

## Old Sagas, Heroes and Swords

I got a bit carried away when I wrote this module, as you can, no doubt, figure out yourself. Well, it happened, and I let you have it. If you don't want to read all this but just want to know what I found out with regard to swords, use [this link](#)

### A Few General Words to Sagas and Their Roots

Advanced

Every *German* with a halfway decent education has heard about **Siegfried** and the "Nibelungenlied" (Song of the Nibelungs). Every *European* with a halfway decent education has heard about her ancient local heroes mentioned in some epic, poem, epic poem, song, saga, legend, *lay* or whatever literary genre the surviving text belongs to. I will use the term "**saga**" in what follows for all of that. What we lose in precision, we gain in simplicity.

The motives and plots of most old sagas are powerful and ageless; they still grab our imagination. Lots of the present phantasy books and films are just modern versions of old sagas. Take "**Lord of the Rings**" or "**Star Wars**", for example. No matter if the the saga is old or new, we often find a common feature:

**"Magic" swords are important parts of many sagas.**

Of course, every European with a *halfway* decent education has also learned about much older sagas, for example **Homer's Ilias** and *Odysee*, recounting events from around 1500 BC, *Greek* tragedies and comedies, and *Roman* writings of all kinds. Possibly one has even heard about the **Epic of Gilgamesh** from old Mesopotamia. It is the oldest saga (going back to 2150-2000 BC) that survived in (*cuneiform*) writing. Only recipes for [making beer](#) are even older.

Old sagas, by the way, always involve all kinds of supernatural beings, including all kinds of Gods and Semi-Gods, and thus are always more or less mixed up with religious beliefs. When religious beliefs changed, the sagas might have changed too.

Europeans with a *fully* decent education like me were forced to learn a lot about history. In many case this included some local sagas but nothing about sagas from the East (China, India, . . .) and other more remote corners of the globe (from an European viewpoint).

Before the advent of the Internet you just couldn't know much about the sagas of other cultures, even if you were interested in that for some (strange) reason like looking for magical swords. That has changed and it is now easy to "browse" around. Maybe some day somebody will even do a comparative study about the occurrence of "magical swords" or other iron / steel objects in sagas all over the world. We probably could [learn something](#) about the coming of the iron age from that.

Until then I just share what I have found with you in this module.

As far as really old sagas go, I like "**Enûma Eliš**", the creation myth of the Babylonians from around 1500 BC. It stars *Apsu* and *Tiamat*, the first Gods or something to that effect, and these two primary beings manage to produce offspring. As soon as their kids have grown up (or maybe just entered teenagerdom), the parents complain bitterly about them. They're being too loud, don't respect their parents; things generally were better in the good old times, and so on. You know the drill.

So things (and kids) weren't all that different 3500 years ago. Knowing that even deities had problems coping with their brood makes me feel better about my failures in this respect.

The really old sagas seem to contain not all that much [sword and ring symbolism](#). I consciously use the conjunctive because I don't really know. I have, of course, not really read through all those old sagas; I have only read *about* them. And whoever put together the excerpts you find on Wikipedia or elsewhere, may not have included relatively minor and "uninteresting" technical stuff about armor, weapons, and swords if that was not central to the saga.

It is not surprising that magical or other swords do not figure heavily in very old sagas. It might be simply due to the fact that good steel swords simply did not exist. Iron (not the same as steel) was "invented" around 1500 BC by the Hettites in what is now Turkey and thus could not figure prominently in sagas that go back further than that.

One exception is the **Ilias** where **Achilles**, the big hero of the Trojan war, had his armor made by the God **Hephaestus**. Achilles descended from (minor) deity himself and was for some reason invulnerable in all of his body—except for his heel. That's why a weakness might still be called an **Achilles heel** today. It's thus a bit strange that Homer pays a lot of attention to the *shield* made by Hephaestus—which Achilles essentially didn't need—and far less to the sword.

But back to Northern sagas. Those sagas, epics and poems are among the *oldest* written records from the Northern areas or what's now England, France, Germany, Ireland, Iceland, Scandinavia, .... It is thus unavoidable that they are held in high esteem by the historians and literati of those countries.

So all of us who wanted to graduate from High School (meaning you had to pass a big exam) had to learn about some saga in more or less detail. In my case it was the "**Nibelungenlied**" (**The Song of the Nibelungs**), an epic poem written in Middle High German (or gibberish as far as we were concerned).

English kids probably had to deal with *Beowulf* and the *King Arthur* stuff, and Scandinavians, I guess, could not escape one of the two "*Edda's*" (actually from Iceland), or other sagas from way up there. The Irish had plenty of their own stuff, Spain has "*El Cid*", and so on (only Italy seems to be missing some specific national saga). And many of us know the [sagas around Jesus](#)

I'm pretty sure that most cultures have corresponding myths and sagas. Most sagas, however, are probably lost forever because they were never written down.

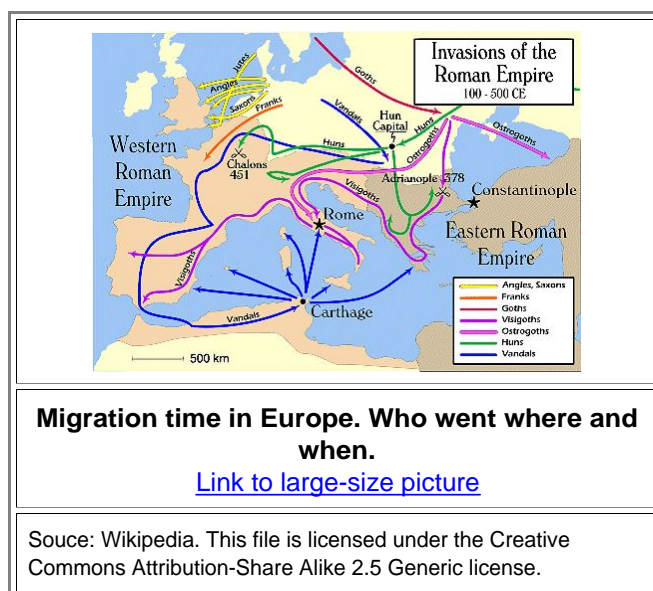
There are a lot of connections between the Nordic or "Norse" sagas. Some major figures like *Weiland the smith* or *Siegfried* appear in many different sagas, together with the main hero. Several sagas might agree on some common ground with respect to what the hero is doing but some of his (or her) adventures might appear only in one saga. It's not unlike the [gospels](#). That's why **Siegfried's sword** has different names and origins—it depends on which saga you pick.

There are also indirect relations between sagas, like the the same **basic motives** coming up in otherwise unrelated sagas. Examples are: (evil) dwarfs as the (magical) masters of crafts, (evil) giants, pulling a magical sword out of something, killing a dragon, saving some damsel in distress, and having trouble with relatives including kids.

Let's be clear about one thing: the European sagas, when compared to old lore from Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greek, Rome and so on, are comparatively *recent*. Their surviving written versions usually date to the 11th - 13th century. There might have been older written versions but we simply don't know about them. It's rather like what you find in the Bible.

Most likely the Norse sagas have been told (or "sung") orally long before they were written down for the first time. We know that because some older artifacts like "rune stones" or "image stones" show [scenes from some sagas](#). At least some sagas must thus go back to older times, in particular to the so-called "**dark ages**". This is roughly the time between the fall of the Roman Empire at 476 AD and the coming to power of **Carolus Magnus** ("*Karl der Große*", or *Charlemagne* (747 - 814)).

This time is also known as the (European) "**migration period**". The end of the (western) **Roman empire** dawned when the **Visigoths** entered Roman territory in **376**, after they lost a clash with the **Huns**. Europe then was crisscrossed for centuries by all kinds of folks, moving from wherever they came from (not always clear but usually from the North and East) to better and greener pastures in the South and West. The following map (from Wikipedia) gives a good idea of what was going on



It was *not* a peaceful period. "**Huns**" or "**Vandals**" kept a bad image (in the West) till this very day! But look how far around they got! They might be your ancestors, by the way.

This Migration Period, also called the *Barbarian Invasions* (and in German: "Völkerwanderung" = migration of peoples), occurred from about 300 AD to 700 AD. This period marked (or maybe it induced) the transition from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Age. The term "**dark ages**" was also used. It first referred to the lack of written records from this period but went out of style with historians. I still think it is an apt name, however, because lots of science and technology from the Romans and others was unlearned and forgotten And that includes basic things like the ability to read and write,

or to make useful things like a sewer system.

