified as Esztergom, which is a city on the Danube in Northern Hungary.<sup>153</sup> Esztergom was the capital of the Hungarian state from the 10<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century. This coincides with the time when the *Nibelungenlied* was thought to be composed. If the Burgundians were to travel from their court in Worms to Pannonia, the *Nibelungenlied* reflects the most probable course. Coincidentally, it also follows the *Limes* (Roman word for limits, boundaries).<sup>154</sup>

Both *Þiðreks saga* and the *Nibelungenlied* expand greatly on the journey to the Hun court. It is worth mentioning these events but they will not be fully examined because I believe they are out of scope for this paper. They are as follows: Queen Oda's advice, the encounter with the water maids, the killing of the ferryman, the seizing of the watchman, and the stay with Margrave Rodingeir. Further, it would be interesting to compare *Þiðreks saga* and the *Nibelungenlied* to Priscus' journey to Attila's court.<sup>155</sup>

#### 4.3 Hun Ambush

The ambush by the Huns is the climax of the story. It's when the Burgundians meet their fate. There are three major themes that echo through the pages. That is, the treachery

<sup>152</sup> See more: William Paff, *The Geographical and Ethnic Names of Þiðriks Saga. A Study in Germanic Heroic Legend* (2014).

<sup>153</sup> Hatto, *The Nibelungenlied*, 396, for more information on 'Gran'.

<sup>154</sup> Indeed, the author of this thesis has made this trip! A good description of it is provided by Gerald Axelrod, *Wo das Reich der Nibelungen verborgen liegt* (2013).

<sup>155</sup> *Þiðreks saga* and the *Nibelungenlied* versions of the Burgundian trip to Attila's court should be compared to Priscus' Journey to Attila's court.

of the Huns, the overwhelming nature of the defeat of the Burgundians, and the role of the villain. Like the historical Burgundians, the Burgundians of legend were defeated by the Huns. The nature of the defeat is very consistent. The Burgundians are betrayed, and overwhelmingly defeated.

Our 6<sup>th</sup> c. historian from Constantinople, Jordanes, quotes a message sent from the Western Emperor, Valentinian, to the king of the Visigoths. Valentinian needed an alliance between Romans and Visigoths before the battle of the Catalaunian Plains (451 AD); he says to the king of the Visigoths, "... you surely cannot forget—that the Huns do not overthrow nations by means of war, where there is an equal chance, but assail them by *treachery*, which is a greater cause for anxiety."<sup>156</sup> It is difficult to know what Valentinian could be making a reference to; is it the recent destruction of the Burgundians in 437 AD, or to the Goths themselves as they fled the Huns in c. 376 AD, or is he simply referring to the military tactics of the feigned retreat used by the Huns. It cannot be known; regardless this sentiment is exactly what we find in the Germanic texts.

As the Burgundians approach the Huns' court, Guðrún calls out to her brother: "Betrayed you are now, Gunnarr; what, mighty lord, will help you against the evil *tricks* of the Huns? [Ráðinn ertu nú, Gunnarr, / hvat muntu ríkr vinna við Húna *harmbrögðum*?]"<sup>157</sup> Atli has invited the Burgundians into his court under false pretenses and is violating the code of hospitality. This cannot be understated. The violation of the code of hospitality was a serious offense. There is even section dedicated to it in the Burgundian Law Code written by Gunnarr's grandson.<sup>158</sup> Atli is called an oath-breaker, another serious offense also found in the Law Code, which Gunnarr condemns him for.<sup>159</sup> The Burgundians are then decisively defeated by the Huns.

In *Þiðreks saga*, the Burgundians fight bravely but are defeated by the Huns using "overwhelming force" (driva nu til huner [þessar orustu sua at huert streti er fullt [þar inand af hunum oc verða nu niflungar of liði borner)].<sup>160</sup> This point is reiterated, (þat med ath [honum er komid ofurefli lidz]).<sup>161</sup> The sources are in complete agreement on this point. The

<sup>156</sup> Jordanes, *Origins and Deeds of the Goths*, 106.

<sup>157</sup> Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 212 (*Atlakviða* 15); Jónas and Ólason, "Atlakviða," 375.

<sup>158</sup> Katherine Fischer Drew, *The Burgundian Code* (XXXVIII, page 47).

<sup>159</sup> Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 214 (*Atlamál* 29).

<sup>160</sup> Bertelsen, *Þiðriks saga af Bern*, 312.

