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## GUNTHER'S HEAD AND HAGEN'S HEART. ROYAL SACRIFICE IN THE LAY OF NIBELUNGS

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### **Abstract**

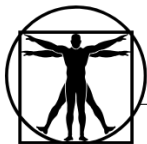
The article deals with the final part of the German epic Nibelungenlied to learn the real significance, cultural and ideological context of these episodes. The author analyzes literary and anthropological theories, as well as archaeological finds to conclude that royal deaths described in the epic reflect the ancient practice of human sacrifice.

### **Keywords**

the Nibelungenlied; the Elder Edda; interpretative level; human sacrifice; intra-communal violence



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## ГОЛОВА ГУНТЕРА И СЕРДЦЕ ХАГЕНА. ЖЕРТВОПРИНОШЕНИЕ В «ПЕСНИ О НИБЕЛУНГАХ»

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### Аннотация

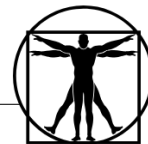
В статье подробному рассмотрению подвергается финальная часть немецкой эпической поэмы «Песнь о нибелунгах», автор ставит себе задачу выяснить подлинное значение, культурный и идеологический контекст этих эпизодов. На основании анализа литературоведческих и антропологических теорий и археологических находок автор приходит к выводу, что гибель королей, описанная в поэме, отражает древнюю практику человеческих жертвоприношений.

### Ключевые слова

«Песнь о нибелунгах»; «Старшая Эдда»; уровни интерпретации; человеческое жертвоприношение; внутриобщинное насилие



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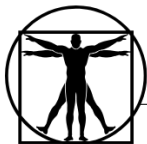
The German epic *Nibelungenlied* (The Lay of Nibelungs) is a unique work of European medieval literature. It can boast a long and elaborate plot, rich imagery and unprecedented for its time psychological insights into human nature, but that's not what makes it unique. The real uniqueness of the epic lies in its multidimensional character, in the number of interpretative layers for the realities it depicts. It was composed of stories originating from different epochs and so bears traces of different beliefs and ideologies, intellectual and emotional climates.

Namely three layers can be singled out. The surface layer belongs to the XII-XIII century when the epic was written, thus it reflects the mindset of the High Middle Ages, the time of powerful Church, stable states and courteous love. It is the level of politics and emotions, operating at this level we can ask and answer questions of what the characters felt towards each other, how they constructed their identities and built alliances, what kind of etiquette they resorted to and what desires were hidden behind the veil of this etiquette, and – the focal point of any literary analysis – how the author viewed and represented human soul.

Deeper under the surface is the layer of the story proper. The plot of the *Nibelungenlied* is a masterful combination of historic epic songs of the Germanic peoples: Burgundian songs of the war with Atilla's Hunns and the ruin of the First Burgundian kingdom, legends of the Frankish kings' marriages, rivalries, assassinations and revenge. This is where the main parts of the *Nibelungenlied* story come from, including Siegfried's murder, the Horde of the Nibelungs, the heroes' death in the hands of the Hunns, Kriemhild's revenge. Accordingly, most questions why the characters did something or refused doing something should be addressed here, the answers mainly lying either in the history of the Great Migration or in the heroic values characteristic to that period.

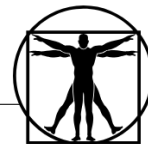
Still deeper is the primeval layer of the myth. It is practically invisible, a subtle undercurrent which mostly manifests itself through a tint of absurd, when the personages act with no sense or logic, against their own best interests. Needless to say, it only seems absurd for as long as we fail to see the ancient religious beliefs motivating these actions. And such manifestations always happen in the presence of either Sex or Death, the common denominator of the two being the Underworld. So whenever the characters of the epic marry, kill or die, we are bound to look for the pagan and the mythological, otherwise our understanding will be limited.