"Migrating peoples" included ethnicities, tribes or nations like the Huns, Goths, Vandals, Avars, Slavs, Bulgars, Alans, **Suebi** (after who my own tribe, the present-day Suebians in the German state of Baden-Württemberg are named), Frisians, and Franks. It goes without saying that they all fought each other when it was necessary or just fun, allied themselves with the Romans against the others, ganged up with others against the Romans—whatever suited their ancient war needs. Peaceful living, it appears, was not considered a valid option. "Rob thy neighbor" (and kill him, rape his women, sell his kids into slavery and so on) was an accepted way of live.

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| <b>It says: "Migration Period - Young prince of the Bajuvars"</b>   |
| From 19th century "posters" for teaching the kids in Germany. The "germanic" part of the chaos was conceived to be somehow <a href="#">special and noble</a> , putting an end to Roman oppression, and so on. |
| Source: Photographed in the Bamberg (Germany) museum  |

Here is a quick overview of the migration period ending with the **fall of the Roman empire**, mostly taken straight from Wikipedia:

### Time Period

### What Happened and Some Major Names

#### 3rd century

- The Roman Empire crisis of the Third Century (234 - 284), a period of political anarchy.
- The reign of emperor **Diocletian** (284 - 305), who attempted substantial political and economic reforms, many of which would remain in force in the following centuries.

#### 4th century

- The reign of **Constantine I** (306 - 337), who built the new eastern capital of **Constantinople** and **converted to Christianity**, legalizing and even favoring to some extent this religion. All Roman emperors after Constantine, except for **Julian**, would be Christians. If **you** are a Christian, that's probably the major reason why.
- The first war with the **Visigoths** (376 - 382), culminating in the Battle of Adrianople (August 9, 378), in which a large Roman army was defeated by the Visigoths, and emperor **Valens** was killed. The Visigoths, fleeing from the migrating **Huns**, had been allowed to settle within the borders of the Empire by **Valens** in 376, but were mistreated by the local Roman administrators (as they claimed). They lost no time

rebelling against their benefactors, leading to 6 years of plundering and destruction throughout the Balkans, the death of a Roman Emperor, and the destruction of an entire Roman army.

## 5th century

- The reign of **Theodosius I** (379 - 395), last emperor to reunite and rule the western and eastern halves of the Empire. Theodosius continued and intensified the policies against paganism of his predecessors, eventually outlawing it, and making *Nicaean Christianity* the state religion.
- The "Crossing of the Rhine". On December 31, 406 (or 405, according to some historians), a mixed band of Vandals, Suebi and Alans crossed the frozen river Rhine at Moguntiacum (modern Mainz), and began to ravage **Gaul**.  
Invading what is now France happened many more times (and became a quaint old custom that we Germans honored ever since, it seems). Some (mostly Vandals) moved on to the regions of Hispania, shipped over to Africa, and moved East all the way to Egypt. The Empire would never regain control over most of these lands.
- The *second war* with the Visigoths, started by **Alaric**, the first King of the Visigoth. They first raided Greece then invaded Italy, culminating in the *first sack of Rome* (410). The Visigoths eventually left Italy and founded the Visigothic Kingdom in southern Gaul (after invading it) and Hispania.
- The rise of the *Hunnic Empire* under **Attila** and **Bleda** (434-453), who raided the Balkans, Gaul (sic!), and Italy, threatening both Constantinople and Rome.
- The *second sack of Rome* (455), this time by the **Vandals**. They came from the South since the Vandals had by now settled in Africa.
- Failed counterstrikes against the Vandals (461 - 468). The Western emperor **Majorian** planned a naval campaign against the Vandals to reconquer northern Africa in 461. Word of the preparations got out to the Vandals, who took the Roman fleet by surprise and destroyed it.  
A second naval expedition against the Vandals, sent by emperors **Leo I** and **Anthemius**, was defeated in 468. The Roman defeat this time was just bad luck (wind from unusual directions, ...). The outcome could just as well have been the other way around and the world would now be a very different place.
- Deposition of the last Western emperors, **Julius Nepos** and **Romulus Augustus** (475 - 480). Julius Nepos, who had been nominated by the Eastern emperor **Zeno**, was deposed by the rebellious *magister militum* (chief of the military) **Orestes**, who installed his own son Romulus in the imperial throne. But Zeno and his rival **Basiliscus** in the East, continued to regard Julius Nepos, who fled to Dalmatia, as the legitimate Western emperor, and Romulus as an usurper, causing all kinds of trouble.  
Shortly after, **Odoacer**, an ostrogoth and *magister militum* appointed by Julius Nepos, invaded Italy (obviously also a fun thing to do), defeated Orestes, and deposed the child emperor Romulus Augustus on September 4, 476.  
Odoacer then proclaimed himself ruler of Italy and asked the by now Eastern emperor Zeno to become formal emperor of both empires. That would have legalized Odoacer's own position as imperial viceroy of Italy. Zeno complied (he hadn't much choice if he wanted to keep a smidgen of influence). So he put aside the claims of Julius Nepos that he had supported so far. Nepos was murdered by his own soldiers in 480 anyway.
- Foundation of the **Ostrogothic Kingdom** in Italy (493). Concerned with the success and popularity of Odoacer, Zeno now started a campaign against him, at first with words, then by inciting the Ostrogoths to take back Italy from him. They did as much, but then founded an independent kingdom of their own, under the rule of king **Theodoric the Great** (454 – 526; also known as Flavius Theodericus). Italy and the entire west were now lost to the Empire for good.
- Official **end of the Roman Empire**.

Stuff like that always sounds a bit crazy in retrospect. For comparison, just look at what the USA did with Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan in recent times. First Saddam Hussein was a friend and ally. Then he became a foe who was defeated a little but but left alive. After that he was upgraded to deadly enemy for utterly wrong reasons, who now needed to be killed and its country given to civil war. To make up for the loss, Pakistan is now a friend ...

## Possible Role Models for Northern Saga Heroes and Figures

Some of the historic figures of record from the migration period might have been the role models for the various heroes in the sagas, just as some of the Greek myths around their God folk might have supplied the role models for the various Northern Gods and minor Deities. The stories moved up there via the Romans, who also heavily relied on the Greek for their Gods (e.g. Greek Zeus ⇒ Roman, Jupiter ⇒ Northern Wotan / Odin).

Mix up some bits of old myths as they were recounted then, spice with some local hearsay, retell many times, varying the tale a bit each time—and you have a Northern saga.  
It's not that simple, of course, and serious scholars disagree a lot about what can be traced to what. But nobody doubts that there are *some* relations.

Here is a small list of historical figures, mystified to some extent by later generations, who might have been role models for Northern Saga people (in order of importance).

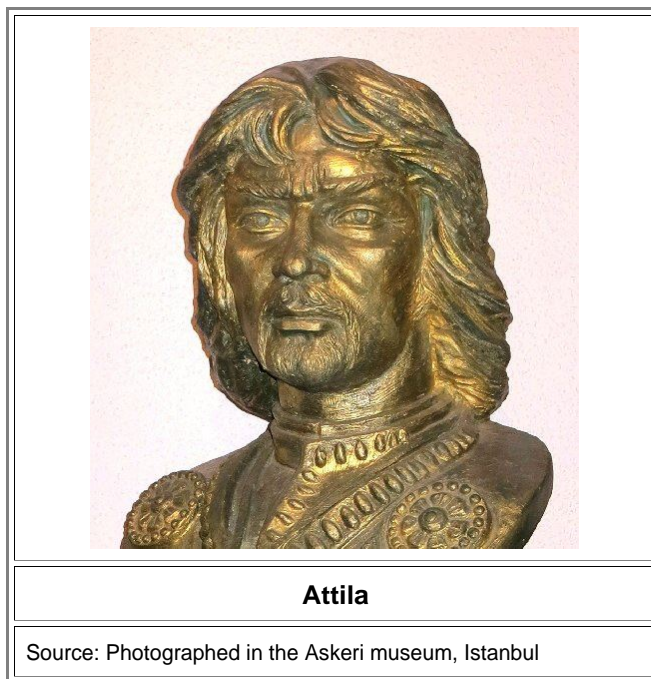
**Attila the Hun** (? - 453); also known as **Etzel**, and his brother **Bleda** (sometimes called "Blödel" in German; synonymous with dunce, dolt, blockhead, causing no end of mirth when we had to read about them in school).