<sup>161</sup> Bertelsen, *Þiðriks saga af Bern*, 313.

Burgundians were treated unfairly and were defeated soundly by the Huns. In legend, Gunnarr and Hogni are then killed in cruel fashion: Gunnarr is thrown into a snake pit and Hogni has his heart cut out. The imagery between Atli and the Huns to Gunnarr and Hogni is on full display. The Huns are greedy and fight unfairly, whereas Gunnarr and Hogni resist the persuasion of gold and fearlessly engage their opponents directly.

*Piðreks saga* and *Nibelungenlied* begin to part significantly from the Norse tradition, once the Burgundians arrive at the court of Attila. The scene in *Piðreks saga* where Grímhildr has the squires of the Burgundians killed is expanded in the *Nibelungenlied*. Here Hagan's brother Dancwart becomes the hero and slays Bloedlin. The same Bloedlin in *Piðreks saga* who is the one who refuses Grímhildr's request to betray the Burgundians.<sup>162</sup> Dancwart bursts through the door, covered in blood and reveals that the Huns have betrayed them by killing their squires. The Burgundians leap into action, Hagan cuts off the head of Ortlieb (Kriemhild and Attila's son) so that the head falls into the lap of Kriemhild and then proceeds to decapitate the tutor of the boy; this is still fairly consistent with *Piðreks saga*. The battle continues on. The Burgundians are defeating everything the Huns throw at them; in fact, they defeat everyone to the last man. The *Nibelungenlied* is different from the *Piðreks saga* where the Niflungs are overcome by a show of overwhelming force. Here the Huns are decisively defeated, and refusing to go on. It's now up to Etzel's vassals to save the day, but one by one Etzel's vassals are defeated. Iring is killed, Rudiger is killed, and Hildebrand is injured. Dietrich laments that all of his men are lost. He finally confronts the last two remaining Burgundians, Gunther and Hagen. Hagen is captured first by Dietrich, who then captures Gunther. If we recall to *Piðreks saga* Gunnarr is captured first by Osid, and then Hogni is defeated by Piðrekr. Regardless, Dietrich brings the prisoner to Kriemhild. She cuts off the head of Gunther and shows Hagen before killing him with Siegfried's sword. Hildebrand is distraught and cuts down Kriemhild. The story ends with sorrow, as those that survive weep for the deceased. The heroes of the story are utterly defeated; the next question we need to ask ourselves is who the poet blames for the tragedy?

The primary difference between the *Piðreks saga* and *Nibelungenlied* and the Norse works is who is the antagonist. In the Norse works it is clearly Atli. He is primarily encouraged

<sup>162</sup> Bloedlin/Blodlin/Bleda is the older brother to Etzel/Atli/Attila. The legendary material and historical material align on this point.

by greed as a primary motive and revenge as a secondary motive. In *Þiðreks saga* and the *Nibelungenlied*, Atli's and Etzels' reputation of greed is still observed but his role as villain has been completely overtaken by Grímhildr/Kriemhild. It's very interesting on how the authors treatment of the characters is consistent but their roles as villains has been switched.

The worst portrayal of Atli is to be found in the *Atlakviða*. The poet does everything in his power to make Attila and the Huns the villains. In *Atlakviða*, the Huns, on several occasions are pejoratively associated with dogs.<sup>163</sup> Atli is only given the chance to speak once in the entire poem: "Drive out the chariot! Now the captive is in chains," (Ýkvið ér hvélvögnum, /haptr er nú í bǫndum"),<sup>164</sup> which serves only to condemn Gunnarr and Högni to death. In refusing to give Atli a voice we never see his perspective, and as a result, this does little to provide the audience any empathy for the character in his poem. He is a character that the audience is unable to relate to, and that the poet has no interest sympathizing with. This treatment is in stark contrast to other treatments of Atli.

The *Atlamál* offers a strikingly different portrayal of Atli. The first line sets the tone: "People have enmity which happened long ago"<sup>165</sup> (Frétt hefir ǫld ófo, / þá er endr um gørðu/ seggir samkundo, /).<sup>166</sup> The conflict between the Burgundians and Atli is presented as a *mutual* hostility, not an utter betrayal by Atli, as found in *Atlakviða*. In this poem Atli's actions, despite being unfavorable to audiences can be redeemable. Towards the beginning of the poem, after receiving the Huns' message inviting him to their court, Högni ignores the warning of his wife Kosbera that he will die if he goes and instead describes Atli as well intentioned.<sup>167</sup> Atli isn't devious, he "was cunning but ill-advised."<sup>168</sup> This opens the possibilities of the well-established 'evil advisor' trope that was well known among Norse audiences. This is again implied later in the poem too, where Guðrún confronts Atli saying; "you always wanted to yield, you'd never stand firm in any matter, you'd quietly let things be." (at þú sǫk sottir /né

<sup>163</sup> McMahon, *The Early Empires of Central Asia* (1939).