Some episodes of the *Nibeleungenlied* can be explained at one interpretative level only and have little or no meaning at the two other



levels. For instance, in Adventure 26 the Burgundians travelling to the land of the Hunns see a knight asleep on the bare ground and recognize him as Eckewart, their own compatriot, who, after Kriemhild's marriage to Etzel, followed her and served her in the foreign land. One would expect that it was his queen Kriemhild who sent him to the border to see her brothers coming. But Eckewart of the epic does not say a word about her, nor does he mention any purpose for his journey at all, instead he wakes up and laments having lost his sword, and he laments having lost Siegfried, then, on finding the former, he advises the Nibelungs to have a rest in Margrave Rudiger's house and gladly takes it upon himself to tell Rudiger about the guests' arrival (*Das Nibelungenlied*, 2006, pp. 226-227). This meaningless conversation conceals more than it reveals. Why is Eckewart at the border and not in Etzel's capital, by his lady's side? Why is it worth mentioning that he is sleeping? At the literary level there are no answers to these questions. But if we dive to the level of history, we'll find out that in the epic songs of the death of Burgundians which preceded the *Nibelungenlied*, the one who planned the slaughter of the Burgundian heroes was King Etzel, not his wife. The episode finds its explanation: Krimhild tried to thwart her husband's sinister plans and to save her brothers, so she sent her vassal to warn them to not come. But the messenger got so tired that he fell asleep at the border, and so the Burgundians passed him without noticing and went further to face their doom. This episode, thus, only gets significance at the historic level, while remaining silly at the literary level and non-existent at the mythological one.

Some other episodes can be interpreted at two levels, yet others – the key scenes of the whole story – can be simultaneously seen at all the three. One of these, as we have shown in a prior article (Sarakaeva, 2016, p. 30), is the final conversation of two arch-enemies, Kriemhild and Hagen. Knowing that the driving force for Kriemhild's actions is her unrelenting grief for Siegfried and her desire to avenge his death, a modern reader expects her to discuss her late husband with his murderer, but contrary to these expectations she would only ask him about the Horde. Why is she so concerned about money at this moment? Or is there something else she implicitly strives for while explicitly demanding her treasure back? This question can be answered at all the three levels. If we interpret the epic in its given literary form, we can notice that Kriemhild hates Hagen so profoundly that it is not enough for her to simply kill him, she wants to win a moral victory over him, and so she tries to force him to capitulate by giving her back what has been taken away. An alternative, though not conflicting, literary interpretation would be



focused on the subconscious eroticism in the relationship of the characters, the love-hate impetus which makes Kriemhild plan Hagen's death and at the same time – look for his company. So when she finally has him in her power, she starts demanding money for the sake of conflict and conversation, because she cannot demand Siegfried's resurrection, and not making any demands at all would mean it is the time to kill the prisoner and thus to finally part with him.

Analyzing the episode from the historic perspective, we have to resort to the very same fact that explains Eckewart sleeping at the border: historically, in the Burgundian and Frankish epic songs which first formed the story of the Nibelungs, the heroes were trapped, imprisoned and killed by the King of Hunns Etzel, and he was obviously motivated by avarice only, not vengeance. So, on taking Gunther and Hagen prisoners, the Hunn naturally asked them where their gold was hidden. Later, as the legend evolved, Kriemhild replaced Etzel as the mastermind of the massacre, but the story-tellers still remembered the captor's request about the treasure and the captives' proud denial to answer. So, this detail remains in the new text of the epic, though even the author does not know how and why the Horde of the Nibelungs is so important for Kriemhild as to discuss it in the moment when all the world is collapsing round her.

Moving even further down the religious and intellectual history, we can see the real significance of the Horde. The mythological mind of the ancient Europeans treated it as the treasure of the dead, which comes from the Netherworld, and can only be used in the Netherworld, while in the world of the living it spreads chaos and distorts human hearts and relations. By throwing it into the Rhine Hagen returned it to the Netherworld where it belonged, and where the Burgundian hero wanted to use it – and to share it with his kings – when it was their turn to die. Accordingly, their sister and enemy Kriemhild could not let them keep the treasure after their death, as she wanted to bereave them of the happy eternity where they could still be rich, triumphant and able to strike back. (For more detail on the Horde see (Sarakaeva, 2018, pp. 26-36).

Directly after Kriemhild makes her demand of the treasure, the new act of the drama begins, and again the characters say and do things so strange that it provokes a discussion among the Nibelungenlied scholars, because it calls for explanations, but however one explains it, something is still lacking.