Attila was the ruler of the Huns from 434 until his death in 453. He was leader of the Hunnic Empire, which stretched from Germany to the Ural River and from the Danube River to the Baltic Sea. During his rule, he was one of the most fearsome enemies of the Western and Eastern Roman Empire. He invaded the Balkans twice and marched through Gaul (modern France) as far as Orléans before being defeated at the Battle of Châlons. He refrained from attacking either Constantinople or Rome.  
The Huns were a group of Eurasian nomads, appearing from east of the Volga, who migrated into Europe ca. 370 and built up an enormous empire there. Their main military techniques were mounted archery and javelin throwing, and a lot could be said about their *composite recurve bows* and the technique behind that.

Attila is portrayed as sinister and brutal, maybe he even killed his brother Bleda to be the sole ruler. He appears in several sagas, e.g. the Norse sagas and especially in the *Nibelungenlied*, the "song of the Nibelungs". In some sagas he is described as great and noble king, in others he is a more shady figure.



Attila as seen in those little pictures you got when buying "**Liebig's Fleisch Extract**" (Meat Extract) starting 1890. Attila isn't seen to kindly, in contrast to *Alarich* (see below).  
The text is: *Hunish raid in 444.*  
Collecting those beauties in an album generated a craze that spread to many other products and proves my point: Those ancient guys were still "alive".  
Of course, what's a hun for some is a hero for others. Here is Attila as found in a place of honor in the **Askeri (military) museum** in Istanbul:



- There is a (newer) legend about the **sword of Attila**. The Roman historian *Jordanes*, quoting the work of the historian *Priscus*, gave the story of its origin around 550 (about 100 years after Attila's death) in Constantinople. As it goes, a shepherd finds a sword in the ground, digs it up, and brings it straight to Attila, who somehow recognizes it as the sword of the war God (*Mars* in Roman terminology; what Attila believed we don't know). Note the "[sword in the ground / stone and digging / pulling out motive](#)". Priscus also describes how Attila used the sword as both a military weapon and a [symbol of divine favor](#), which may have contributed to his reputation as "the Scourge of God", a divinely-appointed punisher. In this way the sword became somewhat of a *sceptre* as well, representing Attila's right to rulership.
- Attila at first kept good contacts to the (western) Roman empire, later he was fighting it. One of the reasons for that was:
  - ▶ **Flavius Aëtius** (396 - 454); *magister militum* (commander in chief of the Roman troops in Gaul)
  - Aëtius was kept as hostage at the court of the king of the Goths, **Alaric I**, between 405 and 408. Alaric asked to have Aëtius back as hostage again, but this time he was refused. Aëtius was now needed as a hostage for the court of the king of the Huns, *Rugila* (Attila's uncle), in exchange for Attila who was kept hostage in Rome. That was the quaint old way of making sure that your ally behaved himself. Otherwise the head of a loved one was delivered as a little reminder. The two hostages knew and esteemed each other, it seems.
  - Later, from 433 to 450, Aëtius was the dominant personality in the Western Empire, obtaining the patrician rank (5 September 435) and playing the role of "protector" of *Galla Placidia* and *Valentinian III* (kids of [Theodosius](#)) while the Emperor was still young. He came to power with the help of Attila. At the same time he continued to devote attention to Gaul. I guess it either needed to be invaded or other invaders had to be kept out. In 436, the Burgundians of **King Gunther** were defeated and obliged to accept peace terms of Aëtius. That didn't keep him to sent Attila's Huns in the the following year to destroy them (Burgund is situated in Gaul). 20,000 Burgundians were killed in a slaughter and that seems to have become the base of the [Nibelungenlied](#), the major saga in Germany. While the Nibelungenlied blames the Huns for the slaughter, they were actually Roman auxiliaries, just following orders, and not acting on their own.
  - ▶ **Theodoric the Great** (454 – 526)
  - Theodoric the Great was king of the Ostrogoths (471 – 526), ruler of Italy (493 – 526), regent of the Visigoths (511 – 526), and a viceroy of the Eastern Roman Empire. His Gothic name Þiudareiks translates into "people-king". Many believe that he became a hero of [Germanic legend](#), others doubt that very much.

The man who would later rule under the name of Theodoric was born in 454 AD, one year after **Attila's** death, on the banks of the Neusiedler See near Carnuntum (that makes him an Austrian), a year after the Ostrogoths had thrown off nearly a century of domination by the Huns. Theodoric also went to Constantinople as a young boy as a hostage, to secure the Ostrogoths' compliance with a treaty his father Theodemir had concluded with the Byzantine Emperor **Leo** (ruled 457-474).

He lived at the court of Constantinople for many years and learned a great deal about Roman government and military tactics. That served him well when he became the Gothic ruler of a mixed but largely romanized "barbarian people". Treated with favor by the Emperors **Leo I** and **Zeno** (ruled 474-475 and 476-491), he became magister militum (Master of Soldiers) in 483, and one year later he became consul.

Afterwards, he returned to live among the Ostrogoths when he was 31 years old and became their king in 488. He marched west with his people, trying to take Italy, which then was ruled **Odoacer**. Some 5 years of fighting each other ended first with a kind of truce, negotiated with the help of the Bishop of Ravenna, and some three weeks later with Theodoric killing Odoacer (plus wife and anybody else) spectacularly at a dinner party. Theodoric cleaved him in two parts from the head down to the hip, remarking that the villain didn't even have bones in his body. Theodoric may not have had the magical sword **Eckesachs**, ascribed to his possible mythical alter ego **Ditrich von Bern**, for doing this great deed - but at least he had a pattern-welded sword; see his "Thank You" letter to **King Thrasamond**. He also has some practice in killing his guests. Nine years earlier he had killed another rival during a dinner party. What we Germans learn once again: Be careful with Austrians. Theodoric was now the undisputed ruler. His kingdom included Italy and large parts of the former western Roman empire down the Adria. The capital was in **Ravenna**. His tomb there is still a major sight.



**Theodoric on golden solidus**



**Mausoleum of Theodoric the Great in Ravenna**

Source: Internet

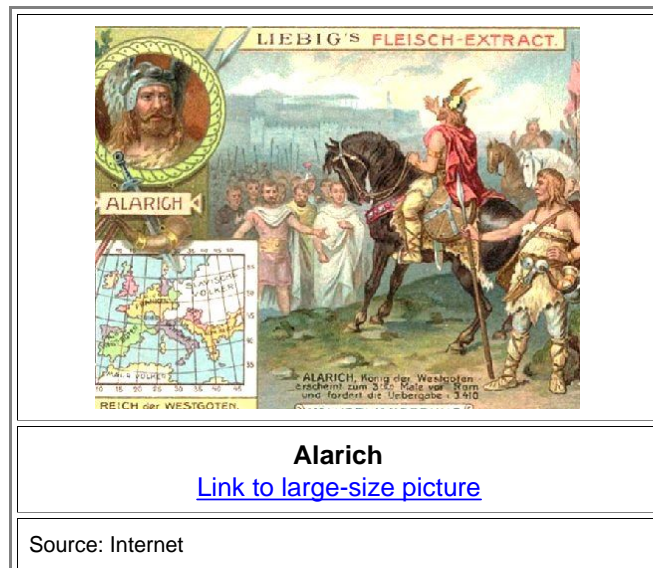
The roof is made from a single 300-ton stone, 10 meters in diameter! The significance of the mausoleum lies in its "Gothic" style, which is not related to Roman or Byzantine art. We would call that style rather "Romanic" now, the style before the "Gothic" took over in cathedral building. It is the only surviving example of a kingly tomb of this period.

The mausoleum does make use of the Roman stone construction technique, however, with no mortar between precisely cut rectangular stones. You can't improve much on this; just ask a modern builder to do something similar, including the 300 ton top.

**Alarich** (370(?) - 410); Alareiks in the original Gothic; King of the Visigoths from 395–410.

When Alaric was born, his Visigoths dwelt in present day Romania / Bulgaria, having fled beyond the wide estuary marshes of the Danube to its southern shore from their foes, the Huns. 376 they appeared at the border of the Roman Empire across the Danube and asked for asylum. The Romans let them in and Alaric became a military commander of the Romans under emperor **Theodosius I**. He hoped, some story goes, to be promoted but was thwarted. Pissed, he called a rebellion, was raised "on a shield" and named King in 395, and caused the Romans no end of trouble ever since. Tell that story to your boss when he doesn't want to promote *you*.