<sup>164</sup> Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 214; (*Atlakviða* 28); Jónas and Ólason, "Atlakviða," 378.

<sup>165</sup> Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 217 (*Atlamál* 1).

<sup>166</sup> Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, 77; (*Atlamál* 1); The world has heard of the malice when men long ago gathered for a meeting; Jónas and Ólason, "Atlamál," 382.

<sup>167</sup> Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 220 (*Atlamál* 20) "Heill er hugr Atla," Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, 80 (*Atlamál* 19).

<sup>168</sup> Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 217 (*Atlamál* 2) "Illa réz Atli," Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, 77 (*Atlamál* 2).

slekðir aðra; vildir ávallt vægja /en vætki halda, /kyrrt um því láta - - -)<sup>169</sup> Atli is passive in courtly decisions and can be easily persuaded. The malicious Atli in *Atlakviða* has been replaced, but even if he is still equally condemnable Atli, at least his motives are understandable.

In *Atlamál*, the audience gets to hear more than a single sentence from Atli and he finally gets to display his grievances with the Burgundians, causing more sympathy for his character. Speaking of Gunnarr and Hǫgni, Atli says: “Alliance with splendid men I made – I can’t deny it- I got a monstrous wife, I’ve had no benefit from it...you’ve deprived me of kinsmen, swindled me of property, you sent my sister off to hell, that is what matters most to me.” (/Mægð gat ek mikla, /mákak því leynd, /konu váliga, /knáka ek þess njóta; /hljótt áttum sjaldan, /síz komt í hendr ossar, /firðan mik frændum, /fé opt svikinn, /senduð systur Helju, /slíks ek mest kennumk.”)<sup>170</sup> Atli is able to state his motives and give the audience something to sympathize with him. We even get to see Guðrún being characterized negatively by ‘I got a monstrous wife’ (konu váliga).<sup>171</sup> Atli wants to avenge the death of his sister, Brynhildr. Seeking revenge, or wergild was a justifiable and even honorable act in Germanic society. Perhaps then, Atli is not just being greedy, he just wants the inheritance of his wife, or the wergild for his sister’s death, and vengeance for the Burgundians part in causing her suicide. Did Gunnarr or Hǫgni try to compensate Atli for the death of his sister, Brynhildr and his brother-in-law, Sigurðr? No! But, did Atli offer wergild to Guðrún? Yes! After Atli kills Gunnarr and Hǫgni, he offers to compensate Guðrún for the killing of her brothers, and says: “I’ll comfort you with splendid treasure, with slave-girls, snow-gleaming silver, just as you yourself desire” (/Mani mun ek þik hugga, /mætum ágætum, /silfri snæhvítu /sem þú sjálf vilir).<sup>172</sup> This is set in stark contrast with Gunnarr and Hǫgni. Following the death of Sigurðr and Brynhildr, Gunnarr and Hǫgni seized his wealth and did not offer any compensation for her death. Whereas, following the murder of Gunnarr and Hǫgni, Atli does not gain their wealth and he does offer compensation for their deaths. If anyone is being greedy in *Atlamál*, it is Gunnarr and Hǫgni. Despite Atli’s more generous offer, Guðrún remains ‘treacherous’ to

<sup>169</sup> Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 233 (*Atlamál* 101); Jónas and Ólason, “*Atlamál*,” 400.

<sup>170</sup> Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 225 (*Atlamál* 56); Jónas and Ólason, “*Atlamál*,” 392.

<sup>171</sup> Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 225 (*Atlamál* 56); Jónas and Ólason, “*Atlamál*,” 392. A more accurate translation might be “dangerous.”

<sup>172</sup> Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 228 (*Atlamál* 70); Jónas and Ólason, “*Atlamál*,” 394.

