

Initiation Rituals in Old Norse Texts and their Relationship to Finno- Karelian Bear Cult Rituals

a comparative approach



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Contents

Summary	page 3
List of abbreviations	page 4
Introduction	page 5
Introduction to the scholars	page 6
Introduction to the Finno-Karelian sources	page 8
Introduction to the Old Norse sources	page 8
<i>Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans</i>	page 9
Narrative breakdown	page 11
<i>Völsungasaga</i>	page 11
Narrative Breakdown	page 15
Ritual	page 16
Analysis of the Old Norse sources	page 21
Sigurd in <i>Völsungasaga</i>	page 21
Schjødtt's framework	page 22
First, the notion of irreversibility	page 22
Second, the tripartite system	page 23
Third, the oppositional pairs	page 27
Fourth and finally, the numinous object	page 30
In summary	page 32
Bödvar and Hottr in <i>Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans</i>	page 32
In summary	page 37
Comparison of <i>Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans</i> and <i>Völsungasaga</i>	page 37
The Bear Cult	page 40
Comparisons	page 43
Animism	page 50
Conclusions	page 53
Bibliography	page 56
Appendix 1	page 60
Appendix 2	page 61

Summary

This thesis demonstrates that there is a compelling link between the ancient northern Bear Cult and Old Norse sagas. This is achieved through analysis of two *fornaldarsögur*, in terms of ritual framework and the thread of animism which lies under the surface of the narrative. The chosen sagas are the famous *Völsungasaga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans*. This thesis focuses on two episodes in these sagas. In *Völsungasaga*, analysis is made of the legendary encounter between Sigurd and Fafnir. In *Hrólfs saga*, the thesis concentrates on Bödvar and Hottr, and their strange experience with the animal that attacks Hrolf's hall. These *slaying episodes* are examined in light of a scholarly framework for identifying initiation rituals. It is found that ritual combat with a supernatural monster is likely to be based in actual historical practice. The history of this practice is traced back to a cult belief that has been termed Eurasia's oldest religion; the ancient northern Bear Cult. This once spanned the northern hemisphere, but was remarkably preserved in Finno-Karelian oral tradition. Poetry from Finland and Karelia, including the Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*, form the comparative material against which the sagas are examined for links to the Bear Cult. This thesis finds that there are compelling connections between the Bear Cult and the slaying episodes in terms of ritual patterns and animist practice. This connection is significant for seeing the slaying episodes as remnants of actual historical practice, and for understanding the origin of some of the motifs and themes in the sagas.

List of Abbreviations

FFA – *Finnish Folklore Atlas*

HSK – *Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappi hans*

IBTW – *Initiation Between Two Worlds*

TGB – *The Great Bear*

VS – *Völsungasaga*

see bibliography page 56

Introduction:

Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans and *Völsungasaga* are two well known *fornaldarsögur*, examination of two episodes, one from each saga, will form the basis of this thesis. The current project will examine two 'slaying episodes' which are themselves among the most well known individual scenes from across the Old Norse literary corpus. The slaying episodes constitute what this thesis aims to show as evidence of a ritual practice undertaken in Old Norse society and preserved by the saga authors from surviving oral tradition. This will be shown by examining the two episodes against frameworks for identifying rituals devised by Schjødt. Schjødt is a scholar of ritual and Scandinavian mythology, his book *Initiation Between Two Worlds* will provide the main criteria for understanding how the episodes in the Old Norse texts can be seen as rituals. Taking lead from Schjødt, this project sees the rituals in the texts to be examined as *initiation* rituals as they can be seen as fulfilling the criteria set down in his book. By understanding how the slaying episodes work as rituals it is possible to see them less as literary motif or as dramatic creation of the saga authors.

The ritual nature of the episodes suggests that there is a level of historical reality to the ritual pattern. This will be further examined in this thesis by additional analysis of the rituals identified in the Old Norse texts, with comparative material from a geographically and culturally approximate culture, which has been suggested as possibly having a connection to certain saga motifs by Jesse Byock and Matti Sarmela.¹ This thesis hopes to explore these possible connections to full reasonable extent and answer the questions posed by these scholars. The material chosen to make the comparison is records of Ob-Ugrian ritual and cultural practice related to the Northern Bear Cult. The particular focus of this thesis will be on making comparison with sources from the Finnish and Karelian traditions. They have been chosen from among the diverse group of Ob-Ugrian peoples because of their geographical proximity to the Nordic region and for the wealth of available sources. It would be beyond the scope of this project to widen the comparison to a study of the full available corpus of Ob-Ugrian sources. While mention will be made of other areas where necessary, further enquiry would be required to fully understand the extent of the comparison.

In addition to the close geographical link between the two groups, the Nordic peoples and the Finno-Karelians, the nature of the Finnish sources also provides ample reason for this choice of

¹ Sarmela, *Finnish Folklore Atlas 4th Edition* (Helsinki, 2009) p. 92

Byock, *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki* trans. (London, 1998) p. vii

comparative material. The bear songs or poems recorded in areas of Finland and Kareila in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and sources extant from as early as the sixteenth century, are among the best preserved records of a culture which had remained largely unchanged for centuries. Due to the extraordinary nature of the oral tradition recorded by these sources, this thesis will argue that it allows us to glimpse a culture which existed in a relatively unchanged form. This at a time contemporaneous to the period the sagas were transferred from oral tradition to manuscript page. Furthermore, due to the largely unchanged nature of the oral tradition, that is not unreasonable to suggest that the rituals extant in the Finno-Karelian material may represent the type of practice which influenced the slaying episode rituals in the Old Norse texts.