- First he and his Visigoths marched around in what is now Greece and Macedonia, conquering a lot of cities (meaning killing the men, raping the women, looting, burning and drinking; having fun in other words). Finally they were checked by the Roman leader *Stilicho*. But that didn't mean that Alarich and Stilicho couldn't be good friends on and off (like Sarkozy / Berlusconi and Gaddafi; Bush and Saddam Hussein, Stalin and Hitler, ...).
- 401 Alaric invaded Italy, the heartland of the Romans, for the first time. The Romans could check him but just barely. Then he did all kinds of odd jobs for and with Stilicho for a while, but in September 408, (Stilicho was dead) he stood before the walls of Rome and began a strict blockade. No blood was shed this time; Alaric relied on hunger as his most powerful weapon. After much bargaining, the famine-stricken citizens agreed to pay a ransom of 5,000 pounds of gold, 30,000 pounds of silver, 4,000 silken tunics, 3,000 hides dyed scarlet, and 3,000 pounds of pepper. Not bad, even for today's standards. Since marching towards Rome was so much fun, he did it again in 410. This time he really "took" the city and we have what is known as the **first sack of Rome** (killing the men, raping the women, and so on).



- Alarich as seen by [Liebig's Meat Extract](#). The implied message is: When a nice Germanic kind of guy sacks your city, it's just a deal between gentlemen. The text is: Alaric, King of the Visigoth, appears for the third time at Rome and asks for surrender.
- Being rich and famous by now, Alaric figured what the hell, let's take the rest of whatever the Romans still possessed too, and marched southwards into Calabria. He desired to invade Africa, which, thanks to its grain, had become the key to holding Italy. **In contrast** to the Vandals under Geiseric in 429, he had tough luck. A storm battered his ships into pieces and many of his soldiers drowned. Alaric died soon after in Cosenza, probably of fever, at the early age of about forty (assuming a birth around 370 AD). His body, according to legend, was buried under the riverbed of the Busento with plenty of treasure that has never been found. A [major German poem](#) (I had to learn it) glorified that in the 19th century.

▲ **Geiseric** (389 - 477); also Genseric or Gaiseric

- The Vandals led by *Geiseric* captured the Western Roman province of Africa and its capital of Carthage. That was quite a feat considering that the Vandals had a [long way to go](#). During his nearly 50 years of rule, he raised a relatively insignificant Germanic tribe to the status of a major Mediterranean power — which, after he died, entered into a swift decline and eventual collapse. Geiseric ferried all 80,000 of his people from Spain across to Africa in 429 and then marched on, conquering whatever was in his way (including Gaul, of course). He took the western Roman provinces of Africa and its capital of **Carthage**, then the richest province of the Western empire and a main source of food for Rome. In 455, Roman emperor Valentinian III was murdered on orders of Petronius Maximus, who usurped the throne. Geiseric was of the opinion that these acts voided his 442 peace treaty with Valentinian, and on May 31, he and his men landed on Italian soil and marched on Rome, where Pope Leo I implored him not to destroy the ancient city or murder its inhabitants. Geiseric agreed (up to a point, of course) and the gates of Rome were thrown open to him and his men for the (relatively unbloody) **second sack of Rome** in 455. Trying unsuccessfully to oust the Vandals from the Roman core provinces depleted the Northern areas of soldiers and helped the Huns under Attila to make their conquests. In 468, Geiseric's kingdom was the target of the last concerted military effort by the two halves of the Roman Empire. They wished to subdue the Vandals and end their pirate raids. Geiseric, against long odds, defeated the eastern Roman fleet commanded by [Basiliscus](#) off Cap Bon. It has been reported that the total invasion force on a fleet of 1,100 ships, counted 100,000 soldiers. Geiseric sent a fleet of 500 Vandal ships against the Romans, losing 340 ships in the first engagement, but succeeded in destroying 600 Roman ships in the second. So he was an extremely capable or extremely lucky leader. His deeds were certainly remembered for a long



time, and he might well have served as indirect role model for later heroes.

One should not forget some of the more remarkable *Ladies* behind, under, or on top of mighty men - but I will nevertheless do just that.

### Some Special Heroes and Figures in Sagas

What follows are remarks to the major names in alphabetical order

**Alberich** or Alfrik.

- "Alberich was a legendary Frankish sorcerer who originated in the mythology or epic sagas of the Frankish Merovingian Dynasty of the 5th to 8th century AD" I read somewhere.  
I don't know, however, how we know this, since I'm not aware of written records from that time.  
Alberich means "king of the elves" (elbe, albe = elves, reix, rex = king), but he was also known as king of the dwarves. Alberich possessed the ability to become invisible.
- In Norse mythology, we have one *Andvari* (Old Norse "careful one"), a dwarf who lives underneath a waterfall and has the power to change himself into a fish at will. Andvari had a magical ring *Andvarinaut*, which helped him become wealthy.  
I wonder if he said "Golum" a lot.
- In Richard Wagner's "[Der Ring des Nibelungen](#)", the character Alberich is based in some part on Andvari, but more on the Frankish sorcerer Alberich.
- In a 14th century saga (from *Huon de Bordeaux*) Alberich mutates to *Auberon* / **Oberon** and finds his way into the King Arthur story lines (not to mention Shakespearean story lines).
- Alberich is also a mighty smith and in some of the sagas forged the sword "**Eckesachs**", the sword that on some legends "[Dietrich von Bern](#)" took from "*Ecke*", the original (giant) owner.

**Beowulf** (Bee wolf, Bee hunter, a nickname for a bear?)

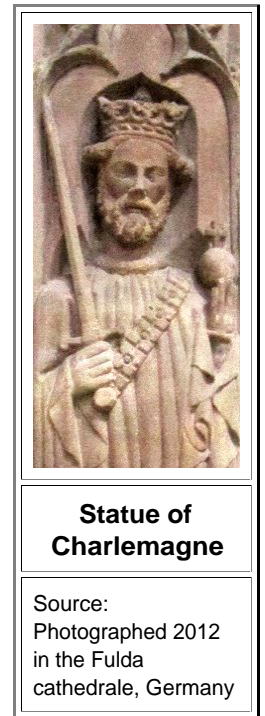
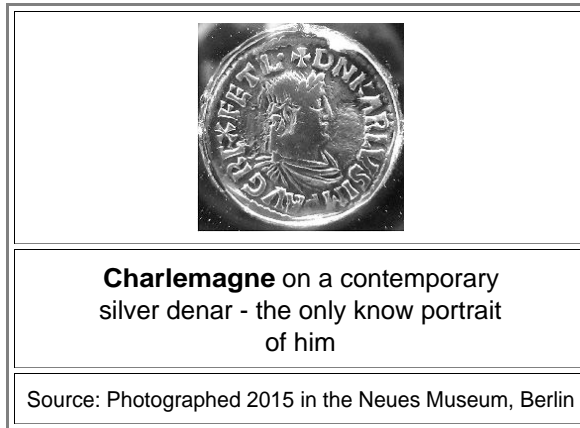
- Beowulf was written in England, but is set in Scandinavia. The hero fights three mighty (and evil) antagonists: **Grendel**, a monster who has been attacking the resident warriors of the mead hall of *Hroðgar* (the king of the Danes), **Grendel's mother** (far worse than her son), and an unnamed (relatively harmless) dragon.  
He wins against Grendel with his bare hands, but needs *two* more or less magical swords to finish off Grendel's mother. After that heroic deed Beowulf goes home to Geatland in Sweden and becomes king of the Geats.  
The last fight with the dragon takes place fifty years later (with the *third* famous sword). In this final battle Beowulf is fatally wounded. After his death, his servants bury him in a tumulus in Geatland.
- His first special sword with the name **Hrunting** was given to him by a warrior called *Unferth*. The iron blade with its "ill-boding patterns" had been **tempered in blood**. It had never failed the hand of anyone who wielded it in battle. Yet it cannot pierce Grendel's mother's armory, and Beowulf discards it. In desperation he sees a mighty **sword of the giants** in Grendel's mother's lair and grasps it—a feat no other man could have done—and kills Grendel's mother with it. The blade, however, "melts" when it touches her poisonous blood.  
Hroðgar is pleased and gives Beowulf many gifts, including the sword **Nægling**, his family's heirloom. But it breaks when he uses it against the dragon.
- So three important swords figure in the tale. One proves to be useless, the other two are destroyed in battle. What does that signify on a [symbolic level](#)?  
Well, the author, maybe, wants to remind us of the futility of battle or that you should not rely too much on artificial tools coming from others but just on your own strength. The failure of Hrunting thus might symbolize the failure of the warrior class and the ultimate futility of warfare.  
Or, maybe, Hrunting's failure as claimed by Kent Gould (in his essay "Beowulf" and *Folktale Morphology: God as Magical Donor*) is a message promoting Christianity. Hrunting fails because it was given to Beowulf by Unferth, a heathen. Only the more powerful replacement blade that (*obviously!*) [God gives Beowulf](#) in his moment of desperate need is capable of destroying evil.