Atli and plays a double game with him.<sup>173</sup> She appears friendly but meanwhile plans something ‘savage.’<sup>174</sup> Guðrún kills her own children, saying to Atli, “I’ve long wanted to cure you of old age” (/lyst várumk þess lengi /at lyfja ykkir elli).<sup>175</sup> Here she is portrayed as being far crueler than in *Atlakviða*; she even makes skull goblets out of the boys’ heads.<sup>176</sup> Atli is a family man who dearly loves his children. When he is murdered, he is not the inebriated man he was in *Atlakviða*.<sup>177</sup> Instead he is attacked while in bed by Högni’s son. The audience of the poet can be reminded of variants where Sigurðr, the most famous of heroes, is also stabbed by a son of Gjúki while in bed.

Guðrún’s role as the avenger is being minimized and she is beginning to take Atli’s role as the antagonist. In the *Atlakviða* Guðrún kills Atli at sword-point,<sup>178</sup> but in the *Atlamál* Högni’s son strikes the death blow.<sup>179</sup> Snorri’s *Prose Edda* also has Atli being killed by Högni’s son.<sup>180</sup> The poet continues to diminish Guðrún as a bad wife.<sup>181</sup> It is even suggested that these tragic events began with Guðrún; Atli scolds Guðrún for betraying Brynhildr who trusted her.<sup>182</sup> In the end, Atli is given a proper funeral,<sup>183</sup> reminiscent of Hector’s funeral of the *Illiad*, where the Greek audience sympathizes with the hero of the enemy, Hector.<sup>184</sup> Although Atli was the antagonist of the tale, at the end of the story *he* is given a grand funeral procession. This more benevolent view of Atli suggests that this poem had less intention of vilifying him in retribution for his actions.

The *Völsunga saga* follows the *Atlamál*, and adds little more. Atli is again seen motivated by gold. He already has vast wealth, as illustrated when his messenger, Vingi, was able to offer extraordinary wealth to Högni and Gunnarr.<sup>185</sup> However, Atli still desires the

<sup>173</sup> Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 228 (*Atlamál* 74,75).

<sup>174</sup> Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 230 (*Atlamál* 85).

<sup>175</sup> Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 229 (*Atlamál* 78); Jónas and Ólason, “*Atlamál*,” 396.

<sup>176</sup> Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 229 (*Atlamál* 82).

<sup>177</sup> Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 231 (*Atlamál* 89).

<sup>178</sup> Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 216 (*Atlakviða* 41).

<sup>179</sup> Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 231 (*Atlamál* 89).

<sup>180</sup> Also, in *Skáldskaparmál*: Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, 101.

<sup>181</sup> Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 232 (*Atlamál* 96).

<sup>182</sup> Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 231 (*Atlamál* 92).

<sup>183</sup> Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 233 (*Atlamál* 103).

<sup>184</sup> The Norse were familiar with the story of the *Illiad*, known to them as the *Trójumanna saga*.

<sup>185</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 97 (*Völsunga saga* 35).

legendary gold of Gnitaheath, a reoccurring theme.<sup>186</sup> He says: “for a long time, I have intended to take your lives [Gunnarr and Hǫgni], to control the gold...”<sup>187</sup>

As mentioned above, another possible motive mentioned for the betrayal of Gunnarr and Hǫgni is revenge for the killing of Sigurðr. Following the death of her husband, Brynhildr, Atli’s sister, commits suicide. It is interesting that the emphasis is on Sigurðr, as he could have easily included Brynhildr as he had done in *Atlamál*.<sup>188</sup> It may be that by avenging Sigurðr, Atli could have a claim to his gold, which is what he really wants. Or could it be that Sigurðr is a Hun,<sup>189</sup> as in the Eddic poem *Sigurðarkviða hin skamma*?

*Þiðreks saga* and the *Nibelungenlied* variants have Grímhildr/Kriemhild become the primary antagonist. Attila is still the most powerful but his position as villain has been shifted to Grímhildr. Her motivation is solely revenge. She is not concerning in acquiring wealth; she wants retribution for the slights against her from her brothers. In the *Nibelungenlied* she persuades Etzel to invite the Burgundians on the pretext that she is lonely. When the Burgundians arrive to Attila’s court they are treated cordially, and are warned by Þiðrekr that Grímhildr cries every day for Sigurðr. She quickly moves to action, but fails to find anyone to aid her, even Attila cannot be turned against his guests (En þo vill hann þeim velfagna. Er þeir hava hann heim sott).<sup>190</sup> Finally, Grímhildr convinces her young son Aldrian to sucker punch Hǫgni in the face, and in retaliation Hǫgni cuts off the boy’s head and throws it to Grímhildr’s breast. This initiates the fight and Attila jumps up and calls out “stand up Huns, all my men, and arm yourselves and kill the Niflungs” (stande vpp [hvner aller minir menn oc [vapne sic oc drepe niflunga).<sup>191</sup> Grímhildr is killed by Þiðrekr for her evil deeds.