Introduction to the scholars:

This project is mainly looking at work from two scholars, the first is Jens Peter Schjødt now of the University of Aarhus in Denmark. This thesis primarily takes cue from Schjødt, *Initiation Between Two Worlds, Structure and Symbolism in Pre-Christian Scandinavia Religion* (Odense, 2008) translated into English by V. Hansen. Schjødt's particular goal in *Initiation Between Two Worlds*, IBTW) was to shed light on the practice of initiation rituals present in Norse mythology. Schjødt in IBTW looks at the history of scholarship surrounding ritual studies and particularly focuses on the early work of Van Gennep, who did much to establish the scholarly study of initiation rituals.² Van Gennep's work *Rites of Passage* was particularly important as it distinguished between puberty rites and initiation rites which Van Gennep looked upon more as “social puberty”.³ Schjødt refines the previous scholarship and focuses on creating a framework for identifying initiation rituals, as distinct from other types of rituals, with a specific eye to examining the Old Norse sources.⁴ Of these sources Schjødt is particularly focused on Scandinavian mythology and primarily those myths concerning Odin. The other gods and the human heroes Schjødt sees more as background comparative material for the Odin myths.

After further analysis of other types of ritual and the semantic field used to talk about them, Schjødt concludes that he has created a set of criteria which can effectively isolate and identify initiation rituals in Old Norse narrative sources.⁵ Not only this but Schjødt also concludes that pre-Christian

² Schjødt, *Initiation Between Two Worlds, Structure and Symbolism in Pre-Christian Scandinavia Religion* (Odense, 2008), p. 73

³ Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage* trans. Vizedom & Caffee (London, 1965, 1908) p. 65

⁴ Schjødt, IBTW, pp. 72-85

⁵ Ibid., p. 459

Scandinavia must have had a very well developed series of ideas, or “semantic universe” of what constitutes initiation. ⁶ Schjødt's final remarks, which are most relevant for the present study, include the following finding: “...there existed in the period before Christianity entered into the consciousness of the Scandinavian people an initiation structure and initiation symbolism which, in all likelihood, had an impact on their ritual performances...”.⁷ Schjødt goes on to say that the “...comparative perspective is able to, perhaps even necessary in order to contribute at the general religious level in terms of the general reconnaissance of the material.”⁸ The present project hopes to build on the closing statement by allowing for comparison with related Finno-Karelian material.

The second of the two scholars this study will take lead from is Matti Sarmela of Helsinki University. Sarmela, *Finnish Folklore Atlas*, (Helsinki, 2009) translated into English by A. Silver this contains the scholar's main work on the Finno-Karelian Bear Cult among a wider review of the folklore associated with different areas of Finland. Due to the limited space available in the present project and the relevance to the source choice, the study will focus solely on Sarmela's chapters concerning Bear Rites. In the *Finnish Folklore Atlas* (FFA) Sarmela provides rigorous analysis of the main source material concerning the Bear Cult across Finland and Karelia looking at the poetic sources, some archaeology and narrative sources including the *Viitasaari Text*.⁹ The FFA is a very useful work for the study of the Bear Cult because Sarmela makes use of a number of poem variants which appear here translated into English. He also provides analysis of certain Old Finnish texts which are not otherwise available in translation. Sarmela examines in his narrative perceptions of the bear in Finland, and related areas including reference to Lappish and Siberian peoples, from the oldest possible times right up until the modern era.¹⁰ He charts the history of human interaction with the bear, lingering longest on the earlier material which preserves ideas of man's earliest interactions with the animal, while only comparatively briefly looking at early modern and modern perceptions of the bear. It is Sarmela's survey and analysis of the earlier interactions which are relevant to this thesis. Indeed Sarmela makes a fleeting reference to a possible relationship between the Bear Cult and the Old Norse corpus: “...traces of bear totemism are also found in ancient Scandinavian sagas and kinship narratives.”¹¹ This thesis hopes to go some way towards bridging the gap between the Bear Cult and Old Norse texts.

⁶ Schjødt, IBTW, p. 461

⁷ Ibid., p. 462

⁸ Ibid., p. 462

⁹ Sarmela, pp. 81, 88, 91, 105-6

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 103

¹¹ Ibid., p. 92

Introduction to the Finno-Karelian sources:

The sources this thesis will be using to represent the Finnish material include canto 46 from *The Kalevala* – A section of the national epic of Finland which deals with a bear ritual. The *Kalevala* was compiled by Lönnrot in the nineteenth century from a vast corpus of oral poetry he collected in numerous journeys across the country. These collections of poetry, before Lönnrot arranged them and brought them together as a single narrative are also important sources of comparative material. The *Kalevala* has been translated into English a number of times by different scholars and poets. The translation used in this thesis is the translation by Francis Peabody Magoun, Jr. who's approach to the text makes for the most accurate representation of the content of the poems for scholarly purposes. Magoun's approach preferences line by line translation over preservation of metre or rhyme. Magoun describes his method as akin to the straightforward translation of Icelandic sagas preserving their straightforward approach and preservation of literal meaning.¹²

A number of these poems which represent the different versions told in the tradition are collected in side-by-side translation in *The Great Bear* edited by Honko and Branch. This thesis will be looking primarily at poems 43 *Setting out to Hunt*; 44 *Where Bruin was Given Birth*; 45 *At the Bear's Lair*; 46 *Off you Go, Gold One*; 47 *Welcome Home, Bruin* and 48 *The Bear Feast* (see appendix 2). Sarmela also records alternative versions of a number of poem/songs in his *Finnish Folklore Atlas*. Sarmela's work also includes his interpretation of a number of prose sources of information on the Bear Cult, most notably the *Viitasaari Text*. The *Viitasaari Text* is a seventeenth century narrative in which a local bishop describes what he has witnessed of local cultic practices.¹³

Introduction to the Old Norse sources:

The two *fornaldarsögur* to be examined in this thesis are *Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappá hans* and *Völsungasaga* (hereafter referred to as HSK and VS respectively). They are among the most famous texts of the Old Norse literary corpus. At this juncture it is necessary to briefly recount the narrative of the two saga texts. HSK describes events thought to have taken place during the sixth century concerning a king in Denmark known as Hrolf and is representative of a long held oral tradition surrounding this legendary figure. HSK was written down in prose in Iceland some time in the

¹² Magoun, *The Kalevala or Poems of the Kalevala District Compiled by Elias Lönnrot* (Cambridge Mass., 1963) p.

