

*Res, Artes et Religio*  
ESSAYS IN HONOUR OF RUDOLF SIMEK

EDITED BY  
Sabine Heidi Walther, Regina Jucknies,  
Judith Meurer-Bongardt, Jens Eike Schnall

IN COLLABORATION WITH  
Brigitta Jaroschek, Sarah Onkels

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# THE ‘DRAGONISH’ BRYNHILD IN *GUÐRÚNARKVIÐA I*: A HISTORICAL COUNTERPART IN FRANKISH HAGIOGRAPHY

Veronka Szóke

Dipartimento di Lettere, Lingue e Beni culturali, Università di Cagliari

## INTRODUCTION

The Nibelung cycle enjoyed widespread popularity “over the entire Germanic area in the Middle Ages between at least the ninth and the fourteenth centuries,”<sup>1</sup> and its stories and characters have featured in literature and the arts of the Northern countries up to our days. The events concerning Brynhild and her interactions with Sigurd and the other characters of the cycle are conveyed in their most complete version in the mid-thirteenth-century *Völsunga saga*, by some heroic poems handed down in the *Poetic Edda*, and by a summary in the *Snorra Edda*, which only provides the

most important elements of the plot. In two eddic poems, whose editorial titles indicate the hero as the protagonist, Brynhild dominates the action (*Sigurðarkviða in forna* or *Brot* [hereafter *Brot*], and *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* [hereafter *Sigurðarkviða*]). The eddic anthology also includes a fairly large group of elegiac poems<sup>2</sup>—*Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta* (hereafter *Guðrúnarkviða I*), *Guðrúnarkviða önnor* (hereafter *Guðrúnarkviða II*), *Oddrúnargrátr*, and *Helreið Brynhildar*—in which Brynhild’s and

1 Grimstad and Wakefield, “Monstrous Mates,” 238.

2 An overview of the issue of the elegiac genre in the North falls beyond the scope of this article; for a summary of the main issues related to the subject and the most important scholarly contributions thereon, see Andersson, “Is There a History,” 193–202.



also Gudrun's feelings and reactions to Sigurd's murder are elaborated upon. The present analysis will focus on one of these late poems, *Gudrúnarkviða I*, in order to reflect on how it represents Brynhild's anger blended with grief and on the origin of the unusual 'dragonish' imagery used by the poet to express the woman's feelings at Sigurd's death.

According to Andersson, "rather than trying to imagine Brynhild as a late accretion to the Sigurd legend, we may more easily imagine that Sigurd's adventures were expanded because of a flattering association with such a powerful heroine."<sup>3</sup> Brynhild's ups and downs also surface in the Norwegian compilation centred on Thidrek of Bern known as *Þiðreks saga af Bern* (hereafter *Þiðreks saga*). Dating back to the middle of the thirteenth century, the saga represents a mixed version of the Nibelung narrative, in which source material of German, Southern provenance was adapted to the Norse cultural milieu. Parts of this Saga are indeed very close to the *Nibelungenlied* (c. 1200), the fullest poetic account of the Nibelung material in German context.

## THE HISTORICAL BRUNHILD

The roots of Brynhild's character are to be looked for in one of the leading women of Merovingian history, Brunhild, daughter of the Visigothic king Athanagild, who married Sigibert of Metz, king of Austrasia, in 567. Brunhild played an influential role first

as Sigibert's spouse and then as a regent for her son Childebert and her grandsons Theudebert and Theuderic. She was also a supporter of the Church and founder of monastic centres. Her correspondence with Pope Gregory the Great also reveals that she backed the Augustinian mission to England.<sup>4</sup>

The second half of the sixth century was an age of treacherous plots and murders within the Merovingian royal family, connected with the rules of succession and partitioning of the kingdoms.<sup>5</sup> Brunhild's marriage with Sigibert was short since he was murdered in a plot involving his half-brother Chilperic of Soissons, king of Neustria, and, according to Bishop Gregory of Tours's *Decem libri historiarum* (hereafter *Histories*, 575–594),<sup>6</sup> his wife Fredegund. The Gallo-Roman bishop wrote his *Histories* while Brunhild was alive and his portrayal of the queen is essentially positive, constructed by means of her juxtaposition to her corrupt and evil rival Fredegund. Gregory's representation would be turned upside down in the major historiographical works of the later Merovingian and Carolingian age, that is, in the *Chronicles* attributed to Fredegar (c. 660)<sup>7</sup> and later in

3 Andersson, *The Legend*, 80.

4 For a very informative presentation of Queen Brunhild, see Nelson, "Queens as Jezebels," 39–45 and Wood, *Merovingian Kingdoms*, 126–36. See also Thomas, "The 'Second Jezebel,'" 63–73, 75–80.

5 Wood, *Merovingian Kingdoms*, 130–36, 194–97.

6 Gregory of Tours, *Libri historiarum X*, ed. Krusch and Levison, IV.51 on p. 188; see also VII.14 on p. 335.

7 *Chronicarum quae dicuntur Fredegarii Scholastici libri IV cum continuationibus*, ed. Kursch (hereafter referred to as *Chronicles*).

the anonymous *Liber historiae Francorum* (c. 727)<sup>8</sup>. According to Gregory, the murder of Sigibert marked the beginning of hostilities between the two powerful women, which in the legend became the rivalry between Brynhild/Brünhild and Gudrun/Kriemhild, and a matter of fierce revenge in the *Liber historiae*.<sup>9</sup> The other major subject of the Nibelung cycle, that is, the downfall of the Burgundians/Giukungs, probably represents a literary elaboration of the historical destruction of the Burgundian kingdom in the fifth century by the Huns, and the subsequent massacre of the Burgundians.<sup>10</sup>

Brunhild also managed to preserve her position of power after her son Childebert's death by supporting her grandsons Theudebert and Theuderic, who obtained Austrasia and Burgundy, respectively. However, Theudebert then expelled her from Austrasia, and she took refuge at Theuderic's court, where she exercised a marked influence on Theuderic by also preventing him from marrying; the presence of a legitimate wife at court would have undermined her position. Her final attempt to hold on to power after Theuderic's sudden death failed, since in 613 Chlothar II had her murdered in his fight for the unification of the Merovingian kingdoms.