In Adventure 39, the very end of the epic, the heroes' death is described. Kriemhild comes to see Hagen, already a prisoner, and again inquires about the treasure, and this time, unlike before the battle, he does

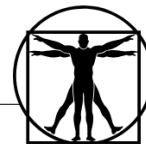


not simply refuse to give her the information – he says the treasure belongs not only to him, but to the three Burgundian kings as well, two of them have perished in the battle, but Gunther is still alive, and as long as he lives Hagen is not free to give up the gold. After that Kriemhild has her own brother beheaded and brings his head to show it to Hagen. This, however, does not help her regain her Horde, because Hagen refuses her point-blank. Unable to get hold of the treasure, Kriemhild at least takes Hagen's sword which used to belong to Siegfried, and kills the prisoner with her own hands. Seeing this as a violation of human and social norms, Etzel's old warrior Hildebrandt kills her (Das Nibelungenlied, 2006, pp. 327-329).

The famous Nibelungenlied scholar J.D. Müller thinks Hagen's words to Kriemhild permit two conclusions: "It remains open to debate whether Hagen thus deliberately causes the death of his lord or demonstrates the eternal triuwe bond one last time. The allegation that Hagen sacrifices the life of his lord ...cannot be supported. ...This speech contains a sinister insinuation but does not articulate it openly" (Müller, 2007, pp. 127-128). But apart from him no other researcher has voiced a doubt that Hagen intentionally manipulated the queen into killing his own friend and feudal lord. But why did he do it?

The evident answer would be that he wanted to keep the Horde, and was afraid Gunther could give it up. Most scholars just do not comment on why the need to keep the treasure outweighed Hagen's concern for his liege's well-being. However, I. R. Campbell pays special attention to this question, and comes to the conclusion less than flattering for the Burgundian hero. He sees Hagen of Tronek as a man of passion who followed his own agenda without caring much for his kings and their kingdom – a description quite contrary to the text of the epic that repeatedly characterizes Hagen as the "defender of the Nibelungs", "shield of the Nibelungs" and glorifies him as an epitome of loyalty. But Campbell thinks Hagen betrayed his king, he ruined Gunther's only chance to survive with no other aim but to remain a winner in his long-lasting feud with Krimhild (Campbell, 1996, pp. 32).

Lynn Thelen is even more critical of Hagen. In her article, somewhat ironically named "Hagen's Shields" she makes use of the hero's epithet, but tries to prove that Hagen, far from shielding other people from danger, was constantly using them for self-protection. In her point of view, he made Kriemhild kill the king for no better reason than to put one more person between himself and death (Thelen, 1997, p. 401). Thus, she portrays him as a coward, a traitor, and a fool – because it was quite obvious this manipulation could give him minutes at best.



Far-fetched as this theory might seem, it is not new, it was supported by the medieval author of the so-called Manuscript C. (There exist three main versions of the Nibelungenlied text, the canon text being Manuscript B, with A following quite close, while C is full of later additions which were meant to clarify the personages' motifs or moral characteristics). Evidently, the author of Manuscript C found the original text too ambiguous and wanted to state directly who was right, and who was wrong; he or she was strongly biased towards Kriemhild and against Hagen. Accordingly, they comment on the analyzed episode: "Hagen knew for sure that she will not let him live. He was afraid that, should she kill him first, her brother will be allowed to return home unharmed. Has there ever been a worse disloyalty?" (Hennig, 1977, p. 255). Just like the modern critics, the author of Manuscript C blames the lord of Tronek of treason, but does not care to explain what he could have gained with this trick. It seems enough for them to say he betrayed his sovereign without any need, just because he could, and was bad enough for that.

We do not subscribe to this point of view. More than that, we think Gunther's death was more than just a means to an end for Hagen, it was no less important than keeping the secret of treasure. As we have once shown in a previous work, King Gunther had absolutely no good ways out of captivity, his choice being between the bad and even worse ones. If he simply refused to give up the Horde, like Hagen did a few minutes later, he would be killed; if he agreed to give it up he could be spared to live with the shameful reputation of a monarch who had lost his whole army but bought his own life, but most likely he would be killed anyway, adding the shame of being fooled to the disgrace of cowering before the enemy. For a medieval war-lord, whose social existence totally depended on his fame and honor, death was definitely the best case-scenario. And so Hagen helped his liege to die as soon, and with as much dignity as possible (Sarakaeva, 2017, p. 55).