xvi

¹³ Sarmela, p. 81

1300's placing it as a mid to late text in the history of Icelandic saga writing.¹⁴ The current form of the saga can be dated to a c.1400 composition while it is only extant in manuscript copies from the seventeenth century.¹⁵ Byock identifies that the saga author was adhering to the episodic structure of earlier material when this saga was recorded and as such can be seen to have been aware that the text he was creating was drawn from disparate sections of much older material.¹⁶ The composition of VS has been dated to the thirteenth century making it a slightly older saga than HSK. This saga too is thought to have been a recording of an enduring oral tradition and describes events which are thought to be connected to the fourth and fifth centuries.¹⁷ VS is thought to be based on poetry in the *Elder Edda* which tell much of the Sigurd story and are considered among the oldest Old Norse literature.¹⁸ Byock puts the remarkable oral preservation of stories, from such a far removed past, down to the popularity of the Sigurd story, which was recorded in such different works as the *Nibelungenlied* and the Greenlandic *Lay of Atli*.¹⁹ Both of the sagas to be examined here are thought to draw on a solid oral tradition and cultural memory of the story contained within their pages. Both sagas therefore can be considered to preserve to an extent very old events and practices associated with Old Norse culture and history.

Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans:

HSK relates the story of King Hrolf and his group of renown warriors including the back stories of a select number of these retainers; of particular interest for the purpose of this thesis are the characters Bödvar Bjarki and Hottir/Hjalti. Bödvar is the son of a woman and a bear and as such is immediately connected with the other or supernatural world, around which and within which, rituals take place. Bödvar, the younger of three brothers, is the last to leave his mothers home having remained longer to see his dead father avenged. On leaving home he acquires his inheritance, a magic sword, left by his father in the cave where the latter lived as a bear. Bödvar travels onwards and meets first his eldest brother who has the legs of an elk, Bödvar fights his brother amicably and upon losing, his brother instructed him to drink blood from his leg so Bödvar might increase his power. Bödvar meets his second brother after being mistaken for him and sleeping in the same bed as his brother's wife for a number of nights before the two meet – whether there was a sexual encounter between Bödvar and his brother's wife is open to question. Bödvar continues on his

14 Byock, HSK p. vii

15 Ibid., p. viii

16 Ibid., pp. viii-ix

17 Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs* trans. (London, 1999) p. 2

18 Ibid., p. 3

19 Ibid., pp. 3-4

journey and on the way to the hall of King Hrolf he meets the peasant mother of Hottr, a boy she says is being mistreated by Hrolf's warriors. Having grown in strength, Bödvar eventually arrives at the hall of King Hrolf where he finds the warriors of the king and Hottr.

It is the nature of the interaction between Bödvar and Hottr which is specifically important for this project. The story of their meeting and early time at Lerje, Hrolf's hall, contains the slaying motif which conforms to the established ritual structure, and shows a commonality of features with the Finnish material related to bear hunting. This particular episode shall be considered to begin the moment Bödvar meets Hottr in the hall as there are a number of elements in their interaction which follows expected patterns of behaviour in a ritual setting. Bödvar after meeting Hottr takes him from underneath a pile of discarded bones and washes him in a nearby body of water, after which Bödvar sets Hottr on a bench in the hall beside him. When the warriors see this they continue to mistreat Hottr by throwing bones at him and Bödvar, the latter protecting Hottr, catches a large bone and throws it back at the man who threw it, causing his death. This action brings Bödvar to the attention of King Hrolf who makes Bödvar one of his warriors under the agreement that Bödvar and Hottr can sit at the bench nearest to the king. The next thing the saga relates is when an animal approaches the hall at Yuletide. Hottr tells Bödvar that this is a regular event and that the beast causes great destruction. Hrolf orders none of his men to go against the animal so they do not throw their lives away. Bödvar, taking Hottr with him sneaks out of the hall in the night to go against the beast, Hottr being too afraid, is left cowering on the heath while Bödvar kills the animal. After the animal is dispatched Bödvar has Hottr drink of the beasts blood and eat of its heart. After doing this Hottr feels a new strength and the two prop the animal up as if it were still alive and return to the hall. The next morning, when the king asks who will go against the animal, Bödvar volunteers Hottr for the task. To general astonishment Hottr accepts and proceeds to go against the animal if he can claim a sword named Goldenhilt from King Hrolf. This is agreed upon and Hottr 'kills' the animal, while Hrolf reveals he knows the truth, he is pleased that Bödvar has created a strong man out of Hottr. When Hottr has successfully completed the task, he is rewarded by Hrolf with the new name of Hjalti and becomes a warrior of similar standing to Bödvar at the hall.

Narrative breakdown:

On first meeting Hottr is lying under a pile of bones.
 Bödvar washes the blackened and dirty Hottr in a nearby lake.
 Hottr tells Bödvar of the animal which arrives in winter time.
 Hrolf forbids anyone to go against the animal.
 Bödvar and Hottr sneak out to fight the animal.
 Hottr is left cowering while Bödvar kills the animal.
 Bödvar makes Hottr eat the heart and drink the blood of the animal.
 Bödvar and Hottr wrestle and Hottr declares his new strength.
 They both prop up the dead animal so it appears to be alive.
 They both return to Hrolf's hall.
 Bödvar volunteers Hottr to take on the animal.
 Hottr agrees and goes against the animal while Hrolf sees through Bödvar's ploy.
 Hottr earns the sword Goldenhilt and the new name of Hjalti.
 Hjalti lives at the hall with Bödvar and is of comparable strength and bearing.