8 *Liber historiae Francorum*, ed. Krusch (hereafter referred to as *Liber historiae*).

9 *Liber historiae* 30–31.292–93; 32.296. On the relationship between the two women in Gregory's *Histories*, see Dailey, *Queens, Consorts*, 118–40 and Dumézil, *La reine*, 406.

10 Schütte, "The Nibelungen Legend," 291–327.

## BRYNHILD'S PORTRAYAL IN THE LITERARY SOURCES: AN OVERVIEW

In the Norse tradition, Brynhild's identity and characterisation are as complex as the circumstances in which her fate entwined with that of Sigurd.<sup>11</sup> In some sources, Brynhild overlaps with the valkyrie who, for an act of insubordination, was punished by Odin with magic sleep and relegated to a hall surrounded by a wall of flame. Whilst this identification is explicit in the *Snorra Edda* (*Skáldskaparmál*, 41 and 47–48) and *Völsunga saga* (21.35),<sup>12</sup> it is only hinted at implicitly in some of the heroic poems in the eddic collection; *Fáfnismál* labels the sleeping valkyrie as *sigrdrif* "giver of victory" (44.5),<sup>13</sup> a compound that recalls the proper name Sigdrifa that occurs in a prose section in *Sigrdrífomál*. The overlapping between Brynhild and Sigdrifa is only witnessed directly in the *Völsunga saga*, and such identification was probably favoured by Brynhild's proclivity to warfare and martial life, epitomised by her oath to marry only the man who proved to be the bravest of all (*Sigrdrífomál* 4 prose). In *Gripisspá*, however, Brynhild, introduced as Budli's daughter (27.5), is distin-

11 For an overview of Brynhild's legend, see Gildersleeve, "Brynhild in Legend," 345–46, 349–54, and Andersson's more recent and complete monograph, *The Legend*.

12 The text of the Saga is quoted from the edition and translation by Finch, and the indication of chapter number is followed by that of page number.

13 Eddic poems are quoted from Gustav Neckel and Hans Kuhn's edition, with reference to stanza number followed, if needed, by the number of line(s), and their translation is taken from Larrington's *Poetic Edda*.

guished from the Odinic valkyrie (15–16 and 27–31). This poem probably witnesses a primary stage in which the valkyrie and Brynhild were two discrete characters.<sup>14</sup> *Grípisspá* also points at Brynhild's connection with the Huns, which only emerges in Scandinavian poetic and prose works, where Budli and Atli are Brynhild's father and brother, respectively.<sup>15</sup> In *Brot* (8.1–2; 14.1–2) and *Sigurðarkviða* (15.1; 15.3; 30.1–2; 32.4–6), Brynhild's identity is defined exclusively through these relationships, with no reference to supernatural features.

The conundrums connected with the circumstances of Brynhild's first meeting and interactions with Sigurd are partly related to the issue of identity. Some of our texts bear witness to<sup>16</sup> or implicitly hint at their first encounter, when the two young people make a pledge to marry no one else (the so-called 'prior betrothal motif').<sup>17</sup> This motif is, how-

ever, missing from some other sources, such as *Brot*, the oldest Norse poem on Brynhild. The first encounter between Brynhild and Sigurd, or the second one (if there was a 'prior betrothal'), takes place as a consequence of Sigurd's arrival at King Giuki's court, where he swears an oath of brotherhood with the Giukungs Gunnar and Hogni. According to the *Völsunga saga* (27.46; 28.47; 29.48–50; 30.52) and *Grípisspá* (33 and 35), a magical potion makes Sigurd forget his betrothal to Brynhild and marry Gudrun, Giuki's daughter. He then helps Gunnar to woo Brynhild, and in order to do so, he crosses the wall of flames in Gunnar's stead by exchanging shapes. In the context of this deceitful plan, Sigurd sleeps alongside Brynhild in Gunnar's shape, placing a sword between them so as to preserve her virginity for Gunnar. However, treachery is bound to lead to ominous consequences: when Brynhild learns about the true circumstances of her wooing, she takes on the role of the avenger: she has Sigurd killed by the Giukungs and then commits suicide.<sup>18</sup>

14 Andersson, *The Legend*, 238–39. *Helreið Brynhildar* also shows the complexity of the issue of identification: Brynhild tells her story of the Odinic valkyrie (8–10), but she is also referred to as a princess (4.6). On the basis of her account, the anonymous valkyrie referred to in *Grípisspá* (15), *Sigrdrífomál* (pr, 1–2), and *Fáfnismál* (42–44) is to be identified with Brynhild; see von See, *Kommentar*, 5: 505, 517.

15 *Grípisspá* 27; *Helreið Brynhildar* 4.1–2. See also *Skáldskaparmál* 41 and 47, and *Völsunga saga* 25.42; 26.44; 29.48. On this connection, see von See, *Kommentar*, 6: 269.