All this said, the episode is still far from clear, too many details still ask for comments. How are the Burgundian heroes taken prisoners in the first place? Both Gunther and Hagen, the later especially, are shown in the epic as mighty warriors. Their military prowess keeps them through many days of fighting, and no enemy is strong enough to even wound them seriously, to say nothing of killing, and yet they both – the only two among the whole Burgundian army – get taken alive. The very picture of them being captured is fantastic: their rival, the famous Dietrich of Bern, first fights with Hagen, and uses his enemy's fatigue to tie and escort him out of the hall, while Gunther is watching it and doing nothing, not even trying to save his friend. We might think the king is too tired to stop



Dietrich, yet in a few minutes, when Dietrich returns to the hall, Gunther also starts fighting with him and also ends in prison. So why does he not help Hagen? And why does Dietrich even want to take them prisoners, if his primary aim was to kill them as a revenge for the death of his own friends-in-arms, the so called Amelungs? And how come that this noble avenger brings rope with him when he is going to duel?

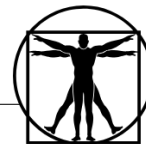
In Scandinavian retelling of this plot – Swedish *Didriks Chronicle* and Norwegian *Thidreks Saga*, the king looks even more pathetic: he is taken prisoner immediately after the battle starts, and all the time the Burgundian knights are fighting with the Hunns he just sits waiting for rescue (*Didriks Chronicle*, 1850, p. 126; *Saga of Thidrek*, 1998, p. 97). The audience is left to guess how it is even possible to snatch a commander-in-chief from under the nose of his troops.

Yet we would be mistaken to suppose that these sagas intentionally denigrate the king's image. A Swedish classic of the *Nibelungenlied* studies A. Heusler proved that in the initial form of the epic songs of the *Death of Burgunds* Gunther was the main character of the plot and an impeccable hero, but the songs already contained the episode of Gunther and Hagen's captivity, refusal to give up the Horde, and one of the prisoners manipulating the enemy into killing the other (Heusler, 1920, p. 303). At this early stage of the legend formation this must have been Gunther making the Hunns kill Hagen.

The same dynamics can be seen in the *Elder Edda*: Gunnar and Högni get captured (we do not know how and in what sequence), and the king of Hunns Atli asks Gunnar to give away his treasure, Gunnar sets a condition that he wants to see his brother's heart first. Atli tries to deceive him and shows him the heart of a lowly slave, but Gunnar immediately understands the truth, because this heart is trembling while the heart of a hero would stay calm in whatever pain it might be. So Atli has no other option but to obey the prisoner's wish, Högni's heart is cut from his live body and brought to his brother. As soon as he sees it, Gunnar refuses the enemy and gets thrown into a snake pit, where he lulls venomous snakes by playing harp and waits for someone to help him. But subsequently he grows too tired to play, and the snakes kill him (*Poetic Edda*, 2004, pp. 368-369, 387-389).

Thus the variants of the story differ in details, like when and how the personages were taken prisoners, and which of them demanded the other's execution, but they repeat the general scheme, according to which they were fighting the common enemy, but were captured, kept and questioned separately, and one of them manipulated the captors into killing his friend and severing some part of his body, after that he was





killed as well. The scheme once made us suggest in a research of Hagen's image and origin, then in the initial form of the legend Hagen used to be an ally and a sworn brother to the Burgundian king, not a vassal, and died in another location, though in the hands of the same enemy. Then the story would be as following: Atilla heard that the Burgundian king Gunther had a great treasure of gold, and so he came to claim it, his troops were innumerable, but Gunther refused to surrender. He sat besieged in his capital of Worms and waited for his ally, the "Kaghan of Tongeren" to come to his rescue. When Atilla learned of it, he wanted to bereave Gunther of any hope, and so declared he had already conquered Tongeren. Gunther then wanted to see his sworn brother's heart, which the Hunns did not have, and so they killed a slave and produced his heart. But the heart trembled of fear, and the king was able to see through the deception. So Atilla got furious, he went to Tongeren, seized and destructed it, killed the Kaghan and tore the heart out of his chest, and showed it to Gunther. The later still did not agree to surrender, but he lost hope, and in some time both he and his kingdom perished in this war.