Völsungasaga:

Völsungasaga is probably the most well known of all of the fornaldarsögur as it forms the basis for the story of Sigurd/Siegfried which was retold in Wagner's Ring Cycle. Half of the saga deals with the ancestors of Sigurd along the Völsung line including his father. For the purposes of this project we will be focusing on Sigurd and perhaps the most well known episode – his slaying of the dragon Fafnir. The slaying episode occurs quickly over a few short chapters, but is first mentioned in the same chapter as Sigurd's birth. The aftermath of the slaying continues for a number of chapters up to Sigurd's departure from the valkyrie Brynhildr. Schjødt in *Initiation Between Two Worlds*, additionally examined a different episode in Völsungasaga, namely the section concerning Sigmund and Sinfjötli. Sigmund tests Sinfjötli, in what Schjødt has identified as an initiation ritual situation where Sinfjötli proves himself as a strong man worthy of Sigmund.²⁰ The same Sigmund, who is then revealed to be Sinfjötli's father by his own sister thus making Sinfjötli a pure Völsung. There is a particular part of this episode which has relevance to the present project as it contains an element of animism. Sigmund and Sinfjötli put on wolf skins which transform them into wolves. The

²⁰ Schjødt, IBTW, p. 299

initiation ritual continues through this transformation as Sinfjötli is tested and nearly killed by men he attacks when running as a wolf. While this episode does not have a bearing on the interpretation of the slaying episode, it does identify a certain animist theme running through the saga.

Sigurd the hero of *Völsungasaga* and son of Sigmund and Hjordis, is born at the court of the King of Denmark after Sigmund's death. Sigurd is fostered, a typical arrangement in Norse society with a man called Regin. Regin tells Sigurd, in the same chapter in which Sigurd is born, that he must kill the dragon Fafnir to acquire wealth and glory as he claims that Sigurd has no independent wealth of his own as it is controlled by the Kings of Denmark. We know that Regin urges this of Sigurd at the first opportunity because Sigurd makes mention that he is scarcely out of childhood when asking why Regin is pressuring him so strongly to move against Fafnir. Regin proceeds to tell Sigurd the story of his family and why he wants Sigurd to kill Fafnir. The story Regin recounts continues the thread of animism running through the saga; the Aesir kill Regin's brother Ottar when he was fishing in the form of an otter. The Aesir are then made to pay wergeld for Ottar by the father of the brothers, this ransom is a huge wealth of gold and gems which the gods themselves take from the dwarf Andvari, whom they capture when he is in the form of a pike. After hearing that Fafnir took all of the wealth for himself and has become a terrible dragon, another animal transformation, Sigurd agrees to kill Fafnir for Regin, but only once his father is avenged. Sigurd, like Bödvar, avenges his father before embarking on his journey of initiation.

Once Sigurd comes to a point where he is ready to confront Fafnir the narrative moves quickly and the episode is quite brief, perhaps typical of the understated nature of saga literature. The episode can be considered to begin properly when Regin makes three swords in preparation for Sigurd. The first two swords break and only the third made with the pieces of Sigurd's father Sigmund's sword is sufficient. Once the sword is acquired, Regin leads Sigurd to the lair of Fafnir. Regin runs to hide and much like Hottr, he does not take part in the battle against the monster but stays nearby in passive participation while Odin appears to Sigurd and tells him how to kill Fafnir. Sigurd digs trenches to lie in to stab Fafnir from underneath and also for the dragon's blood to run into. Fafnir is killed with a single stab from Sigurd but unlike the animal in HSK, an interaction between the dragon and Sigurd follows Fafnir's mortal wound. Sigurd's dialogue with Fafnir sees Sigurd gain knowledge of the dragon's hoarded wealth but also burdens him with a magical curse. In a scene highly reminiscent of the episode in HSK, once Fafnir is dead Regin rejoins Sigurd and drinks the

blood of his fallen brother, then has Sigurd cook the heart of the dragon for him. While Sigurd is cooking the heart he tastes some of the blood which gives him supernatural knowledge – the understanding of the speech of birds. He takes the advice of the birds he overhears and eats more of the heart himself to gain supernatural powers, then kills Regin who the birds reveal is going to betray Sigurd. Once Regin is killed, Sigurd takes possession of the hoard of Fafnir including the supernatural Helm of Terror.

After acquiring the wealth of Fafnir, Sigurd travels onwards and meets the valkyrie Brynhildr who imparts on him supernatural knowledge and wisdom. Further evidence for Sigurd's first encounter with Brynhildr being part of the ritual is the supernatural manner of their meeting and the content of their conversation in comparison to Sigurd's second encounter with Brynhildr. The first encounter appears supernatural, while the second encounter gives the impression of a more mundane meeting. The first time that Sigurd meets Brynhildr is in an undoubtedly supernatural setting. There is a great light and Brynhildr is seemingly bound in her armour unable to talk or move and placed in a position atop a rampart of shields, which gives the impression of a sacrifice or altar. Brynhildr is unable to interact with Sigurd until he removes her armour with his magic sword. Brynhildr's imprisonment in her armour could be considered as a further test for Sigurd which could constitute part of the ritual as it requires direct action; the cutting of her armour. A feat Sigurd would have been unable to achieve without the sword Gram. After Sigurd has freed her from her bonds Brynhildr grants him supernatural knowledge in the form of 'runes' (in this interpretation runes represent lore or wisdom instead of letters) which she recounts as verse, and then offers further wisdom through normal speech. At the end of the chapter Sigurd and Brynhildr promise to marry each other and then Sigurd leaves, ending this particular episode.

In light of the first encounter with Brynhildr, Sigurd's second meeting with her seems unusual. Brynhildr is described in more human terms, she is a foster daughter of Heimir and as the daughter of Budli. Sigurd recalls meeting her before but is uncertain how she will feel toward him and falls into depression. Given that they promised to marry each other at the end of the first encounter, the hesitancy from Sigurd, a man not characterised as shy, suggests an impermanence to the first encounter. Suggesting Sigurd is unsure of the validity of the first meeting. An encounter which could be considered to have occurred in a supernatural otherworld instead of the real world of the second meeting. In the second meeting Sigurd and Brynhildr once again promise to marry each

other, the text has been translated as meaning that they renew their vows. Indeed valkyries are known to have relationships with human heroes.²¹ It is possible that this is a meaning read into the text by a translator attempting to reconcile the strange nature of the conversation in this second meeting with the contents of the first. It is not unreasonable to suggest that Sigurd's consumption of the heart is directly linked to his encounter with Brynhildr. Valkyries are strongly associated with birds in the Old Norse literary corpus such as in *Hrafnsmál* and *Völundarkviða*.²² It can be intimated that it is Sigurd's new understanding of their speech which allows him to meet with Brynhildr, a supernatural figure who inhabits both the world of men and the other world in her role as valkyrie.