16 The most detailed account of the betrothal is provided by the *Völsunga saga* (22.40; 25.43–44; 27–28.46–47; 29.50; 31.56).

17 *Sigurðarkviða* 3.5–8; 40.1–2; see also *Helreið Brynhildar* 6. As in *Sigurðarkviða*, in the *Þiðreks saga* Sigurd knows the way to Brynhild's castle (*Þiðreks saga* 226.306); on his arrival, the woman is cold to him, since at their

first meeting they had sworn not to marry anyone else (*Þiðreks saga* 227.307). See also *Nibelungenlied* (331, 378). The *Nibelungenlied* is quoted from the edition of Bartsch and de Boor. Andersson discusses in detail the so-called 'prior betrothal motif,' which he considers of German origin (*The Legend*, 28–29, 31–33, 47–49, 143–46).

18 Suicide is the main innovation in *Sigurðarkviða* (42–43; 47–48, and 65–71), and it is also attested in *Helreið Brynhildar* (initial prose) and in *Oddrúnargrátr* 19; see also *Skáldskaparmál* 41, and *Völsunga saga* 30.50–51; 32–33.60–61.

There are several important differences between the *Nibelungenlied* and the Norse legend with reference to the initial events involving Siegfried (Sigurd), Kriemhild (Gudrun), and Brünhild (Brynhild). The motif of the prior betrothal is not used, and the marriage between Siegfried and Kriemhild only takes place after he has managed to woo Brünhild in Gunther's stead, which implies contests proving physical superiority since in this source Brünhild is characterised by supernatural strength.<sup>19</sup> During a quarrel between the two sisters-in-law, Brünhild finds out that Siegfried, and not Gunther, was her first lover. Such allegations publicly made against Brünhild humiliate her and disrupt social order and conventions. It is therefore the powerful vassal Hagen who avenges the wrongdoing by orchestrating Siegfried's murder. The ominous quarrel between the two powerful women thus results in the death of Siegfried and the massacre of the Burgundians, which is dealt with in the second part of the poem.

The reason for Siegfried's killing is straightforward in the *Nibelungenlied*. Kriemhild's revelation wounds Brünhild's pride, which is avenged by Hagen; Brünhild, who disappears from the plot after Siegfried's death, is not the instigator of the murder.<sup>20</sup> The role of Siegfried's avenger is taken on by

Kriemhild, who is a constant presence in the second half of the poem.

In the Norse sources, the motivations behind Sigurd's murder are more elaborate, as are Brynhild's feelings about the event and her reactions to it. When she finds out that the Giukungs and Sigurd had wronged her by exchanging their shape and thus preventing her from marrying Sigurd, the best of men, she sets about avenging their duplicity and exacts Sigurd's killing, which is a major feature in several Norse sources.<sup>21</sup> Alongside her anger, her desire for revenge is also determined by a strong feeling of jealousy, rendered in the most vivid way in *Sigurðarkviða* (6–9), and surfacing again in *Brot* (3) and in the *Völsunga saga* (30.51; 32.57).<sup>22</sup> As the poet of *Sigurðarkviða* effectively shows, Brynhild is in the grasp of feelings she no longer masters (19). Private motivations and emotions mix with practical preoccupations, according to *Brot*, where Brynhild justifies Sigurd's murder by contending that his military superiority and power represented a threat to Giukung leadership (8–9, and 10.5–8).

Brynhild's character is further outlined in the depiction of her reactions to Sigurd's death which she herself had advocated. In *Brot*, she first laughs triumphantly (10.1–4),

19 *Nibelungenlied* 438.4; 449–450.4; 636–639; 682.1; cf. *Þiðreks saga* 228.308–09.

20 However, Brünhild expresses satisfaction when she learns about Siegfried's death: *Nibelungenlied* (1100).

21 *Brot* 2; *Grípissþá* 45.5–8; 47, 49–50; *Sigurðarkviða* 10–11; 27.7–8; 40–41; *Oddrúnargrátr* 19.1–4; *Skáldskaparmál* 41, and 48, and *Völsunga saga* 32, and 57. In the *Þiðreks saga*, Brynhild incites her brother-in-law Hogni to kill Sigurd (346.471).

22 A hint at such feelings may also be traced in Brünhild's sadness at Kriemhild's marriage to Siegfried in the *Nibelungenlied*; see Andersson, *The Legend*, 191.

thereby expressing her satisfaction over the evil deed, but later on she bursts out crying (14–15). Overwhelmed by grief, she confesses that she had made a false allegation about Sigurd's oathbreaking (16.9–12, and 17–19) and she then commits suicide (concluding prose). A similar gap between feelings and external somatic signals and indicia also characterises *Sigurðarkviða*: Brynhild laughs when she hears how Gudrun wails at Sigurd's death (30), but her laughter contrasts with her livid face (“hvíta lit,” 31.8).<sup>23</sup> However, the blackening of her character does not leave much room for sympathy: she is labelled as “heiptgiorn kona” a “woman bent on wickedness” (31.4) and “feikna foeðir” (31.9; “engenderer of evil”),<sup>24</sup> who “æ borin óvilja til | mǫrgom manni at móðtrega” (45.9–12; “was ever born to bring misery | and grief of heart to many a man”).