Then of course, subscribing to the view that swords are [phallic symbols](#), the huge sword he uses to kill Grendel's mother is a symbol of his manhood. His smaller sword — a symbol of his adolescence — is of no use against a full grown woman. Naegling, breaking when fighting the dragon, then symbolizes loss of virility with old age. But perhaps Naegling's failure just signifies the end of Beowulf's era, and the beginning of a new era for a new hero such as *Wyglaf*, the only friend who doesn't flee when the dragon comes forth.  
One might also consider ....[enter your favorite hypothesis here](#). Just to give you an idea: A sword (= phallus symbol) might "melt" (become much smaller) when encountering (menstrual) blood of powerful females.

**Advanced  
Module  
Swords and  
symbols**

## Charlemagne

- Charlemagne ("Karl der Große" in German) is certainly not a mystical figure but a figure of [historical record](#). Nevertheless, he is also a figure of legend and he owned a ~~magical~~ miracle performing sword. There is a huge difference between a *magical* sword and a *miracle* working one: Magic is done and invested in something like a sword by *pagan sorcerers* like druids, witches or warlocks. Magicians are evil and burning them at the stake (after a bit of torturing as a kind of foreplay) is the prescribed antidote of peace-loving religions. *Magical* swords are thus evil things. *Miracles*, in contrast, are performed by Christian saints and they are thus a good thing. Charlemagne's sword "[Joyeuse](#)" contains christian relics and thus is not magic but miracle performing.



- After Charlemagne died, a number of sagas and legends developed. Legends are stories about saints, and Charlemagne is indeed a kind of saint. He was accorded sainthood inside the Holy Roman Empire after the twelfth century. However, his canonization by Antipope Paschal III, to gain the favor of Frederick Barbarossa in 1165, was never recognized by the Holy See, which annulled all of Paschal's ordinances at the Third Lateran Council in 1179. Nevertheless, his beatification has been acknowledged as "cultus confirmed" and is celebrated on January 28.
- The major cluster of sagas is the [Roland story](#) below. There is also the "Historia Karoli Magni et Rotholandi", the Latin version written between 1130 and 1140, with authorship claimed (wrongly) to archbishop [Turpin](#), one of the heroes of the Roland saga. Further legends report his (imaginary) travel to the "Holy Land" where he casts out the heathen from Jerusalem and secured precious relics (one of the many nails from the cross, for example). Giving wrong authorship just continues the tradition of nearly all the early Christian works ([including the ones in the bible](#)).
- The evolution of sagas around the "real" Charlemagne could also serve as model for saga development, just as the evolution of gospels and other stories about the "[Jesus event](#)" 800 years earlier.

## Ditrich von Bern (Theoderic)

- Dietrich figures in a considerable number of surviving sagas, which are assumed to be based on long-standing oral tradition. There are two kinds of sagas about Dietrich: history-based ones and adventure stuff, sort of fairy tale like. The latter tell stories about his battles with dwarves, dragons, giants, and other mythical beings, as well as other heroes such as *Siegfried*. In addition to these two categories of poems, he appears as a supporting character in some poems such as the "[Nibelungenlied](#)" and "Biterolf und Dietleib" (13th century saga). In other words: he was extremely prominent in medieval literature.
- One school of thought sees a connection to the historical [Theodoric](#) but this is contested by others. Personally I do believe that a guy as prominent as Dietrich must have had some roots in reality.

- Ditrich grows up as a prince in Verona (= Bern). He collects 12 (or 11) buddies as close allies (like King Arthur) and becomes King. His "master of arms" is *Hildebrand*, famous from his [own saga](#). Ditrich does great deeds. Like Beowulf, Siegfried / Sigurd or Tristan he slays a dragon. But he doesn't always win his battles and sometimes needs help. He only wins a sword fight against *Odoaker* (or *Sigurd*) because he uses *Wayland the Smith's* supreme sword " **Mimung**". First, however, he kills the giant Grim with the help of the dwarf *Alfrik* (= Alberich) who gives him a helmet named Hildegrim and his first famous sword **Nagelring**. His uncle Ermanarich eventually ousts him and he goes into exile to Etzel (or *Attila*), the king of the Huns. There he helps to overcome the murderers of Siegfried and in particular mad *Kriemhild*. In his old age he regains power again and lords over his kingdom once more.
- In one poem he fights against the giant Ecke, wins, and takes his sword - Ecke's sachs (a sachs or sax is a single edged sword). This is one explanation of the sword name "**Eckesachs**" but there are others too. Once more, like in Beowulf, we have a famous **sword that originates from the giants**. Nagelring is later given given to his Buddy Heime. Shortly after he kills Ecke, Ditrich encounters Eckes's brother *Fasold* who is described as having two long braided locks that hang down to his waist and which are woven in with *iron*. The two fight, and Dietrich overcomes Fasold by cutting off his braided locks (greetings from Samson and Delila! (look it up yourself)), and the giant surrenders. Ditrich also associated with **Wudga** (or Widia; Witege Witige or Wittiche, the son of Wayland the Smith) who is in possession of *Mimung*, his fathers super-sword. For the fight with Odoaker he lends it to Ditrich.

### El Cid Campeador or Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar (1043 – 1099)

- El Cid is a real historical figure but comes with his own saga. He is for Spaniards what Siegfried is for Germans, Roland for the French, and Beowulf for the British. The name "El Cid" comes from the Spanish article el (= "the"), and the dialectal Arabic word *sîdi* or *sayyid*, which means "Lord". "The Lord" was a Castilian nobleman, a military leader and diplomat who, after being exiled, conquered and governed the city of Valencia. He also was King Alfonso X's most valuable asset in the fight against the Moors (= islamic folks who had conquered the south of Spain). He is reported as invincible fighter who could cleave an opponent in half with Tizona (helmet, head, and body). He fought against the Moors for his king, with the Moors against his king, and just for himself; the real story is rather complicated. The saga cluster, growing in complexity through the centuries, is only loosely related to the real Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar.
- The interesting thing is that El Cid's famous sword, the *Tizona*, is still with us. Some noble houses kept it for all these centuries. In 2007 the Autonomous Community of Castile and León bought the sword for 1.6 million Euros (otherwise it would have been sold to someone outside of Spain); it is currently on display at the Museum of Burgos. Tizona, while not doing any direct magic, was reported to put terror in the hearts of opponents. El Cid also had a sword called *Colada*.

### Hildebrand

- The *Lay of Hildebrand* ("Das Hildebrandslied") is a heroic saga, written in Old High German **alliterative verse**. Alliterative means that the rhyme is not at the end but that you have a repetition of particular sounds in the first syllables: " *garutun sê iro guðhamun, gur tun sih iro suert ana*" (translation: "they prepared their armor, and buckled their swords"). "Starke Scheite schichtet mir dort" (*Wagner, Götterdämmerung*) or "F\*\*\*ed by the fickle finger of fate" are more modern examples of alliterative rhyming. Hildebrand is a tragic hero because in his saga he is forced to kill his own son, Hadubrand, who "works" for the other side and doesn't recognize or acknowledge his father.
- Hildebrand is also a major figure in the *Ditrich von Bern* saga collections.

### King Arthur

- Everybody has heard of King Arthur and his legendary sword *Excalibur* but nobody knows exactly who he was and when he lived. The best one can say is that King Arthur was a legendary British leader of the late 5th and early 6th centuries, who, according to medieval histories and romances, led the defence of Romano-Celtic Britain against Saxon invaders in the early 6th century. But most of the story is folklore and literary invention. He figures mightily in *Geoffrey of Monmouth's* fanciful and imaginative "*Historia Regum Britanniae*" from 1138. Arthur is mentioned as a great warrior defending Britain from human and supernatural enemies but also as a magical figure of folklore in earlier Welsh and Breton tales. Arthur's father **Uther Pendragon**, the wizard or Druid **Merlin**, Arthur's wife *Guinevere*, the sword Excalibur, Arthur's birth at Tintagel, his final battle against *Mordred* at Camlann and his final rest in Avalon are all there. However, *Sir Lancelot* and the quest for the holy grail was added later by the 12th-century French writer **Chrétien de Troyes**.
- Arthur becomes King by [pulling a sword out of a stone](#).