Through this episode Sigurd gains supernatural knowledge, supernatural items and becomes independent from the kings of Denmark; a hero in his own right. Sigurd is first told about Fafnir and urged to move against him by his foster father, an individual who in Norse society was very much responsible for the upbringing of the child in question. It is under the tutelage of their foster parents that many of the young characters in saga literature grow from child to man. The foster father is particularly responsible for providing the means for their foster child to prove themselves in the eyes of society. One particular example of this type is from the *Islendingasögur*, in *Laxdaela saga* Olaf the Peacock is responsible for providing the men and resources for the overseas expedition/adventure of his foster son; this is a motif repeated time and again across the Old Norse literary corpus.²³ Regin is fulfilling this expectation of his fostering arrangement by telling Sigurd the story of Fafnir and presenting an opportunity for the youth to prove himself and gain independence. Both in terms of making a name for himself and becoming financially independent of the wealth of his father's line which was controlled by his mother and the Danish kings. Despite the lengthy pause in the narrative between the telling of the story to Sigurd and the actual encounter with Fafnir, it is clear from the role of Regin as foster father his argument for Sigurd to go against the dragon, that the goal of the 'ritual' experience *is* initiation and not a similar but non-initiatory ritual. The role of the slaying episode is clearly meant in the sense that Sigurd will become a permanently changed individual of higher status after its completion, in accordance with Schjødts' framework for identifying initiation rituals.

21 Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology* (Woodbridge, 2008) p. 349

22 [http://www.heimskringla.no/wiki/Haraldskvæði_\(Hrafnsmál\)_](http://www.heimskringla.no/wiki/Haraldskvæði_(Hrafnsmál)_) (B1) accessed 22/05/14

<http://www.heimskringla.no/wiki/Völundarkviða> accessed 22/05/14

23 <http://www.snerpa.is/net/isl/laxdal.htm> accessed 23/05/14

Narrative breakdown:

Sigurd is told by Regin why he needs to kill Fafnir.

Sigurd receives a sword made by Regin from the shards of his fathers magic sword.

Sigurd and Regin travel together to the lair.

Regin hides away from the site of the slaying.

Sigurd is advised by Odin and digs three trenches, he lays down in one of them.

Sigurd kills Fafnir.

Fafnir gives certain knowledge to Sigurd.

Regin drinks Fafnir's blood.

Sigurd tastes the blood and can understand birds.

Sigurd kills Regin.

Sigurd eats more of the heart

Sigurd takes Fafnir's treasure and magic items.

Sigurd meets Brynhildr and is given knowledge.

In the examination of the slaying episode from HSK we have seen that the idea of a mock death is present in Old Norse literature. Both in the more obvious death of the animal, and also in the ritual element of mock death when Hottr was in the bone pile. When Sigurd kills Fafnir he does so by lying down in trenches he has dug in the earth, the imagery of a grave is hard to ignore. The expectation that the blood of Fafnir might wash over him furthers the death imagery. It could also be seen as a ritual cleansing much like the washing of Hottr after he is removed from the bone pile. Schjødt argues that Sigurd lying in the trench is representative of the initiand entering the underworld. He also mentions that Fafnir has been described as a serpent which also has underworld connotations.²⁴

²⁴ Schjødt, IBTW, p. 291

Ritual:

While we will be focusing on the framework devised by Schjødt, it is pertinent to look at how ritual has been defined and tackled conceptually by other scholars. Catherine Bell writing in 'Response: Defining the need for a Definition' in ed. Evangelos Kyriakidis, *The Archaeology of Ritual* (Los Angeles, 2007) pp. 277-288 tackles the thorny issue of definition in relation to archaeology. Bell immediately questions what ritual has come to mean, and how it has strayed away from a more simple definition; paraphrasing Renfrew, Bell provides this initial broad definition of ritual - "...rituals are those activities that address the gods or other supernatural forces."²⁵ Bell also offers a warning that attempts to define ritual too narrowly, and in service of one particular school of thought, can undermine the concept's utility as a "universal phenomenon... [which tends] to work roughly the same way everywhere."²⁶ Bell finds that the least confined definition of ritual is in relation to a given culture - "a field of ways of acting in that community..." here she goes some way towards rejecting the universality of ritual. The archaeologist Kyriakidis is supportive of this view going so far to say "As a social activity, ritual is defined by the society that practises it..."²⁷ Bell however does not concede that ritual can only be understood specific to the individuals participating in it, and thus not at all. Bell quotes Humphrey "...the agent of ritual action is only minimally the agent of what is happening." Bell finds that Humphrey's argument here holds true to a certain extent but that "...everyone has to be empowered in some way or to some extent by such an appeal in order to bring power into the community from outside it."²⁸ Here Bell acknowledges that ritual action occurs from a union of individual and community. She finds that using the term 'ritualisation' "... keeps our terminological focus on their decision making, a key to their understanding of a world."²⁹ Here, Bell is arguing that it is in the identification of distinction of action that ritual can be best examined. Bell's questioning of the nature of the external power involved in ritual is pertinent to the question of animal-totemism or animism, and where an individual undergoes a supernatural test in a ritualised setting.

Brandon writing in 1958 (here taken from Brandon, 'The Myth and Ritual Position Critically Examined' in ed. Segal, R. A., *The Myth and Ritual Theory* (Oxford, 1998)) warns against overenthusiastic comparison attempts which look to find common patterns among different cultures.