*Þiðreks saga* places Grímhildr as the villain of the story, not Atli. Grímhildr is the one who wants revenge for the death of Sigurðr, and we might want to recall here that in *Atlamál* it was Atli who had shown this grievance. She may have been able to persuade Atli to help her deceive the Burgundians but, when it came time to act Atli is unable to betray his guests,

<sup>186</sup> Fafnir’s gold, that Gunnarr and Hǫgni acquired after the death of Sigurðr.

<sup>187</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 96,100 (*Völsunga saga* 35, 38).

<sup>188</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 100 (*Völsunga saga* 38). This is the case in the *Poetic Edda*: It is interesting that he chooses to avenge Sigurðr, and not Brynhildr. Besides the Sigurðr’s gold, could there some connection to Sigurðr’s association as a Hun? Unlikely, as we have already established that the *Völsunga saga* makes no distinction between Hun and Burgundian.

<sup>189</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 89, 92 (*Völsunga saga* 32,33).

<sup>190</sup> Bertelsen, *Þiðriks saga af Bern*, 304.

<sup>191</sup> Bertelsen, *Þiðriks saga af Bern*, 309.



recall the *Lex Burgundionum*. We are consistently able to find Grímhildr moving men to arms against the Niflungs, and at every point Atli is resistant, and unable to break the code of honor. In the *Nibelungenlied* she orders the squires of the Burgundians to be killed. She tries to recruit Þiðrekr, Blodlin, and Attila, which she is unable to do, but she is able to incite Irung to arms. In the *Nibelungenlied* she offers Etzel's vassals land and gold. She attempts to disarm the Niflungs (however taking only their spears and shields), and she is continually shown arming men, urging and even bribing them to fight. It is on her advice that Gunnarr is thrown into the snake tower, and it is she who demands to have the head of Hǫgni. Even Hǫgni who is known for his bad moods and brash actions, acknowledges Grímhildr's "evil acts." In the *Nibelungenlied* it is by her own hand that she kills Gunther and Hagan. Perhaps the most vicious of her acts was to take a hot stick and poke it into the mouths of her brothers to check if they were still alive. Unfortunately for Gislher, he happened to be yet alive, but then died shortly after. This was too much for Þiðrekr, who decried her as a "she-devil"<sup>192</sup>. Atli agreed that she was certainly a devil and has Þiðrekr cut her in two right down the middle, whereas in the *Nibelungenlied* Hidebrand commits the act.

The role of the villain is consistent, treacherous and evil, and the language shows this, whether it is Attila and his Huns, or Grímhildr/Kriemhild. The title of the villain shifts between Atli and Grímhildr/Kriemhild. The tragedy of the saga of the Niflungs is clearly pinned on Grímhildr/Kriemhild in the German variants. It takes every opportunity to cast the responsibility in her hands. The manipulation of Atli to invite the Niflungs to Susa, enticing multiple heroes to betray the hospitality of Attila and attack the Niflungs, the taking of arms from the Niflungs, the sent Aldrian to punch Hǫgni which starts the physical confrontation, the arming and bribing of troops, the killing of poor Gislher, and even in death she dies ingloriously being split in two.

By shifting the blame on Grímhildr, it nearly absolves Attila as responsible for the death of the Burgundians. Attila did agree to lure the Niflungs, but when the it came time to act, he refused. He only called on the attack of the Niflungs after Hǫgni had killed Attila's son. This incited Attila, who is widely known for the love of his sons, to act. Which was an act precipitated by Grímhildr, inciting Aldrian to punch Hǫgni in the face. Attila recognizes the responsibility of Grímhildr after Þiðrekr declares her a she-devil. He then moves to distance

<sup>192</sup> Same vocabulary in *Nibelungenlied*.

himself from her (and so the guilt of the conflict) by having her killed in such a gruesome and dishonorable way. The saga is removing Attila of as much guilt and responsibility as possible and placing it on Grímhildr/Kriemhild. However, what the saga writer can't absolve is Attila's reputation of great greed. This is noteworthy because it is the reason why Grímhildr was able to convince Attila to deceive the Niflungs in the first place.