● Excalibur is the legendary sword of King Arthur, sometimes attributed with magical powers or associated with the rightful sovereignty of Great Britain. Sometimes Excalibur and the Sword in the Stone (the proof of Arthur's lineage) are said to be the same weapon, but in most versions they are considered separate.

The sword was associated with the Arthurian legend very early. In Welsh, the sword is called *Caledfwlch*, which combines the elements *called* ("battle, hard"), and *bwlch* ("breach, gap, notch"). Geoffrey of Monmouth latinised this to *Caliburnus* (likely influenced by the medieval Latin spelling "calibs" of Classical Latin "chalybs" (= steel), the name of Arthur's sword in his 12th-century work *Historia Regum Britanniae*. Caliburnus or Caliburn became Excalibur, Escalibor, and other variations when the Arthurian legend entered into French literature.

How Arthur came into possession of Excalibur also depends on which version you read. It is either the sword in the stone (sometimes called Caliburn), stuck in there by Merlin or it was given to Arthur by the "*Lady of the lake*" sometime after he began to reign, possibly as a replacement for the "sword in the stone" that broke in some battle.

In any case, Excalibur has some more or less magical properties (and so has its sheath in some tales; it heals wounds or prevents that wounds bleed).

Whatever version you pick, it has some connections to older Welsh or Irish tales that we know of and probably even more connections to tales completely lost.

## ▶ **Mime** or Mimir

● Mime appears in several Nordic sagas. He is always as a mythical smith able to do some magic. A smith was often seen as imbued with special knowledge and as a kind of magician. It is easy to see why. All smiths had access to some iron, and pretty much all smiths could make swords that were superior to the cast bronze swords of old. Some smiths, however, working with the same iron as the rest, could make swords that were far superior to the ones from regular smiths. I can't think of more convincing demonstrations of some good magic than that. Mime is simply the archetype of those smiths, I guess.

● Mime usually is described as belonging to the dwarves. He had famous apprentices: [Wayland](#) (Velent, Wieland) "the smith" and [Siegfried](#) (Sigfrid / Sigurd). The famous sword "**Mimung**" (or Miminc) that Wayland eventually forges, was named after his master Mime.

## ▶ **Roland** (Orlando)

● Roland is **Charlemagne's** nephew and a courageous knight who wins battles far and wide, enlarging the kingdom of his boss. He, together with twelve peers (later known as the *Paladins*, Charlemagne's greatest and most beloved vassals), leads the rearguard in a fight against King *Marsilla* who rules the city of Saragossa, the last Muslim stronghold in Spain. The [link](#) shows this rather graphically.

Roland is betrayed (his stepfather, one *Ganelon*, had a hand in this) and at the pass of Roncevaux, his twenty thousand Christians of the rearguard are ambushed by a vastly superior Muslim force, numbering four hundred thousand.

Roland wields his might sword [Durendal](#), his prized possession beside his horn that also had a name: "**Oliphant**" (= elephant; i.e. it was made from ivory). The Franks fight valiantly, but in the end they were killed to the last man. Too late Roland gives three long and mighty blasts on his oliphant so that Charlemagne will return and avenge them. His temples burst from the force required and he presently expires.

Now you know who **Boromir** from the *Lord of the Rings* is modelled after.

Roland positions himself so as to face toward the enemy's land before dying, and his soul is escorted to heaven by Saint Gabriel, Saint Michael and assorted [cherubim](#).

Charlemagne arrives, and he and his men are overwhelmed with grief at the sight of the massacre. Charlemagne pursues the heathen (= islamic) force and, aided by a miracle of God, the sun is held in place in the sky so that the enemy will not have cover of night. This seems to be the second time that God had the sun standing still so that a lot of people could get killed, cf. Joshua 10: 12-13.

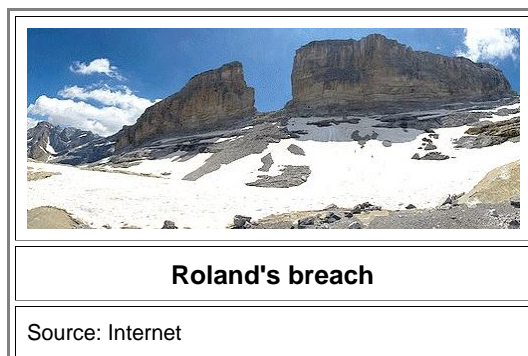
The Franks push the Saracens into the river Ebro, where those who are not chopped to pieces are drowned.

"Love thy enemy", as Jesus taught, obviously does not apply when the sun stands still. Joshua on this occasion also committed major genocide as the Bible proudly proclaims.

● The historical accurateness is there "in principle". Charlemagne did move against the Saracens (= Moors) in Spain in 778. However, he moved not against the King of Saragossa but against Emir Abderrahman of Córdoba. He did that not because he disliked Moslems but because the (Moslem) Sulayman ben al-Arabí, some other ruler in Spain, was his ally and asked him for help. Charlemagne was winning but stopped the whole affair, probably because he had to deal with rebellious Saxons in the North. He did that by having all their leaders killed; staying in the tradition of his Daddy Pippin or Uncle Karlmann, who wiped out the complete Alemannian elite (my forebears, several thousand dead) after he invited them to some meeting in Cannstatt (not far from where I grew up).

During Charlemagne's retreat the rearguard was ambushed (August 15th, 778 in Roncesvalles (= Navarra) in the Pyrenaees) and wiped out, indeed, but not by Saracens (= Islamic Moors) but by Christian Basks. The leader of the rearguard was possibly some "Hruotland" (frenchised (or is franchised?) = Roland).

● **Durendal** (also known as Durandart, Durandarte, Durindana) supposedly was forged by **Wayland the Smith** (Guallant in ancient French). Strangely enough, even so Wayland was a not a Christian, Durnendal's hilt contained a tooth of St. Peter, blood of St. Basilius, a hair of St Dionysius and a piece of cloth from the Virgin Maria. Obviously, good old **Ollivander** (the Elephant man?), wandmaker for **Harry Potter**, was also one of Wayland's apprentices once upon a time (or, maybe, it was the other way around). Since Roland fought the Moslems, the saga contains a lot of Christian lore, in contrast to many other sagas like "Beowulf". The sword thus contained "Christian magic" and not old-fashioned Druide magic. The magic worked to some extent because Roland, about to die, tried to destroy Durendal by hitting a rock. Durendal, however, did not break but broke the rock. It actually put a mighty breach in the mountain range; called "**Roland's breach**"; see below.



● **Siegfried** (or Sigurd; in old Norse: Sigurðr or Sivard. The first element "Sieg" or "Sig" always means "victory" (including modern German).

● Siegfried is the major hero in the first part of the **Song of the Nibelungs** (he doesn't figure in the second part because he is dead). He also appears often in other (and older) Norse mythology. The "Nibelungenlied" is was to Germans what Beowulf is to British subjects, Roland to French, and El Cid to Spaniards: the national epic tale or saga that somehow relates to the identity and culture of the Nation (typically for all the wrong reasons). In modern Germany, the Nibelungenlied, highly regarded in the romantic era (and by the Nazis), is no longer required reading for all high school graduates. In contrast to many Siegfried / Sigurd stories in other sagas, the more mystical elements of Siegfried are not mentioned much in the Nibelungenlied. Nevertheless a lot of characters that we know from somewhere else appear in the song of the Nibelungs: **Brunhilde**, King Etzel (= [Attila](#) ) and his brother [Blödel](#) (= Bleda), [King Gunther](#) with his Burgundians, Hagen, [Alberich](#), [Mime](#), [Theoderic](#), [Hildebrandt](#), and of course **Kriemhild**. If we count in the other sagas from the cluster, we have pretty much all major Northern Gods in the cast, various Giants and dwarfs, plus lots of Kings, warriors, more or less magic smiths, bards, ferrymen, and innocent bystanders including dragons.