²⁵ Bell, 'Response: Defining the need for a Definition' in ed. Evangelos Kyriakidis, *The Archaeology of Ritual* (Los Angeles, 2007) p. 278

²⁶ Bell, p. 279

²⁷ Kyriakidis, 'In Search of Ritual' in ed. Kyriakidis, *The Archaeology of Ritual* (Los Angeles, 2007) p. 1

²⁸ Bell, pp. 286-287

²⁹ Ibid., 285

“...the comparative study of religions has been generally characterised by attempts to find some common interpretive principle which will account for the origin of religion or for its essential structure.”³⁰ Brandon particularly notes that it is artificial to see a connection between two groups with a seemingly similar 'ritual pattern' when it is more likely that seemingly similar rituals “...were independently evolved in response to the challenge of similar environments.”³¹ Brandon was mostly writing in response to those writing in the earlier half of the twentieth century, who sought for a common religious/ritual origin primarily for religion in the Middle East. His ideas apply in the case of this thesis in so much as it is important to distinguish between searching for a common route to the compared cultures, and using common elements to understand modes of thought and development of ideas. This criticism must be kept in mind when undertaking comparison of ritual practice across cultures, but it is pertinent to remember the benefits of the comparative approach which we have discussed in Schjødts concluding remarks.³²

Richard Schechner writing in, Schechner, *The Future of Ritual, Writings on Culture and Performance* (London, 1993) makes a survey of scholarly thought regarding ritual. Schechner identifies that one of the most difficult problems with the study of ritual is that it has come to be a very broad umbrella term - “Ritual has been so variously defined – as concept, praxis, process, ideology, yearning, experience, function – that it means very little because it means so much.”³³ It is for this reason that this thesis will be using the framework provided by Schjødts to define ritual and specifically restrict analysis to initiation rituals. Schechner, in seeking to understand thought about ritual, notes that “It is no accident that many rituals are “rites of passage.””³⁴ This is a key observation for this thesis which will be dealing with rituals which concern initiation – rites of passage. Schechner also deconstructs thinking about ritual by addressing whether it is possible to divorce ritual from 'real events' and if so, what then constitutes ritual.³⁵ It is worth quoting in full Schechner's list of how rituals have been considered in the history of scholarship:

“...1) as part of the evolutionary development of animals; 2) as structures with formal qualities and definable relationships; 3) as symbolic systems of meaning; 4) as performative actions or processes;

30 Brandon, 'The Myth and Ritual Position Critically Examined' in ed. Segal, *The Myth and Ritual Theory* (Oxford, 1998) p. 388

31 Ibid., p. 396

32 Schjødts, IBTW, pp. 462-63

33 Schechner, *The Future of Ritual, Writings on Culture and Performance* (London, 1993), p. 228

34 Ibid., p. 230

35 Ibid., p. 230

5) as experiences. These categories overlap. It is also clear that rituals are not safe deposit vaults of accepted ideas but in many cases dynamic performative systems generating new materials and recombining traditional actions in new ways.”³⁶

Clearly here Schechner is happy to consider that rituals are part of a system of thought, which contrasts with Bell, who considers ritual a system only sparingly. However it would be too much to debate here a definition of system. Schechner argues that rituals are culturally specific, and form for a particular culture, a “...system of organising experience.”³⁷ Schechner borrows the term 'primary processes' from Ehrenzweig which can perhaps be best described as the basic desire of humans to experience the profound. Schechner is fully engaged in the comparative study of ritual and by approaching the subject with a wide view of the field, he is able to identify a certain universality in the nature of ritual. A universality which is denied to the term by Bell, and here Schechner is drawing on previous work by Turner: “...when finished with training, the performer can “speak” noh, kathakali, or ballet: s/he is “incorporated” into the tradition, initiated and made one with the body of the tradition.”³⁸ This is a key observation in comparative study. Showing that while the ritual is concerned with the individual and the community in a culturally specific sense, the universality of ritual remains. The function of transmission of knowledge through ritual is a basic fundamental across varied times and cultures.

Schechner also considers the evolution of thought regarding the nature of violence and the acting of violence in rituals. Schnecher paraphrases Girard, saying that he [Girard] believed rituals “... are homoeopathic – that a little ritual violence inoculates a society against more general, and destructive anarchic violence.”³⁹ This is part of a speculation on behalf of Schechner that some rituals which simulate violent acts may have developed out of “primal” rituals which were considerably more bloody in nature.⁴⁰ While he ends the speculation, it is an interesting point to understand that Schechner considers continuity in ritual form from many centuries ago a distinct possibility. To further understand the nature of imitated or real violence in ritual Schechner looks to scholarly examinations of thought - “Ehrenzweig's theories fit nicely with those of Girard and Freud. Girard believes that lack of differentiation brings about the “sacrificial crisis” which is

36 Schnechner, p. 228

37 Ibid., p. 237

38 Ibid., p. 257

39 Ibid., p. 260

40 Ibid., p. 260

remedied by the mimetic violence of ritual.”⁴¹ Schechner develops and explains this conception of ritual by comparing ritual to art. He places ritual in the same category of human agency and says that “what art manipulates on an individual basis, ritual does collectively. Ritual gives violence its place at the table of human needs.”⁴² Schechner is saying that rituals allow humans to act violently in a context in which that violence is accepted, or provide a substitute for violence which satisfies the human need. Thoughts on violence and ritual are important to the violent nature of the rituals in the Old Norse material and in perhaps explaining a development from violence perpetrated against animals to ritualised mimicry of violence.

By looking at the work of the scholars discussed above, we can see that there is a variety of thinking on rituals and that the field is heavily debated even in areas where consensus can be found. It is apparent that there is a level of universality in the type of behaviour which is represented in rituals, however that behaviour is always grounded in a cultural context. What is important is that cultural context can be influenced by neighbouring or overlapping cultures. Part of the problem with ritual studies is that the term has become so broad, which is why there is value in distilling study of the ritual down to particular types of ritual pattern such as initiation. This thesis has chosen to use the framework for identifying initiation rituals from wider ritual behaviour developed by Schjødtt in IBTW. Schjødtt's framework is particularly relevant because he works with Scandinavian sources in mind.