#### 4.4 Death of Attila

The death of Attila is the final act of the drama. Several Latin texts agree that Attila died in Pannonia in 453 AD. Most modern scholars follow Priscus, and agree that he died from a blood clot on his wedding night with his new Germanic bride. However, just 80 years later Marcellus Comes offers a different version. He states that he was murdered by his bride. The Old Norse literature, which stylistically resemble *fornaldarsögur* (*Atlakviða*, *Atlamál*, *Völsunga saga*) back up Marcellus Comes as does recent scholarship.<sup>193</sup> The Germanic epic romances, which stylistically resemble *riddarasögur*, (*Þiðreks saga*, *Nibelungenlied*) offer a very different version. *Þiðreks saga* mentions Attila's death not in relation to the fall of the Burgundians but as separate account and in a folk tale manner. The *Nibelungenlied* has no information on how Attila died, and why would it? In this version of the story, Attila has been relegated to a secondary character and there is no reason to include the legend of his death. The role of the antagonist had transferred from Attila to Kriemhild, so there is no literary imperative to include how his life resolved.

Attila acquired many fierce enemies that would justifiably like to see his image tarnished to the most degrading status. The poet of the *Atlakviða* is a good example. When Atli returns from slaying the Burgundians, his wife Guðrún receives him “með gyltom kálki/ at reifa giöld rǫgnis” (with gilded cup, /to render a lord his due).<sup>194</sup> “His due,” will be Guðrún's revenge or metaphorically the revenge of all of Attila's enemies. This warrants the actions of Guðrún, and therefore, the poet's audience is able to perceive her as justified when she cooks Atli their own children for a feast. Afterwards Guðrún completes her revenge and stabs Atli

<sup>193</sup> See more: Michael Babcock, *The Night Attila Died* (2005).

<sup>194</sup> Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 215 (Lay of Atli 33); Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, 10 (*Atlakviða* 34).

while he is drunk and incapacitated.<sup>195</sup> She goes on to burn down the hall with all of Atli's retainers, a foreshowing that Attila's empire and decedents will not survive.

This a fitting end to the poem. A reason for this might be found in history, as Ursula Dronke notes, "Burgundian poets, who kept in memory the death of Gundaharius against the Hunnish troops, could have hit upon the happy invention that Attila's death was the retribution for the annihilation of their king."<sup>196</sup> Therefore, there is emphasis on Atli's death as triumphant to appeal to an audience who perceived his death as "retribution." Therefore, Guðrún acts as a champion for the Burgundians, symbolically defeating and gaining revenge from the Huns for their past wrongs to her people. This sentiment could have appealed to the audience of the time.

The remaining accounts treat Attila far more favorably. However, Attila cannot escape his reputation for greed. As was noted in all the texts, Attila is of all men greediest (*allra manna fegiarnastr*).<sup>197</sup> This is how in *Þiðreks saga*, Grímhildr was able to convince him to lure the Niflungs to their death. This is the only instance in the Saga of the Niflungs of *Þiðreks saga* that Attila is shown in a negative light, and it is used to show his greedy nature. If it wasn't for Attila's greed he would not have been swayed by Grímhildr and the Niflungs would have escaped from their deaths. However, to understand this particular shortcoming of Atli we need to go out of the Saga of the Niflungs to the death of Attila that is in a completely different and unrelated chapter.

After the Saga of the Niflungs the author of *Þiðreks saga* moves on to the tale of how Þiðrekr reclaimed his kingdom from his uncle Ermaneric before telling us the downfall of King Attila.<sup>198</sup> However, the seed of his demise had already been sown in the Saga of the Niflungs. Aldrian, son of Hǫgni would avenge his father. *Þiðreks saga's* version of Attila's death is a parable, one of a King's avarice.<sup>199</sup> We are told that, twelve years after the events of the fall of the Niflungs, Attila still desires the treasure of Sigurðr. Aldrian, son of Hǫgni, agrees to take Attila to where the treasure is located. The treasure is inside a mountain, and accordingly, Aldrian seals Attila inside the mountain reminding him: "If you wish to eat barley and drink water out of your need, you can get neither. Drink now gold and silver. You have long thirsted

<sup>195</sup> Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 215,216 (Atlamál 34, 40).

<sup>196</sup> Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, 33.

<sup>197</sup> Bertelsen, *Þiðriks saga af Bern*, 279.