Her representation grows even gloomier in *Guðrúnarkviða I*, in which “the southern distaste [for Brynhild] has left a clearer mark.”<sup>25</sup> The stanzas in which she is on stage are few, but they convey negative associations and charges, notwithstanding the

woman's attempt to justify her misery and its gruesome consequences by blaming her brother Atli. She is defined as “armr vætrr” (“wretched creature,” 22.7) and hated by everyone (“þióðleið,” 24.3). Her responsibility in the death of many a man of worth is clearly stated: “urðr ǫðlinga hefir þú æ verið; | rekr þik alda hvern illrar skepno, | sorg sára siau konunga, ok vinspell vífa mest” (24.5–12; “The nemesis of princes you have always been; | every wave of ill fate drives you along, | wounding sorrow of seven kings, the greatest ruination for women's loved ones!”). A further negative feature, hinted at implicitly, suggests that Brynhild's love for Sigurd also stemmed from her yearning for his gold. In the poem, Gudrun refers to the wooing of Brynhild at Atli's court (22.5–8), where both Brynhild and her brother first caught a glimpse of the treasure Sigurd had just obtained after killing Fafnir (25–26). The references to the wooing at Atli's court and the treasure presupposes the plot described in more detail in *Sigurðarkviða* (34–41), with which the poem shares the greatest number of verbal parallels.<sup>26</sup> The plot sees Atli force Brynhild to get married, and Brynhild fall in love with Sigurd when she first notices him at Atli's court carrying Fafnir's booty. Although the somewhat conflictual nature of these elements and the blurred story line make it difficult to reconcile these aspects and their narrative consequences, what is rel-

23 The blend of grief, anger and desire for revenge is also witnessed in the *Völsunga saga* (31.54–55; 32.57; 32.59).

24 Also *Sigurðarkviða* 27.7–8: “ein veldr Brynhildr ollu þǫlvi” (“Brynhild alone has caused all this evil”). See also her characterisation in *Helreið Brynhildar* 4: “Þú vart, Brynhildr, Buðla dóttir, | heilli versto í heim borin; | þú hefir Gjúka um glatit bornom | ok búi þeira brugðit góðo” (“Brynhild, Budli's daughter, | you were born as the worst luck in the world; | you have ruined the children of Giuki | and destroyed their good dwelling-places”).

25 Andersson, *The Legend*, 248.

26 Von See, *Kommentar*, 6: 264–5. On the verbal parallels, see von See, *Kommentar*, 6: 202–03, 212, 217, 219.

evant for our analysis is Brynhild's interest in Sigurd's gold.<sup>27</sup>

The most impressive aspect of the poem, however, is its concluding imagery which captures and effectively conveys Brynhild's boundless anger mixed with grief as she looks at Sigurd's corpse.<sup>28</sup> The intensity and nature of her emotional turmoil are signalled by her representation as an almost supernatural, 'dragonish' figure,<sup>29</sup> with fire burning in her eyes and venom spewing from her mouth as she stands by one of the columns in the hall, gathering all her strength (*Guðrúnarkviða I 27*): "Stóð hon und stoð, strengði hon elvi; brann Brynhildi Buðla dóttur, | eldr ór augom, eitri fnæsti, | er hon sár um leit á Sigurði" ("She stood by the pillar, she summoned up all her strength; | from Brynhild, daughter of Budli, | fire burned from her eyes, she snorted out poison, | when she looked at the wounds upon Sigurd"). These physical indicia usually characterise dragons, snakes or other monstrous beings, as is shown by the close parallel with the description of Fafnir lying on his treasure in *Fáfnismál*: "Eitri ek fræsta er ek á arfi lá | miklom mins fõður"<sup>30</sup> (18; "Poison I snort-

ed when I lay upon the mighty inheritance of my father"). Fiery eyes also characterise the monstrous Fenrir in *Gylfaginning*.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, apart from dragons, the spitting of venom is associated with supernatural beings such as Grímr, in *Göngu-Hrólf's saga*, a man who takes on a dragon's shape to kill his enemies by means of fire and poison. Another remarkable example is provided by Thor disguised as Freyja in *Þrymskviða*: as the giant Thrym lifts his bride's veil to kiss her, he notes: "þikki mér ór augom eldr of brenna" (27.7–8; "It seems to me that fire is burning from them [Freyja's eyes]").

Brynhild's 'wütende Trauer'<sup>32</sup> in stanza 27 is also to be read in the light of Gudrun's frame of mind and reactions, which are dealt with in a more detailed way in the poems: Gudrun first experiences emotional paralysis as she stands by her dead husband and does not perform any of the acts that are part of

also returns in the *Völsunga saga* (20.32): "ek [Fafnir] lá á arfi míns bróður, of svá fnýsta ek eitri alla vega frá mér á brott at engi þorði at koma í nánd mér" ("I couched on my brother's inheritance, and I breathed out poison all around me so that no one dared to come near me"). On the verbal parallels with *Fáfnismál*, see von See, *Kommentar*, 6: 217, 219, 276.

27 This aspect is also conveyed in the *Völsunga saga* 30.51: "ek ann þér eigi hans at njóta né gullsins mikla" ("I grudge your enjoyment of him, and of all the gold"). On the issue, see also von See, *Kommentar*, 6: 203, 208.

28 See also *Grípisspá* 49.1; 49.3: "reiði and oftregi."

29 Grimstad and Wakefield, "Monstrous Mates," 243–45.

30 On these physical features, see von See, *Kommentar*, 6: 206, 211, 219, 275. See also Sigurd's answer in the next stanza (19.1–3): "Inn fráni ormr, þú gorðir fræs mikla | ok gatz harðan hug" ("Strong serpent, you snorted great blasts | and you hardened your heart"). The reference

31 *Gylfaginning* 51.50: "Eldar brenna, a ór augum hans ok nqsum" ("Flames will burn from its eyes and nostrils"). And the serpent Midgard "blæss svá eitrinu at hann dreifir lopt qll ok lqg, ok er hann allógurligr" ("The Midgard serpent will spit so much poison that it will bespatter all the sky and sea"); Faulkes, *Snorri Sturluson*, 53. For further examples, see von See, *Kommentar*, 6: 276.