● After he delivered her (using some magical tricks) to Gunther, Brunhilde finally finds out how she was betrayed and gets really, really mad. She is an athletic kind of girl and since on her wedding night King Gunther could not wield what his [sword symbolizes](#) as well as Siegfried, she ties him up as shown in the picture.

up from Gunther is not enjoying this.

Picture from Johann Heinrich *Füssli* (1807).

- Siegfried has to help out once more. Disguised as Gunther (he has a magical cloak besides the magical "sword" that King Gunter was lacking) he does whatever needs to be done on wedding nights. Since Brunhildes superhuman strength came from her virginity (now lost to Siegfried, possibly once again), she can no longer resist Gunther on his second try and becomes his unloving Queen.

Later, Kriemhild and Brunhilde have a cat fight ("Zickenkrieg"), described in loving detail; the issue was who has the right to enter church first. Brunhilde loses, so she entices **Hagen**, a shady character hanging around King Gunther, to kill Siegfried (big spear in the back, right through the soft spot). End of part 1.

But now Krimhild is thoroughly pissed and the second part, "Krimhild's revenge", commences. She marries King Etzel / Attila, invites all the Burgundians with King Gunther et al. to a big party, and manages to have all and sundry killed (including herself), with a final body count that easily surpasses even Verdi operas.

- [This link](#) leads to a very short recounting of Wagner's "Ring des Nibelungen", my favorite opera. Do try it! *Mark Twain* was right: Wagner's music is much better than it sounds.
- **Siegfried's famous sword** is called **Gram** (Old Norse "wrath") in the Norse version. It was forged by [Wayland the Smith](#) (the Northern [Hephaistos](#) as far as it goes) and originally belonged to his father, *Sigmund*, who received it in the hall of the Volsung after pulling it out of the tree Barnstokk into which Odin had stuck it—**no one else could pull it out**. The sword was destroyed and reforged at least once. After it was reforged, it could cleave an anvil in twain. In the much more civil "Nibelungenlied" (no Gods appear directly), Siegfried's sword is called **Balmung**; in Richard Wagner's Ring Cycle, it is called **Nothung** or *Notung*. Some sources refer to the sword also as *Balmus*.

### Wieland der Schmied (Wayland the Smith, Völundr, Volund, Velentr, Wiolant, ...)

- Wayland is a legendary master blacksmith in Germanic and Old Norse mythology. He has some semi-God characteristics and is reminiscent of [Hephaistos](#) and even *Daedalus* from Greek mythology. In the Old-German "Wielandlied" he is crippled ("hamstrung"; i.e. his hamstring was cut; we have a reminiscence to [Achilles heel](#) here) by evil King Nidung, for whom he is forced to work. In a contest with the King's other smith Amelias he forges **Mimung**, the probably most famous sword in Northern Mythology, with the help of goose shit. The full story (in German) can be found in [this link](#). Wayland, like Siegfried, was an apprentice to [Mime](#) and "Mimung" is named in honor of Mime.
- Wayland made many other famous things like the magic sword Gram (also named Balmung) from above, magic rings, the mail shirt worn by [Beowulf](#), the swords Eckesachs, Curtana, Durendal and God (Odin?) knows what else. He did not need to make [metal maidens like Hephaistos](#), however, because he just raped somebody when the need arose (twice described in loving detail in "[Simrock's](#)" 19th century rendering of the saga). In the end he constructs a flying apparatus (here is **Daedalus**) and takes off. The evil king Nidung, however, forces Egil, Wayland's brother, to shoot him down. Egil is a master shot with bow and arrow. Nidung knows this because he forced Egil to demonstrate his skill by shooting an apple off the head of his son. When Nidung asks him after the successful shot why he kept two more arrows ready, he replies that they were meant for him—if he would have killed his son. Egil and Wayland had a little scam prepared for this event, and Egin only hits some blood-filled bladder (ketch-up not having been invented yet) that Wayland was hiding below his cloths. Wayland looks deadly hurt (lots of blood issuing forth) but is unharmed and flies off to better and greener pastures. Now you know where all this **Wilhem Tell** stuff comes from.



**VØLUND, Smed**

Source: Photographed in Oslo; Norway

- This Vølund, as the Swedisch call him, stands in a little garden next to the City Hall in Oslo, capital of Norway. The artist Stephan Sinding made him in 1873.

Waylands son *Wudga* (produced by raping the Kings daughter Bathilde) figures in many sagas as an independent character, he is then usually the the possessor of Mimung.

- It appears to me that with the figure of Wayland, the authors of the sagas could shift the origin of "magical" swords and other rather unholy stuff from Northern Gods and other heathen creatures like dwarfs and giants to a more human source.

Note also that Mimung is made by [utilizing goose shit](#); no magic is needed.

The reason seems to be clear. In the 11th century and later, when all those sagas were written, people were fundamentalist Christians. Invoking all those Northern Gods along with giants, dwarves, valkyries, and so one was probably becoming politically incorrect. Don't forget, that some major **crusades** were taking place around the time these sagas were written. Since Jesus was a carpenter by trade, he and his kin could not be employed for doing the required magic. Wayland seems to be a good compromise

First Crusade 1095–1099  
 Second Crusade 1147–1149  
 Third Crusade 1187–1192  
 Fourth Crusade 1202–1204  
 Fifth Crusade 1217–1221  
 Sixth Crusade 1228–1229  
 Seventh Crusade 1248–1254  
 Eighth Crusade 1270  
 Ninth Crusade 1271–1272

Looks like [invading Gaul](#) for fun in your spare time went out of style, and some other way to pass the time was needed.

### Some Sagas in Short

▶ **Norse Mythology**; a collection of many sagas with a more or less common background and typically written down between the 11th and 18th century, not necessarily in what we know perceive as "Norse" = Norway. There are indications that those sagas were orally told and preserved for centuries before they were recorded. Major sagas within Norse Mythology are:

- The "**Edda**" (Old Norse Edda, plural Eddur) a collective name including the *Poetic* Edda and the *Prose* Edda, both of which were written down in Iceland during the 13th century in Icelandic (very difficult language!) by *Snorri Sturluson* (1178/79–1241).

They contain material from earlier traditional sources, reaching into the Viking Age (late 8th to 11th century). The books are the main sources of medieval skaldic tradition in Iceland and Norse mythology.

Snorri Sturluson, who was a leading skáld (court poet), chieftain, and diplomat in Iceland, believed that pre-Christian deities trace real historical people and wrote accordingly. It was probably the politically correct way to deal with the old Gods.