A comparable set of criteria for understanding rituals is that of Gaster who's ideas were drawn out and developed into a coherent framework by Ronald Grimes in Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies* (London, 1982). The value of Grimes' analysis of Gaster, is that he approaches the scholar from the perspective of ritual studies, instead of looking at his work through the potentially distorting lens of Gaster's background as a religionist.⁴³ Grimes values Gaster's work by saying that “... one of his most fundamental contributions is his argument that certain ancient texts bear the marks of what he calls alternately “Seasonal Pattern” and the Ritual Pattern””.⁴⁴ Grimes breaks down Gaster's ritual pattern into four categories before dividing his ideas on the identification of ritual into five basic types.⁴⁵ The ritual pattern which Grimes analyses is intended to correspond to

41 Schnechner, p. 238

42 Ibid., p. 238

43 Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies* (London, 1982) p. 133

44 Ibid., p. 134

45 Ibid., pp. 134-7

various seasonal festivals which, while Gaster was looking primarily at the ancient Near East, have a certain universality in the wider study of ritual. The “moments” of the ritual pattern are: first mortification which marks fasts and inversions of normal behaviour; second purgation which removes negative concepts from the participant/s through ritual; third invigoration which is the high of the ritual pattern and concentrates on the acquisition of power; and fourth jubilation which celebrates the end of a ritual cycle.⁴⁶ The four part pattern identified here represents a pattern for rituals at the macro scale. These are the times of the year into which certain rituals fall. However, it is not unreasonable to see this pattern on a more micro level where each are represented within one ritual, as the process of the ritual itself mirrors and incorporates the wider yearly pattern. This is perhaps especially pertinent for a discussion of initiation rituals, and to the framework devised by Schjødt, which is examined in more detail below. Grimes goes on to discuss Gaster's typology in his understanding of rituals which consist of five basic types: the comprehensive, combat, disappearing god, coronation and burlesque types.⁴⁷ The comprehensive type identified here is the closest to the ritual type that does encompass the ritual pattern on a micro level. While the other types each emphasise a different phase of the pattern. Grimes takes issue with Gaster on the coronation type, arguing that the criteria could be seen as too general and more overlapping than the other types, and identifies the burlesque type more as Gaster's description of ritual becoming entertainment and devolving from the set ritual pattern.⁴⁸ Gaster has a controversial view which Grimes summarises as argument that there can be “...a fundamental, intercultural continuity underlying a surface of diversity and change.”⁴⁹ Though, as we have seen, there is a level of agreement of the cross cultural nature of ritual in the universality of certain types, which are however tied back to the culture they originated from. A significant point which Grimes identifies in Gaster's writing, is how ritual over time changes through the medium of drama and myth, to become embedded in the literature of the culture which surrounds the ritual. This can then be worked backwards by identifying the criteria or patterns which define ritual. “Gaster's most significant historical thesis is... that there occurs an evolution or devolution from primitive ritual to literary composition.”⁵⁰ Ritual, such as the initiation rituals we are looking at in the Old Norse texts, can therefore be worked back to allow for some understanding of actual practice.

46 Grimes, pp. 134-5

47 Ibid., pp. 135-37

48 Ibid., p. 137

49 Ibid., p. 142

50 Ibid., p. 137

Analysis of the Old Norse sources:

Sigurd in VS:

Schjødts analysis of Sigurd is taken from a number of sources including the *Elder Edda's* *Reginismál*, *Fáfnismál* and *Sigrdrífumál* in addition to *Skáldskaparmál*, *Norna Gest's Þáttr*, *Þiðreks saga af Bern* and *Völsungasaga*. The analysis in this thesis shall only concentrate on *Völsungasaga*, due to limitations of space. It is also unwise to analyse all of the sources as a collective, as motifs present in the saga and thought to originate from one area, may have entirely different reasons for being present in the verse sources for example. As such the present project undertakes to independently apply Schjødts framework to the narrative in VS. As Schjødts draws his information from multiple sources, looking solely at VS will provide greater clarity and allow for a close reading of the episode as it appears in the text. This is especially relevant as the sources conflict at several key points in the narrative, such as the conversation between Sigurd and Fafnir and the identity of the valkyrie.

Schjødts initially highlights Sigurd's upbringing by Regin; that Regin made a sword for Sigurd; Sigurd's "berserker fury" in the avenging of his father; and the killing of Fafnir by lying in a trench; before coming to the conversation between Fafnir and Sigurd (for which he draws heavily on *Fáfnismál*).⁵¹ Schjødts also draws a significant amount of attention to the chapter after the main events of the slaying episode in VS in which Sigurd's appearance and renown is described.⁵² Schjødts has created a list which he uses to breakdown his own analysis into a "sequence of motifs" which he has identified in the sources describing Sigurd's early career.⁵³ Schjødts identifies that the events of Sigurd's early life do conform to ideas of initiation, though they are somewhat less obvious than other sources in his corpus.⁵⁴ Schjødts argues, that for this reason, the narrative about Sigurd has not been examined in enough detail by scholars who have previously touched on the issue.⁵⁵ Schjødts acknowledges that there are challenges in applying the tripartite structure to Sigurd's story, but that there is at least a sequence which corresponds to initiation rituals.⁵⁶ Schjødts looks at the entire sequence of Sigurd's early life across all of his sources as comprising part of the initiation ritual;

⁵¹ Schjødts, IBTW, pp. 284-86

⁵² Ibid., p. 287

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 287-88

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 288

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 289

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 289

from his first introduction as a child until his departure from meeting the valkyrie on the mountain. Schjødt even periodically refers to events which occur after this point in the traditional narrative.⁵⁷ This is perhaps a better approach to take when looking at a wider variety of sources. The present projects analysis in only focusing on VS will be comparatively narrower in scope.

Schjødt's framework:

To examine what makes these episodes initiation rituals, this thesis will use Schjødt's framework which is based on four key identifiers: first a notion of “irreversibility”; secondly the “tripartite sequence”; third the “...oppositional pairs that are analogues to the liminal v.s. the non-liminal.” and finally that “The object that is acquired in the liminal phase always consists of a form of numinous knowledge.”