32 Von See, *Kommentar*, 6: 206, 210.

the mourning ritual:<sup>33</sup> she does not cry or utter words of lamentation (*Guðrúnarkviða I* initial prose, 1–2, and stanzas 5 and 11). Some noble men and women “adorned with gold” try to comfort her, but their words are of no avail (3). Two women, Giaflaug, Giuki’s sister, and Herborg, queen of Hunland, also try to ease Gudrun’s unnatural condition by recounting the most grievous experiences of their lives (4 and 6–10), but even this does not elicit any reaction from her (5 and 11). Finally, Giuki’s daughter, Gullrond, solves the impasse as she unveils Sigurd’s body and has Gudrun look at and touch the corpse (12–13). This confrontation with the loss of her beloved husband physically brings about the desired-for change in the widow, and this is rendered in physical and physiological terms: her hair is loose, her face turns red and her cheeks become wet with tears, and then she begins to cry so violently that the geese in the yard respond to their lady’s distress by cackling (14–16).<sup>34</sup> Tears are followed by words; after praising Sigurd<sup>35</sup> and

underlining her vulnerable condition as a widow (18–19), Gudrun’s attention shifts to those whom she considers responsible for Sigurd’s murder, that is her brothers Gunnar and Hogni (20); she foretells their downfall since they had violated their oath to Sigurd (21).<sup>36</sup> Finally, she also evokes the wooing of Brynhild (22 and 24), which had generated so much evil, thereby introducing her into the story.

Apart from the intertextual connections and parallels in motifs and wording that can be found between the descriptions of Brynhild and those referring to the monstrous creatures quoted above, much attention has been devoted to the carefully devised structuring of the poem.<sup>37</sup> The scene in which Gudrun looks at Sigurd’s corpse is parallel to that referring to Brynhild’s catching sight of the man’s wounds. This is the moment when Gudrun’s unnatural emotional condition is unblocked and she starts to get better, whereas Brynhild’s reaction at the sight of his wounds is almost monstrous. On seeing Sigurd’s now-dimmed eyes (14.5–6)—once shining epitome of his heroic status—her eyes become fiery (27.5). The artistry with which the final stanza is introduced is also noteworthy: Brynhild evokes the first time she saw Sigurd at Atli’s court: “eld á iofri ormbeðs litom, | þess hefi ek gangs goldit síðan” (26.3–6; “we [Brynhild and Atli] saw

33 *Guðrúnarkviða II* features a similar situation: Gudrun spent a night in the forest sitting over Sigurd, unable to weep or clasp her hands (2 and 11–12). According to von See, *Kommentar*, 6: 204–05, this motif could have been taken from *Atlakviða* 38, where Gudrun does not cry when she learns about the death of her sons and her brothers (201). Gudrun’s emotional disruption may be compared with that of Egil after the death of his son Bodvar in the *Egils saga* (78).

34 A similar reaction is also recorded in *Sigurðarkviða* 29.7–8, where Gudrun clapped her hands so violently at Sigurd’s death that “the goblets in the corner echoed her | and the geese in the meadow cackled in reply” (von See, *Kommentar*, 6: 202).

35 See also *Guðrúnarkviða II* 2.

36 See also *Guðrúnarkviða II* 7–9; *Brot* 11.

37 These features are analysed in detail by Andersson, and in von See, *Kommentar*, 6: 196, 200–02, 205, 209–10, 216–21.

the fire of the serpent's bed shine on the prince; | I have paid for this journey since then"). The kenning for gold paves the way for the monstrous image that closes the poem.<sup>38</sup> However, further insight into the image of the 'dragonish' Brynhild could probably be gained from the characterisation of her historical prototype in Merovingian hagiographical and historiographical writings.

### THE REPRESENTATION OF BRUNHILD IN MEDIEVAL SOURCES

Some kind of justification was needed for the gruesome assassination of Brunhild in 613, which Fredegar described in great detail in his *Chronicles* (IV.42, on p. 142). Chlothar of Neustria therefore soon backed the intense propaganda that aimed at vilifying Brunhild who represented the old regime. This led to her being charged with the persecution of monks and members of the clergy and held responsible for the murder of many illustrious men. As Dumézil points out, the ideological bias against her caused a paradox which saw Chlothar adopt several of Brunhild's political decisions and choices on the one hand, while succumbing to the propaganda that blackened her reputation and transformed her into an evil, almost monstrous being, on the other hand.<sup>39</sup>

The hagiographical writings in which Chlothar's political agenda clearly expresses itself are the *vitae* of Desiderius, Bishop of Vienne, and of the Irish monk Columbanus, the founder of several renowned monastic centres like Annegray, Luxeuil and Bobbio. King Sisebut of Toledo's *Vita Desiderii* (c. 621) focuses on Desiderius's life, miracles and martyrdom. Desiderius is also the subject of the anonymous *Passio Desiderii*, which, though dated to the eighth century,<sup>40</sup> according to Wood, was actually written soon after Brynhild's assassination in 613.<sup>41</sup> The *Passio Desiderii* was one of the sources used by Jonas of Bobbio in writing his *Vita Columbani abbatis discipulorumque eius* (hereafter *Vita Columbani*, c. 639–643), one of the most influential saints' *vitae* of the seventh century.