With the course of time and under the pressure of literary taste and value system of the Germanic peoples the legend changed the setting, Hagen was reinterpreted as a vassal and relative to king Gunther, the battle and execution of the heroes were relocated to the land of the Hunns, even later Atilla was substituted by the heroes' own sister Kriemhild as the antagonist of the piece, but the focal point of the story remained intact: this was still the story of two friends who lost the same battle, got imprisoned and separated, and one of who orchestrated another's painful, but honorable death (Sarakaeva, 2016, p. 73-77).

Though it is a bold assumption that can never be verified due to the lack of textual sources, we still find it worth suggesting for two reasons. First, it closely follows the real history of how the First Burgundian kingdom on the Rhine and the Alan state in Tongeren, in present-day Belgium, appeared, operated and collapsed. Secondly, it fills in some lacunae in the Lay of the Death of the Nibelungs, most important of which being the reason why one captive hero makes the enemies kill and dismember the other.

So far, we have found significance of the final scenes of the Nibelungenlied at both analyzed levels. Treating the epic as an isolated work of art, we have concluded that the driving force behind Hagen's manipulation was loyalty. He did not sacrifice the king's life for the sake of his own pride, he sacrificed it for the king's pride and honor – exactly what a good vassal ought to do. Viewing the Nibelungenlied as the sum of preceding stories and a final result of their merge and evolution, we have

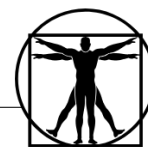


reconstructed a probable original version of the plot, in which the two heroes died each in his own place, and so Gunther did not demand Hagen to be killed, he only demanded to be shown the proof of his ally's death.

Yet we cannot but feel there is something more to the story. To start with, there is this strange captivity of the two heroes. All through the final Adventure, their captor, Dietrich of Bern, keeps doing things quite contrary to his own words and intentions. He entered the battle with the expressed desire to revenge the death of his own Gothic troop, the Amelungs. And still he starts the conversation with the Burgunds offering them safety and protection in case they agree to surrender. Why does Dietrich even make this offer? Taking them prisoners and then protecting them from any harm and humiliation would hardly qualify as revenge. As the Nibelungs proudly decline the offer, Dietrich has to start the fight, but it turns out, he happens to have a rope on him, and he happens to see a possibility to seize Hagen alive, and then returns to look for the same possibility with Gunther. After that, this noble knight brings his prisoners to their mortal enemy Kriemhild and leaves them in her hands with no other security guarantees than the queen's promise to not kill them. Once again, we have to ask why. Dietrich cannot but know Kriemhild wants nothing short of their death, and her word cannot be trusted. Nor does the desperate queen have any power over the Gothic hero at this stage, so had he wanted to kill Gunther and Hagen, or had he wanted to keep them safe – he could do both himself, instead of handing them to her. And this proves that whatever words, thoughts and emotions the text ascribes to Dietrich, his real intention was to do exactly as he did – to capture the Burgundian leaders alive and pass them to Kriemhild. But we still need to face the question why.

Another thing that arrests attention is the quick succession of the three murders in this episode: Hagen died minutes after Gunther, and as soon as he died, his murderer Kriemhild was also killed by Hildebrand – so immediately that it makes the reader understand Hildebrand was present when Kriemhild was questioning and then killing Hagen, did nothing to prevent the murder, but sprang to revenge it. Again – why?

No less disturbing is a very graphic description of these murders, the abundance of corporal details in the episode. The victims are not just killed – they are mutilated. Gunther gets beheaded, and his sister brings his head to his friend holding it by the hair. Then she continues her imminent bodily contact with the prisoners by killing Hagen with her own hands, although she is surrounded by servants. Hildebrands strikes her several times, and the author sadly depicts her crying and trembling of fear, helplessly trying to escape the blows, and the old warrior



following and repeatedly stabbing her. The result of this description is a picture of extreme violence, very bodily in nature, and surpassing any social boundaries.