<sup>198</sup> Anachronistic of three separate historical events.

<sup>199</sup> Interestingly Priscus' death of Attila can be seen through a Christian motif of gluttony.

for it" (Villtu nu æta byG oc drecca vatn solltin. Nv mattv hvartki fa. drek nu gvll oc silfr. [þar hævir þic lengi til þyrst).<sup>200</sup> Attila dies and Aldrian becomes an Earl while Þiðrekr takes over the kingdom of Attila.

The story has clearly progressed far beyond legend, and almost into a folktale. A few things are important about the death of Attila. Here we find it as a separate story apart from the Saga of the Niflungs. The second thing to note is the fact that Attila is again portrayed as a greedy king, and it is interesting that the characteristic of greed is still strongly connected to him as a consistent reoccurring theme with Attila in literature and history, as shown above. However, it is all but removed from the Saga of the Niflungs section of the narrative.<sup>201</sup>

Etzel of the *Nibelungenlied* is portrayed in a positive light. He is completely absolved of any responsibility for the tragedy of the betrayal of the Burgundians. Although he is clearly powerful – to the merit of his vassals, otherwise he is inept. He is unable to see Kriemhild's motives, allows discord to prevail in his hall, he is cowardly and unwilling to fight. The Huns are easily defeated and it is up to the Etzel's vassals to display their fighting prowess.

It is odd that the Huns would be so inept. How could this memory be transformed? The Huns had completely dominated continental Europe, easily subjugating the Germanic tribes and forcing the Romans to pay heavy tribute. If the Huns could be so inept and cowardly, how could they retain control over such powerful warriors? How did they gain control over them in the first place? Shouldn't the most powerful warriors hold the most powerful positions? These are very interesting questions that have no conclusive answers. But we may be able to draw some conclusions. This transformation and resulting tradition may reflect those that were occupied by the historic Huns. The Germanic peoples that survived the subjugation of the Huns needed to rationalize their current state of affairs. They set themselves as figures of heroic deeds *and* connected themselves to the prowess of the historical Huns. By this interpretation, the shame of subjugation could be rationalized constructively to fit their views. Therefore, in their minds the might of the Huns is due of the strength of the Germanic peoples under their control.

This also explains why the Attila of the *Nibelungenlied* and *Þiðreks saga* is not responsible for the tragedy. The recipients of these traditions are assuming the legacy of the

<sup>200</sup> Bertelsen, *Þiðriks saga af Bern*, 373, *Þiðreks saga* Ch. 426.

<sup>201</sup> It is only mention once, and when Attila has the chance to attack his guests and collect the treasure he refuses.

historical Huns. It is okay for them to relinquish their fighting prowess to the Germanic people but not dishonor of responsibility for the fall of the Burgundians. That's the Burgundians own fault in the personage of Kriemhild. This could explain why in the *Nibelungenlied* the author or storytellers place full blame on to Kriemhild.

One major element missing to the fall of the Burgundians in the *Nibelungenlied* is the death of Etzel. It doesn't exist. Etzel isn't held responsible for the tragedy. It was Kriemhild who convinced Etzel to invite the Burgundians, and her reason was out of loneliness. She does not try to appeal to Etzel's greed for gold, as in *Piðreks saga*. This is because there is no instance where he is portrayed as greedy, unlike all other accounts! Attila is a courteous man, and his only fault is that he is cowardly. He doesn't fight against the Burgundians himself, but then again, he is an old man with great vassals to fight for him. Therefore, Etzel's fault for being cowardly is not held against him. This could be a reason why the death of Attila is left out of the *Nibelungenlied*, i.e. there is no literary reason for his death to be connected to the story.

## 5. Conclusion

Often, in ancient history we know the dates and outcomes of significant events, but rarely do we know of the personalities and political intrigue behind of those events. The Germanic literature of the fall of the Burgundians legend can provide us some of that lost insight. However, it is important to handle all sources with caution. Historical texts are prone to bias and confusion. Narrative accounts are susceptible to embellishment and outright fiction. Nevertheless, if you consider the transmission of memory from oral history into written legend then it is possible to extract some insight that would otherwise be lost.<sup>202</sup> For instance, it is hard not to read the sources and not notice the striking number of similarities, and at the same time to be intrigued and puzzled by the stark differences. It has been my goal to highlight major themes and compare details that reflect a strong continuity in history and legend. Similarities, I argue support a sense of continuity with history, differences may be attributed to the creative license of the author and provide us with clues such as to when and where that particular telling was created. There is much we may never know conclusively, but it is conceivable to narrow the possibilities and make some strong suggestion.