In his *Vita Desiderii* (16.635), King Sisebut aimed to strengthen his political relationship with Chlothar by providing a work that painted a negative picture of Brunhild and blamed her for all the tensions in the relationships between Visigothic Spain and Gaul. This objective implied numerous manipulations of the historical background of Desiderius's life, and an entire shifting of the responsibilities for his exile and martyrdom to Brunhild and her grandson Theuderic, of whom she had been an evil counsellor.<sup>42</sup>

38 Von See, *Kommentar*, 6: 209–11, 218, 243.

39 Dumézil, *La reine*, 392, 398, 400–01. On Brunhild's vilification, see also Thomas, "The 'Second Jezebel,'" 169.

40 Fontaine, "King Sisebut," 102.

41 Wood, "Forgery," 373–75; Dumézil follows Wood's dating (*La reine*, 466).

42 According to Fredegar, Desiderius's exile and martyrdom were contrived by Brunhild and Bishop Aridius of Lyons (*Chronicles* IV.24, on p. 130; IV.32, on p. 133).



What is markedly interesting in the context of the present analysis is that these hagiographical works set off a neat process of demonisation of Brunhild, who is represented as a close associate and instrument of the devil, and characterised mainly by evil emotions and feelings. In Sisebut's work this connection also concerns Theuderic, but the author places a greater emphasis on the woman's wicked nature.<sup>43</sup> As Fontaine puts it, "the Devil comes onto the stage"<sup>44</sup> in the *Vita Desiderii*, and Brunhild is depicted as "a woman who enthused over the worst vices and was a great friend to the wicked" ("Fautricem pessimarum artium, malis amicissimam," 4.631).<sup>45</sup> According to Sisebut, Desiderius's death sentence resulted from his critical views of Brunhild's and Theuderic's sinful ways of life and their way of ruling the kingdom.<sup>46</sup> But his warnings went unheard and their moral corruption further increased, which is effectively referred to as the devil

entering Brunhild's and Theuderic's hearts<sup>47</sup> and taking hold of them completely, so that they decree Desiderius's death by stoning.<sup>48</sup>

While Desiderius's reproaches in Sisebut's *Vita* are generic, the *Passio Desiderii* claims that the holy man objected to Theuderic's adulterous relationships (8.640–41), a subject that is also dealt with in the *Vita Columbani*, where Jonas represents Brunhild and her grandson Theuderic as fierce enemies of both Desiderius and of Columbanus (*Vita Columbani* I.27, on p. 214): "Theudericus atque Brunichildis non solum adversum Columbanum insaniebant, verum etiam et contra sanctissimum Desiderium adversabantur" ("Theuderic and Brunhild were not only raging against Columbanus but they were also persecuting the most holy

43 On Sisebut's demonisation of Brunhild, see Thomas, "The 'Second Jezebel,'" 109–13. On the juxtaposition between Desiderius and the forces of the Evil represented by Theuderic and Brunhild, see also Favaro Esteves, "Evil and Politics," 9–14.

44 Fontaine, "King Sisebut," 104.

45 The translation of the excerpts is taken from Fear, *Lives of the Visigothic Fathers*.

46 Sisebut, *Vita Desiderii* 15.635: "more nempe prophético clangore tubae personuit seseque totum pro depellendis erroribus eorum invexit, quatenus Deo faceret proprios quos diabolus alienos" ("[Desiderius] sounded forth the trumpet blast in the manner of the prophets and wholeheartedly took himself off to drive out all their sins in order that he might make God's people those whom the devil had made strangers to him").

47 Sisebut, *Vita Desiderii* 15.635: "obsidebatque pectus eorum truculentior hostis, et captivos in sua dictione tenebat callidissimus serpens; [...] Satiati tamen de eius labilibus poculis, coeperunt contra Dei famulum rabidos latrare sermones et verbis strepentibus comminantes sporcissimas evomere voces" ("The enemy besieged their hearts all the more fiercely and the cunning serpent held them captive in his power. [...] Sated with his [the devil's] lethal drafts, they began to bark out rabid rantings against the servant of God [Desiderius], spewing forth their disgusting words in raucous tones").

48 Sisebut, *Vita Desiderii* 16.635: "Huius inlibantam inimicus constantiam humanitatis aspiciens, pectora qui nunquam Brunigildis ac Theudericus deseruit, totum ut in proprio se domicilio miscuit modoque imperativo in suum magis exitium eos sibi debitum impulit." ("The enemy of mankind, on seeing his [Desiderius's] steadfast constancy, occupied completely the hearts of Brunhild and Theuderic which he never left, treating them as if they were his own home, and in imperious tones drove them all the more to the doom.")

Desiderius”).<sup>49</sup> The use of the verb *insanio* (to act like a madman, to rage) in this context is telling, and reinforces the devilish characterisation since it refers to a boundless raging that has almost inhuman features. In an article on emotions in the writings of Gregory of Tours and Gregory the Great, Rosenwein notes that the devil is a being with feelings “possessed mainly by envy,” but “often, to be sure, [it] just rages (*saevit*), which is not an emotion but rather a form of bestial ferocity.”<sup>50</sup>