The Elder Edda, though more laconic when it comes to feelings and details, still preserves this stress on corporal violence in its presentation of the according episode. Högni's chest is cut open, and the heart is torn out if it and brought to Gunnar; Gunnar is tied and thrown into a pit full of snakes, where finally a snake bites him (in another Eddic song Atli's mother bites his heart (Poetic Edda 2004, 362); Gudrun tries to protect her brothers with a sword in her hands, and having failed, she kills her own sons by Atli, cutting their throats and then taking out their hearts to fry them for their father's dinner; last of all she cuts sleeping Atli's throat and burns his palace (Poetic Edda, 2004, pp. 387-389, 390-393).

Whatever version of the story we take, the Death of the Nibelungs is a mounting of brutalities, so vivid that it is easy to overlook a certain design in them: first there comes a general battle, then the two heroes are intentionally taken prisoners, one of them orchestrates the other's murder and mutilation, and gets killed too, which is followed by the last act of the drama – the brothers' murderer is also cruelly killed, all in quick succession.

The only practice in history which corresponds to this design is a human sacrifice.

We see mentions of human sacrifice among Germanic peoples in written sources; Tacitus states, for example, that in Germanic tribes "capital punishment, imprisonment, and even flogging are not inflicted merely as punishment or on the leader's orders, but in obedience to the god whom they believe to preside over battle" – the god who the modern historians think to be Odin (Freeman, 1995, p. 35). Much later Snorri Sturluson routinely notes that this or that king sacrificed prisoners of war to Odin (Sturluson, 1991).

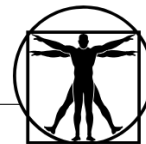
Though the very occurrence of human sacrifice has long been an issue of debate for historians for the lack of relevant and indisputable archaeological finds, in the past decades more and more of these cases have been revealed in Europe. And their character is very informative. What makes these cases notable, what makes it possible to recognize the remains as sacrificial victims is multiple traumas and manipulations of the body parts. For instance, the so called Bog Bodies, human mummies deposited in wetlands through Celtic and Germanic areas of Europe show traces of torture or mutilations, like two persons found together in a bog in Drenthe in Netherlands, holding each other in what seemed a romantic embrace, and so initially believed to be spouses, but later proved to be two



men, one of whom had his stomach sliced open. A man in Clonycavan, Ireland, was disemboweled, had his nipples cut off, and was struck three times on the head (Congail, 2017). In Uppland area, Sweden, there is a large deposition of human and horse remains, where the majority of human victims were young males with healed bone trauma, most likely warriors, both humans and horses were killed by violence to the head (Edholm, 2019, p. 265). Summing up the findings historian Ned Kelly suggests that at least some of the Bog Bodies might have been kings sacrificed for the well-being of their chiefdoms. He also thinks that excessive violence per se is a sign of ritual killing (Duerr, 2016, p. 6). M. Lovschal and M.K. Holst pay attention to yet another tendency in human sacrifices in Northern Europe: the ritual killing of humans typical for the early Iron Age later tends to be substituted by destruction of weapons when the enemies' swords were damaged and thrown into the water of wetlands (Lovschal, 2018, p. 27-39).

We can easily see some important similarities between these sacrifice practices and the Death of the Nibelungs described above. Victims were either royalty or prisoners of war (or both), they were killed with excessive violence, their heads or hearts were severed from the bodies, they were placed into a low and wet pit, their swords were taken away in a symbolic gesture. But these external similarities do not explain the inner logic of the episode, like we have all the details at hand, but miss the assembly point. If this episode in the epic really reflects the distant memories of the Iron Age sacrifices, then why are the two Nibelungs specifically chosen as victims? Why does Hagen orchestrate Gunther's death? Why does Hildebrand let the queen kill the prisoners, but kills her immediately afterwards? And why – should the episode actually reflect the religious rite – there is no sense of piety, any god figure is remarkably absent from the scene or even from behind the scene, instead the setting is prevailed by hatred and extreme violence.