The background to the decisive encounter between the Burgundians and Huns are in agreement in both the historical accounts and in the Germanic literature. The Huns displaced East Germanic speaking peoples along the northern Black Sea region. The Burgundians fled across the Rhine under this pressure, and had successfully fought off an invading Hun army. The literature accurately remembers this event and the death of Attila's uncle in the battle. It is probable that there was a marriage alliance between the Burgundians and Huns to bring a temporary peace. Locations of the Huns in the Pannonia plain along the Danube and the location of the Burgundians at Worms on the Rhine is also accurate. Variations among the locations in the texts such as the Limfjord in *Atlamál*, or the mention of contemporary figures like Valdamar of Denmark, suggest a pattern of locationization and prestige to those figures. The same goes for, Ragnar Lodbrok who married Áslaug the supposed daughter of Brynhildr and Sigurðr.

<sup>202</sup> Jan Assmann, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," trans. John Czaplicka, *New German Critique* 65, *Cultural History/Cultural Studies* (1995): 130-133.; Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (1992).

The personalities of the narrative also reflect what is known in historical accounts; Attila's abrupt death, his Germanic bride, his greedy and treacherous character traits as seen by his adversaries, yet respected and powerful nature, the love for his children, and the inclusion of his numerous vassals that reflect his vast dominion.<sup>203</sup> Gunnarr is brave and warlike, and is defeated and killed by the Huns, along with the nobility. Ildico was an East Germanic Princess that could reflect the characters Grímhildr, Kriemhild, or Guðrún. Högni has yet to be identified with a historical person, yet he plays a significant role in the story (perhaps his roots are to be found as an Alan vassal lost to history). A further research topic would look more into the other German accounts of Walther and Hagan. They are both vassals who flee the Hunnish court.

Moreover, it is difficult to assess what can be gained from the events of the narrative. For instance, the banquet may represent the death of Attila, whereas the treachery may represent the historical defeat of the Burgundians. The Burgundians were overwhelmingly defeated by the Huns and this is attested in all accounts. However, the Germanic literature seems to be merging two separate events, Attila's death and the defeat of Burgundians, which happened nearly twenty years apart. These events did occur, and how they are perceived, especially concerning Attila, provides us insights on the audience of the varied sources. The *Nibelungenlied* is by far the most favorable depiction of Attila and it is also the text found closest to where Attila died. As you move further away and back in time the texts become increasingly hostile towards Attila. *Þiðreks saga*, *Völsunga saga*, *Atlamál*, and then finally the worst depiction, *Atlakviða*. This makes sense as well, *Atlakviða* goes the furthest to distinguish between the different peoples, whereas the other texts are more concerned with the personal intrigue.<sup>204</sup> It is likely that *Atlakviða* best represents the attitude of those East Germanic peoples that were not under Hunnic dominion but were decisively defeated in 437 AD. Whereas, the Gothic vassals who fought alongside Attila, in numerous battles such as on, the Catalaunian fields, are probably best represented in the *Nibelungenlied*, where the vassals are the strength of the Hunnish forces.

In conclusion, the Migration Period of the 4-5<sup>th</sup> century was perhaps the most drastic event to ever happen to Europe. It was a time of radical change; ethnic, religious, linguistic,

<sup>203</sup> *Þiðrekr* the Ostrogoth, Hagen, Walther the Visigoth, were all vassals of Attila. In reality Attila did have many vassals, including Gothic vassals.

<sup>204</sup> Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux Memoire," 9-18.

political, and continuous warfare. It was in this time the foundations of modern Europe were being created, and it was in the time that the fall of the Burgundians legend occurred. The historical sources of this time are scarce and fragmented. I believe a significant amount of insight can be gained when analyzing the legendary material not as literature but as oral memory transformed into a written history.<sup>205</sup> As shown here, there is a remarkable continuity among the various literature and historical record. The sources covered here concerning of fall of the Burgundians legend represent only a fraction of the heroic literature. Much remains, still hidden from students and researchers behind several language barriers and in various archives, yet to be compared.

<sup>205</sup> H. Munro Chadwick, *The Heroic Age*, 137. "Now we have to consider certain cases in which elements undoubtedly historical are believed to be blended with myth."



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