The apparent success of Columbanus’s exhortations to Theuderic to renounce his sinful ways caused the devil to react through Brunhild (*Vita Columbani* I.18, on p. 187): “*Mentem Brunichildis aviae, secundae ut erat Zezabelis, antiquus anguis adiit eamque contra virum Dei stimulatam superbiae aculeo excitat*” (“The ancient serpent entered the mind of his grandmother, Brunhild—a second Jezebel—and aroused her by the sting of pride against the man of God [Columbanus]”). Apart from the devilish connection, Jonas also uses an Old Testament paradigm to characterise Brunhild by equating her to Queen Jezebel, Ahab’s wife,<sup>51</sup> the paradigm of an evil woman with a corrupting influence. Nelson points out that her sin is a sin

of pride, “but it is pride of a specific kind, which fears to lose long-held status, power and wealth, and it has a specific manifestation of hostility to the *vir Dei* [Columbanus] whose moralising threatens that position.”<sup>52</sup>

Brunhild is depicted as being driven by a strong will for power, and her description contains again a reference to rage (*Vita Columbani* I.28, on p. 219). As Peyroux notes, “Brunhild [...] is described as being preternaturally savage and implacably wrathful, continuously ‘*furens*’ to Columbanus’s steadfast adherence to godly commands.”<sup>53</sup> This feature is pointed out on the occasion of an argument between Brynhild and Columbanus, who had refused to bless Theuderic’s children because they were born from Theuderic’s concubines: Brunhild’s rage was so intense that it could not be appeased even by the miracle that came about when Columbanus left the royal building (“*nec tamen misere feminae furorem conpescuit*” “it [the miracle] did not, however, abate the fury of the wretched woman,” *Vita Columbani* I.19, on p. 188), and retaliation followed his refusal. Theuderic relapsed into his old habits, and Columbanus threatened him with excommunication. As a result, Brunhild took on the role of instigator against Columbanus, casting doubts about the rightness of his Rule in the bishops’ minds (*Vita Columbani* I.19, on pp. 189–90). This conflict resulted in the holy man’s temporary exile to

49 The translation of the excerpts quoted is taken from *Life of Columbanus*, trans. O’Hara and Wood.

50 Rosenwein, “Even the Devil,” 5.

51 1 King 16–21; 2 King 9: 30–37. The *Vita Desiderii* (2.638) is the first work that equates Brunhild with Jezebel. This connection is later resumed in Fredegar’s *Chronicles* (IV.36, on p. 135). On the subject, see, Nelson, “Queens as Jezebels,” 57–60, and Thomas, “The ‘Second Jezebel,’” 85, 90–91, 93.

52 Nelson, “Queens as Jezebels,” 58.

53 Peyroux, “Gertrude’s *furore*,” 314.

Besançon (*Vita Columbani* I.19, on p. 191). When he returned to Luxeuil, Brunhild and Theuderic “atrociorebus irae aculeis stimulantur” (“are struck by yet worse sensations of anger,” *Vita Columbani* I.20, on p. 193)<sup>54</sup> and become determined to make him leave the kingdom. Jonas makes no mention of the problematic relationship between Columbanus and the Gallic bishops in his *Vita* because of the controversy over the date of Easter (Columbanus followed the Irish reckoning), the criticisms of some aspects of his too strict and rigorous Rule, and also on account of the dissension surfacing among Columbanus’s monks themselves.<sup>55</sup>

Both Sisebut and Jonas considerably manipulated the representation of Brunhild and blamed her and her fickle grandson for the persecution of holy men, for Desiderius’s martyrdom, and for Columbanus’s exile. These works markedly contributed to the fact that by the seventh century Brunhild had been transformed into “a stereotype of villainy.”<sup>56</sup> Thus, these authors underpinned Chlothar’s attack on the memory of this woman and exempted those members of the clergy who were involved in attacks on Columbanus from any responsibility.<sup>57</sup> As already pointed out, Brunhild’s characterisation in such terms also passed into the main

historiographical works of the Merovingian and later ages. Both Fredegar and the author of the *Liber historiae Francorum* made use of Gregory’s *Histories*, but reversed his portrayal of Brunhild, following the lead of the *Vita Columbani*.<sup>58</sup> In these works, Brunhild appears as an ambitious evil counsellor,<sup>59</sup> whose acts lead to persecution and death.<sup>60</sup> The proportions of the bias are effectively conveyed by Fredegar’s account of a prophecy about her, according to which (*Chronicles*, III.59, 109):

Tanta mala et effusione sanguinum a Brunechildis consilium in Francia factae sunt, ut prophetia Saeville impleretur, dicens: “Veniens, Bruna de partibus Spaniae, ante cuius conspectum multae gentes peribunt.”

[her] influence caused so much evil and bloodshed in Francia that the prophecy of the Sibyl was fulfilled, who had said: “Bruna is coming from the regions of Hispania; many nations will perish before her gaze.”

And this prophecy appears to be mirrored in further accusations against Brunhild, who was held responsible for the conflict between her grandsons Theuderic and Theudebert (*Chronicles* IV.27, on p. 132),<sup>61</sup> and the death of several members of the royal family and of

54 See also Fredegar, *Chronicles* IV.36, on p. 137.

55 On these aspects, see Wood, “The *Vita Columbani*,” 64; Stancliffe, *Jonas’s Life*, 201–20; Stancliffe, “Columbanus and Shunning,” 113–30.

56 Nelson, “Queens as Jezebels,” 59.

57 See Dumézil, *La reine*, 398–401.

58 Dailey, *Queens, Consorts*, 120–21, 130, 134.

59 Thomas, “The ‘Second Jezebel,’” 50–51.

60 The characterisation of Brunhild as an evil counsellor is conveyed in both Fredegar’s *Chronicles* (III.59, on p. 109) and the *Liber historiae* (38–39.307–10).