An anthropological theory that directly links human sacrifice to violence was articulated by the prominent French thinker Rene Girard in his book "Violence and the Sacred". The starting point of his hypothesis is the fact, supported by ethnologists, that in primitive societies the main menace for the personal and communal survival is intra-communal violence. When there is no state to punish the guilty, the only mechanism of dealing with crime is blood vengeance, but this is a far from perfect tool, because any act of revenge causes new revenge, more and more people are obliged to kill each other, and violence spreads across the whole society making everyone enemies. Girard sees human sacrifice as a coping strategy for the spread of violence, as it enables people to find a



scapegoat, call him the guilty party and the root of violence, and kill him giving vent to their own aggression, ire and grievances against each other. This theory traces the origin of human sacrifice to social psychology, not to the religious ideas, which makes the very presence of gods or spirits optional for the rite, because first the killing was motivated by collective desires, guilt and anger, and dedicating the victim to gods came as a kind of afterthought.

For a person to be a suitable sacrificial victim he or she should possess two main qualities. First, they must be properly distanced from the community – not total strangers, but somehow distinct from the rest. If they were strangers, they could not represent the community, if they were regular members, their killing would constitute a murder, not sacrifice, and thus would provoke a new round of blood vengeance, instead of putting it to rest. So the victims of choice for the majority of societies are war prisoners, beggars, criminals, outcasts of all kinds, and kings – as the later unmistakably represent the whole of the people, and yet never merge with them.

The second feature that makes victims sacrifice-able is guilt, they must be guilty of crimes numerous and horrendous, so that their killing could placate the universe. In different cultures these crimes can take a form of breaking different taboos, but in general the scapegoat's crimes denominate the same public terror – violence within one's family. So it all can be reduced to incest with one's female relatives and murdering one's male relatives. The male relative figure, the one whose death signaled the starting point of violence, is most often a brother, or a substitute for a brother: a sworn brother or a brother-in-law, hence the abundance of myths where a hero kills his brother. No less notable is the fact that the community often views the sacrificial victim as their own substitute brother. The author cites the ritual practices of South American cannibals of the Tupinamba tribe, in whose language the noun "tobajara" denotes an enemy; a person eaten after having been sacrificed; and a brother-in-law. If we believe, as R. Girard did, that the primary objective of a human sacrifice was to free the community from mutual hatred by readdressing it to someone disposable, then it is easier to understand the overkill of the Bog Bodies: this was a sacrifice and a punishment at the same time, the victim was treated as a worst kind of criminal, causing him pain was the essence of the ritual.

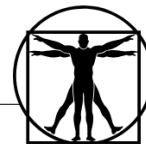
The philosopher pays special attention to the king's sacrifice, the practice which modern ethnologists only witnessed in African monarchies, but which is still traceable in other cultural contexts too. In many African societies the enthronization of a new king includes him



breaking all possible taboos – he marries a sister/mother/aunt, eats ritually impure food like spiders or rats, takes blood baths, uses magic portions, commits violent acts. Girard does not believe – nor, he says, most ethnologists believe – that these taboos are broken just for the sake of demonstrating the exalted status of the king who is above any conventional limitations. The idea that the king marries his sister to preserve the purity of the royal blood seems to him as fantastic as the thought that the king is sacrificed because he has grown old and weak. Both ideas are but late rationalization of the fact that the king commits crimes for no other reason than to become guilty and to embody collective sin, and is sacrificed because that is what he was crowned for in the first place. So the author names it a characteristic feature of monarchy that a king's power is given him by his future death for the sake of the nation. However, the king is not merely a victim, he is at the same time the main figure in his own sacrifice, the center of the ritual dynamics, he sometimes commands the whole process, and the person who deals him a final blow is later punished, expelled or even killed. This way the community gets rid of violence embodied in both the king as the taboo violator, and his killer as a regicide (Girard, 1977).

Looking at the tragic finale of the *Nibelungenlied* from this perspective, we can at last fill in the logical and emotional lacunae enumerated above. The whole story of the Death of the Nibelungs is a chronicle of intra-communal violence. Its precursor, Siegfried's death at the hands of his brothers-in-law, signals the beginning of the societal self-destruction, and when the Burgunds come to the Hunns' capital, to visit Etzel, who replaced Siegfried in the role of their brother-in-law, the violence starts growing exponentially. Gunther and Hagen cannot but be seen as the people guilty of all this violence, as one of them is a king, he symbolically represents Burgundy as a whole, and carries all her sins; the other is responsible for practical implementation of the violence. To make him even guiltier the story-teller has him killing Kriemhild's little son Ortlieb immediately before the battle. If they two have started the violence, then their death – not an ordinary death in the battle, but a ritual killing – is necessary to stop the cycle of violence, which explains why Dietrich takes so much trouble to seize them alive, but loses any interest in their survival right after.