- Snorri Sturluson wrote the *The Prose or Younger Edda* around 1220. The Younger Edda (or Snorri's Edda) is an Icelandic manual of poetics (a kind of handbook for aspiring skálds), which also contains many mythological stories. Its purpose was to enable Icelandic poets and readers to understand the subtleties of alliterative verse, and to grasp the mythological allusions in skaldic poetry. It survives in seven main manuscripts, written down from about 1300 to about 1600.
- The **Poetic Edda** (also known as the **Elder Edda**) was written around 1270; about 50 years after the Prose Edda. It contains 29 long poems, of which 11 deal with the Germanic deities, the rest with legendary heroes like Sigurd the Volsung (the Siegfried of the German version *Nibelungenlied*), Brynhildr (Brinhilde, Brunhild) and Gunnar (Gunther). Although scholars think it was transcribed later than the other Edda, the language and poetic forms involved in the tales appear to have been composed centuries earlier than their transcription.
- **Thidrekssaga**, a lengthy compilation of sagas around [Dietrich von Bern](#) (Thidrek, Didrik) from the 13th century (plus later additions). Since Dietrich figures already in the much older "[Hildenbrandslied](#)" from around 835, the contents go back to far older tales and sagas. Around Thidrek = Ditrich we also meet a lot of the other known heroes or villains like Siegfried, Etzel (= Attila), Wayland, his son Wudga (Vidga, Witege, Wittich), Alberich (= Afrik) and so on.
- The **Völsungasaga** (= Volsunga Saga or Saga of the Völsungs) is a late 13th century Icelandic prose rendition of the origin and decline of the Völsung clan (including the story of [Sigurd and Brynhild](#) and destruction of the Burgundians). It is largely based on epic poetry. The earliest known pictorial representation of this tradition is the Ramsund carving, Sweden, which was created c. 1000 AD. The origins of the material are considerably older, however, and it echoes real events in Central Europe during the [Migration period](#). On the other hand, the only manuscript of the saga dates to about 1400.
- Then we have the **Gesta Danorum** ("Deeds of the Danes"), a patriotic work of Danish history, by the 12th century author Saxo Grammaticus; the **Heimskringla**, the best known of the Old Norse kings' sagas, also written in Old Norse by Snorri Sturluson ca. 1230, and much more.
- ▶ Old English or **Anglo-Saxon Literature and Mythology** encompasses literature written in Old English (also called Anglo-Saxon) in Anglo-Saxon England, in the period from the 7th century to the Norman Conquest of 1066.
  - The 400 surviving manuscripts from this period include epic poetry, hagiography (writings about saints), sermons, Bible translations, legal works, chronicles, riddles, and other stuff
  - Among the most important works of this period is the poem **Beowulf**, which has achieved *national epic* status in England. This heroic epic poem, consisting of 3182 [alliterative](#) long lines, is actually set in Scandinavia and was written in the 8th and the early 11th century (?). Beowulf is considered as one of the most important works of Anglo-Saxon literature. It survives in a single manuscript known as the Nowell Codex. The core events described in "[Beowulf](#)" most likely took place in the late 5th century, after the Anglo-Saxons had begun migration and settlement in England, and before the beginning of the 7th century, a time when the Saxons were either newly arrived or in close contact with their fellow Germanic kinsmen in Scandinavia and Northern Germany.
  - Also important is the **Anglo-Saxon Chronicle**, originally compiled on the orders of King Alfred the Great, approximately A.D. 890, and subsequently maintained and added to by generations of anonymous scribes until the middle of the 12th Century. The **Historia Regum Britanniae** from Geoffrey von Monmouth was written around 1136 and does not only contain the [King Arthur stuff](#) but a complete (and mostly invented) account of the kings of England. It begins with the Trojans founding the British nation (!!!) and continues in this vein until the Anglo-Saxons assumed control of much of Britain around the 7th century
- ▶ **French stuff.** The **Song of Roland** (French: *La Chanson de Roland*) is the oldest surviving major work of French literature.
  - It exists in various different manuscript versions which testify to its enormous and enduring popularity in the 12th to 14th centuries. The oldest of these is the Oxford manuscript which contains a text of some 4004 lines (the number varies slightly in different modern editions) and is usually dated to the middle of the twelfth century (between 1140 and 1170). The epic poem is the first and most outstanding example of the "*chanson de geste*", a literary form that flourished between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries and celebrated the legendary deeds of a hero
- ▶ **Germanic stuff**, not always clearly distinguished from Norse or French mythology. The Germans still believe, for example, that Charlemagne ("Karl der Große") was actually a German King. The French beg to differ. We have the **Nibelungenlied**, the **Kudrun saga** (sometimes known as the "Gudrunlied"), the "**Hildebrandslied**" (Lay of Hildebrand) **Tristan and Isolde** (Gottfried von Straßburg around 1210, Tristan kills a dragon and may have been the original owner of [Curtana](#)), Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parcival* (around 1290) and many more.
  - There are thirty-five known manuscripts of the *Nibelungenlied* and its variant versions. The oldest version is from the early 13th century. The text contains approximately 2,400 stanzas (strophe or verse) in 39 "Aventiuren" (= adventures, chapters). So it's a long, long read for [young people!](#)



- The "*Gudrunlied*" is a Middle High German epic, written probably in the early years of the 13th century (1230/1240), not long after the Nibelungenlied. It was pretty much neglected in German Nationalism because, I guess, not only are the main figures mere women, but it has a kind of happy end! Swords do not figure prominently either.
- The *Lay of Hildebrand* (Das Hildebrandslied) is a heroic lay, written in Old High German alliterative verse. It is one of the earliest literary works in German, and it tells of the tragic encounter in battle between a son and his (unrecognized) father [Hildebrand](#); known from plenty of other sagas. It is the only surviving example in German of a genre which must have been important in the oral literature of the Germanic tribes: it contains only 68 stanzas.

Spanish mythology has many facets. It encompasses, I presume (because I don't know), besides "*El Cid*" a lot more mythology. But only the legend of El Cid is widely known

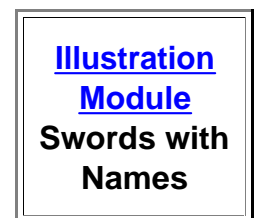
- [El Cid](#), properly Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar, was a historical figure (\* 1043 in Vivar/Bivar; † 10. Juli 1099 in Valencia) who was promoted to the top Spanish national hero after he was long dead. The "Historia Roderici" that first gives an account of his deeds, was written at the beginning of the 12th century.

Enough! One could go on forever, especially if one doesn't just look at a small part of Europe but includes the rest of the planet.

- Being able to hop from saga to saga in the Net is a lot of fun but becomes tiring and a bit redundant after a while. Let's try to remember why I was doing this:

1. I wanted to find out a bit more about those famous swords often coming up in sword lore.
2. I hoped that I could learn something about the history of iron and steel.

- Well, rummaging around in those old books does indeed provide some additional information about famous old swords on top of what one can find "on the quick". Even more details could be unearthed, I guess, if one would actually read *all* the stuff and not just small parts or synopses written by others. I have read the originals only to a small extent since going through all relevant sagas would be a major undertaking. While one does learn more about famous swords, the first topic, the level of confusion also goes up since there is a lot of contradictions. For example the meaning of "[Eckesachs](#)" and its origin comes in rather different variants.



- My hope to learn something about the second point, the history of iron and steel, was mostly disappointed. This is not unexpected. What could I expect from sagas written in the 10th to 13th century? The major historical "revolutions" in sword making were:

- *Replacement* of bronze swords by iron swords. That happened in the Mediterranean region about 2000 years before those sagas were written in the North. Even in Northern Europe iron swords were known for more than 1000 years by then and that event is certainly *not* addressed in our sagas.
- *Gradual improvement* of iron swords. Same as above.
- *Pattern welded swords* appear, culminating in extraordinary complex and beautiful weapons around 400 AD, with possibly better properties than older versions. Superior blades from these times might have been remembered as "*magic*" or "special". Some think that Beowulf's *second* sword (mystic origin from the giants) might have been a superior pattern welded sword, but there is no strong indication for this in the tale.  
On the other hand, Wayland the smith, definitely does *not* use pattern welding when he makes Mimung. He uses, unknown to him of course, nitrogen and carbon hardening with his [goose shit recipe](#).
- Abandonment of pattern welding in favor of *uniform* steel swords. That happened roughly around 1000 AD, somewhat before saga writing began in earnest. So, maybe, "magic" or otherwise remarkable swords simply were the first especially good *uniform steel swords*? If the smith was very good at the new technique, and everything happened to be just right, those sword could have been superior to swords known from earlier times. I will have more to say about this later.

Of course, none of the thousands of experts of history, literature, mythology or whatnot who wrote papers and books about the old manuscripts ever looked at them with an "iron and steel" eye. If one would do that (there's a nice hobby that can keep you busy for years to come!), some insights may or may not result. I ran across two tiny discoveries myself when I scanned through "[Ditrich von Bern](#)" and "[Beowulf](#)":

- Some giant that Ditrich had to fight has [iron woven into his braids](#) and can only be overcome after cutting off his hairdo. This is just a little hint that iron does not just appear in the form of swords but can also bestow special strengths in other ways.

- When [Hroðgar](#) receives the hilt (the blade has "melted") of the unnamed powerful sword that enabled Beowulf to finally kill Grendel's Mom, he says a lot including:  
*"So on the guard of shining gold  
in runic staves it was rightly said  
for whom the **serpent-traced** sword was wrought,  
best of blades, in bygone days,  
and the hilt well wound.*  
Now a "[serpent in a sword](#)" could be an indication of pattern welding; (use the link to see why) but this is just a hint, not evidence.  
On the other hand, *Hrunting*, the sword that failed Beowulf, is described as an "*iron blade with ill-boding pattern*". Maybe Hrunting was the old-fashioned pattern welded sword and the Giants sword was pure steel?
  - Then, of course, we have the small enigma how the author(s) of some Wayland the smith versions came up with the goose shit recipe. It actually works, [it is claimed](#). While case hardening was known at those times, feeding iron particles to geese and than forging them together again is a bit extreme. Not to mention that I don't know how one hammers what is essentially dust together into a solid piece. In the saga Wayland melts the filings but that he most certainly did not.
- ▶ We shall see - but I don't expect major discoveries.
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I have used lots of Internet sourced for this module. Mostly but not exclusively Wikipedia - in German and English (There are often interesting differences between articles to the same topic!).