61 See also *Liber historiae* 38.307–08.

the aristocracy.<sup>62</sup> These charges reach their apex in Fredegar's *Chronicles* (IV.21, on p. 129; IV.28–29, on p. 132; IV.42, on p. 141) where Chlothar accuses her of the murder of ten Frankish kings.<sup>63</sup>

The demonisation of Brunhild is attested in Carolingian hagiography and chronicles<sup>64</sup> and continues well into the tenth century,<sup>65</sup> which further develops her characterisation in negative terms, emphasising emotions such as her anger.<sup>66</sup> The hagiographical corpus includes several *vitae* of Columbanus's followers, which further contributed to Brunhild's *damnatio memoriae*. Her vilification is well voiced, for example, in the lives of Saint Gall,<sup>67</sup> as can be seen in both Walafried

Strabo's *De vita sancti Galli*,<sup>68</sup> and Ratpert's *Casus sancti Galli*.<sup>69</sup>

In the light of the marked relevance of Brunhild and her vivid representations, it is reasonable to claim, with Dumézil, that in Carolingian epic poetry “il exista une héroïne nommée Brunehilde” and that her presence “dans la matière épique carolingienne à côté de Dietrich, d'Attila et de Gunther permettrait ainsi d'expliquer la réapparition conjointe de ces personnages dans les épopées des XIIe and XIIIe siècles.”<sup>70</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The transformation which the powerful figure of Queen Brunhild underwent in the hagiographical and historiographical writings produced in the Merovingian Francia well exemplifies the metamorphic power and long-lasting influence that political and social agendas may exercise on history and its characters, and the ways in which hagiography deals with change. The most striking feature of Brunhild's representations is that she is depicted as “either demonically inspired or employed to demonic ends.”<sup>71</sup> The authors deprive her of her humanity and describe her

62 See also *Vita Columbani* I.28, on p. 219.

63 According to the *Liber historiae*, Brunhild had poisoned her grandson Theuderic and killed his three young sons (39.309–10).

64 See, for instance, the *Chronicon Moissiacense*, 286. See also Dumézil, *La reine*, 409–10.

65 See the *Reginonis Chronicon*, 550, in which Brunhild is referred to as “instigante” and the author of many evil things; see also Aimoin of Fleury, *History* III.21, on p. 706; IV.1, on pp. 765–67. Dumézil, *La reine*, 409–12, 414.

66 *Vita Menelei abbatis Menatensis* II.3, on p. 150: “iracunde regine venenatos animos celans.” In this *Vita*, there is considerable emphasis on Brunhild's anger (II.4–5, on p. 151).

67 In the *vitae* of Columbanus's followers, the bias against Brunhild is usually related to the persecution of the holy man; see *Vita Sadalbergae abbatis laudunensis* 2.51: “regina Brunehilde instigante, versutas nefandi hostis pertulerit insidias”; *Vita Romarici* 3.221; for further examples, see Dumézil, *La reine*, 400, 466.

68 *De vita sancti Galli* I.3, on p. 287: “Sed Brunihildis, avia regis, videns eum viri consiliis oboedire, stimulo malitiae concitata, mentem serpentino furoris armavit veneno.”

69 Ratpert, *Casus sancti Galli* 1.138: “Sed Brunnehildis, [...], plena demonio, tenebrarum socia, lucis inimica, omnibus bonis contraria”; 2.138: “diaboli filia.” The latter expression is also used in the *Vita Galli* by Wetti of Reichenau, 3.259.

70 Dumézil, *La reine*, 413.

71 Peyroux, “Gertrude's *furor*,” 314.

as ruthlessly savage, characterised by ambition and unrelenting anger. Some of these features also spread to Brunhild's literary representations in poetic and prose works. Among these portrayals, the final stanza in *Guðrúnarkviða I* is unprecedented in its featuring of Brynhild's 'dragonish' monstrosity to render her boundless anger and grief. Apart from *Guðrúnarkviða I*, there is only one other text in the Northern tradition in which Brynhild is related to monsters: when she bursts out laughing at the news of Sigurd's death in the *Völsunga saga* (32.59), a horrified Gunnar addresses her by saying "mikit forað ertu" ("you are a monster"), but the expression is not connected with any imagery.<sup>72</sup> In the Southern part of the Germanic world, in the *Nibelungenlied*, Brünhild is characterised by spectacular displays of supernatural strength, a feature that puzzles the men that interact with her and earns her the definition of "tiuvels wîp" ("devil's wife," 438.4) and "tiuvels brut" ("devil's bride," 450.4). Her strength vanishes as she loses her virginity, and her character disappears from the plot, which is then dominated by the once courtly Kriemhild who after Siegfried's murder becomes a devilish avenger.<sup>73</sup>

72 Grimstad and Wakefield, "Monstrous Mates," 243.

73 On the two figures, see Grimstad and Wakefield's analysis in "Monstrous Mates," 240–44. Kriemhild is labelled as a "vålandinne," which is a designation that points at "the moral depravity of the heroine, her self-removal from the human world and the mores that prevail therein." She appears as a "malevolent consort of the devil"; McConnell, "Kriemhild," 46–47.

In the light of the pervasive demonisation and blackening of her character which have plagued the historical Brunhild over many centuries, it is not unlikely that several traces of the transformation pointed out in our survey also surface in the literary legacy that regards her. *Guðrúnarkviða I* is a late poem, "based on Dano-German models," and contains signs that recall a courtly environment,<sup>74</sup> making it plausible that the dragonish rendering of Brynhild's 'wütende Trauer' may well be considered as a Norse poet's response to and elaboration of the echoes of the devilish Brunhild coming from the South.

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