But Kriemhild is no less guilty. The level of violence she directs against her own clansmen is rising with each new decision: first she only plans to kill Hagen, then she uses her son's life to provoke a massacre, then she orders warriors to attack her brothers with all their people, then she personally presides over the beheading of her brother Gunther, and



the violence reaches its climax in the final act when she kills Hagen (also her half-brother in older versions of the plot, or at the very least a substitute brother) with her own hands. And so the society has to sacrifice her as well, dealing her multiple blows with Hildebrand's hands.

In Elder Edda the Burgunds' crime of intra-communal violence is followed by a slight hint of incest: after Brunhild's suicide her widower Gunnar falls in love with her sister Oddrun, and though the sisters' brother king Atli rejects his marriage proposal, Gunnar still secretly meets her to make sex. But the Nibelungenlied excludes sex from the list of broken taboos, and only limits the Nibelungs' crimes to murder of the relatives. But this theme is so important for the story that it literally cannot stop repeating and multiplying these murders.

Within the guilt-and-sacrifice framework it is easier to see the ritual logic of Hagen's manipulation too. As Gunther's subject he must send Gunther to death so that the king's sacrifice serves the good of their own people, not the conquering Hunns. But he is more than just a subject, in these scenes he practically is a king – both because of his role as the Burgundian leader, and because of his place as a center of the sacrificial dynamics. Just like an African monarch in the corresponding ceremony, he commands the sacrifice, decides who does what, and is the crossing point of the sacrificial violence – both the victim and the priest. In the earlier epic songs and the Elder Edda, as we have already mentioned, it is Gunther who dies the last and commands his friends' murder, but the Nibelungenlied reversed the positions, it does not make the king a manipulator, instead it makes the manipulator a king-by-proxy.

Yet there is one more, and perhaps the most important, reason for Hagen to demand Gunther's death – the need to be guilty. Certainly, by this time the Burgundian hero is far from innocent, he killed Siegfried many years ago, and he killed Ortlieb a few days ago. But the logic of sacrifice requires that the victim should be a fratricidal killer or else his death cannot purify the community from the burden of fratricide. This need is so prevalent that the same crime is ascribed to all the three victims of this episode – Gunther, Hagen, and Kriemhild. What qualifies them for a sacrifice is Cain's sin. Why does Gunther have to die? Because he has killed his brother Siegfried. Why does Hagen have to die? Because he has killed his brother Gunther. Why does Kriemhild have to die? Because she has killed her brothers Gunther and Hagen. The threefold repetition of the plot twist reinforces the message: violence within one's clan brings more violence upon one's head, killing within community leads to total destruction, whoever murders their brother will end in a snake pit.

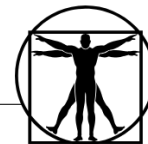


It is necessary to stress, though, that we do not consider the Nibelungenlied a conscious portrayal of human sacrifice. The death of the heroes in the text – and even in the broad historic context – has other reasons, and we are far from treating these reasons as irrelevant, or as a window dressing masking the pagan rituals. Our idea is that the ancient religious practice of sacrificing kings and war prisoners, dating as long ago as the early Iron Age, and possibly even longer, produced a significant impression on the collective memories and values of the Germanic peoples. By the Early Middle Ages when the first stories of the Nibelungs appeared, to say nothing of the High Middle Ages, the time of the Nibelungenlied creation, these practices were long forgotten, but their influence could still be sensed. And so when a song of the Death of Burgundians, a heroic epic by its original nature, told a story of how a king fought and was killed, the collective imagination of the people instinctively added such familiar components as fratricide, captivity, overkill and dismembering of the prisoners, as well as destruction of their swords. It also recombined the elements so as to enforce violence prevention. The picture of severed heads and hearts are used here to instill terror and thus to bring home the message that violence is easier to start, than to finish; once started, it will unmistakably find its way home, to one's own country, family, and body.

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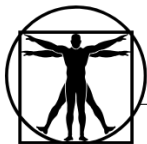




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