First, the notion of irreversibility:

Schjødt describes his concept of irreversibility in terms of significant change to the individual who participated in the ritual, “...the initiate... has acquired something which has changed him forever and separates him from what he was in the initial phase.”⁵⁸ Schjødt emphasises the importance of the irreversibility, as it allows ritual initiation to be differentiated from other types of ritual, or ritual in a broader sense.⁵⁹ The irreversible change which Sigurd undergoes in VS is one of agency. Before the slaying episode in VS Sigurd is without wealth or knowledge, when the initiation can be considered to have begun for Sigurd, at Regin's first urging, Sigurd is limited in his independence by his mother and the kings of Denmark who control his wealth and in knowledge being only a child at the time. We learn of this through Regin's urging of Sigurd. While the narrative shows an ammount of deliberate exaggeration and baiting of Sigurd on Regins behalf, it remains true that Sigurd is not truly his own man such as can be seen here:

*“Annað sinni kemur Reginn að máli við Sigurð og mælti: “Kynlegt er það er þú vilt vera hestasveinn konunga eða fara sem hlauparar.” Sigurður svarar: “Eigi er það, því að vér ráðum öllu með þeim. Er oss og heimilt það er vér viljum hafa.”*⁶⁰

“Regin came over another time to talk to Sigurd and said: “It is strange that you want to be the stableboy of kings or to go about like a vagrant.” Sigurd answered: “That is not true, for I rule over everything with them.

⁵⁷ Schjødt, IBTW, p. 289

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 73

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 72

⁶⁰ <http://www.snerpa.is/net/forn/volsung.htm> accessed 15/04/14

I can take whatever I want.”⁶¹

We learn however that Sigurd does in fact have to ask the kings for permission to take a horse from their herds. This shows that while he is favoured and is indeed granted his request, he has little personal agency because he is still subject to their authority. After the slaying episode, Sigurd has knowledge, wisdom and most importantly independence. In acquiring Fafnir's treasure Sigurd has personal agency that he did not have before the ritual and which remains with him until the end of the saga. In undertaking the ritual, going through the slaying episode, Sigurd gains independence from his parents. That is including the obligation of avenging his father, and of the Danish kings. This issue of limited agency does not occur again for Sigurd in the narrative and can thus be considered permanent and irreversible.

Second, the tripartite sequence:

Schjødts use of 'tripartite sequence' in constructing his framework is perhaps a misnomer. He eventually settles on five key phases of initiation rituals. After building upon an initial three originally proposed by Van Gennep, that is “separation, transition and incorporation”.⁶² Schjødt expands the original three phases to five and alters the vocabulary to better reflect how he wishes to discuss the material. Schjødts marks the divisions of initiation rituals as comprising of an initial phase, a separation phase, a liminal phase, a reintegration phase and a final phase.⁶³ Schjødts is aware that there must be a level of overlap between the phases he has separated, but still finds the five categories more useful than a basic three. Though he readily admits, that as the sequences become intertwined it, “...becomes difficult to identify the individual rite.”⁶⁴

This project finds that the slaying episode in VS fits nicely into the five phases which Schjødts identifies, despite the scholars own misgivings.⁶⁵ The initial stage can include the very first mention of the trial which Sigurd would undergo, namely the urging of the child Sigurd to kill Fafnir. Regin, telling the story of Fafnir to Sigurd and urging him to take action is part of preparing Sigurd for what he will face in the ritual, and as such, is part of the initial phase. As the initial stage of the ritual can include more direct preparation of the initiand for the ritual to come, we can also include

61 Byock, VS p. 56

62 Schjødts, IBTW, p. 73

63 Ibid., p. 74

64 Ibid., p. 74

65 Ibid., p. 289

the creation or recreation of Sigurd's sword from the shards of his father's sword. The sword has an innate magical quality which connects it, and therefore the initial phase of the ritual to the otherworld. A connection to the otherworld does not perhaps immediately fit into the initial phase as objects with a supernatural power are, according to Schjødt's criteria, more often associated with the liminal and reintegration phases. Supernatural, numinous objects are usually won from participating in the ritual. It is not unreasonable to place the magic sword into the initial phase as the sword can be seen as a facilitator of the ritual, a tool which has a connection to the otherworld, to allow the user or wielder to access that world. It is perhaps worth noting that there is a certain numismatic quality to the sword, as the final sword was the third to be forged. The sword itself is described as if it has physical properties connected with supernatural power:

“Og er hann bar úr aflinum sýndist smiðjusveinum sem eldar brynnu úr eggjunum.”⁶⁶

“And when he brought it out of the forge, it seemed to the apprentices as if flames were leaping from its edges.”⁶⁷

The second stage is separation where the initiate begins to leave the human world and start the ritual, but before the full interaction with the supernatural otherworld which occurs in the liminal phase. Though this area is where there is likely to be a lot of overlap. Sigurd and Regin travel together to the lair of Fafnir. The act of travelling away from civilisation to a specific location where the ritual will be conducted is the first part of separating the initiand from wider society. Regin and Sigurd enter the ritual area together and Regin who is acting as the guide in this narrative hides out of fear. He has however fulfilled the role of the guide in bringing the initiand to the site of the ritual. He then leaves himself to isolate Sigurd who is undertaking the ritual alone. It is suggested, that through mock death, an individual can access the otherworld. Such a trope can be seen in VS when Sigurd lies down in the channels he makes for the dragons blood. There is further association with the otherworld in the digging of the trenches; Sigurd is advised by an old man, assumed to be Odin:

“Og er hann er að þessu verki kemur að honum einn gamall maður með síðu skeggi og spyr hvað hann gerir þar. Hann segir. Þá svarar hinn gamli maður: “Þetta er óráð. Ger fleiri grafar og lát þar í renna sveitann. En þú sit í einni og legg til hjartans orminum.” Þá hvarf sá maður á brottu. En Sigurður gerir grafar eftir því sem fyrir var sagt.”⁶⁸

⁶⁶ <http://www.snerpa.is/net/forn/volsung.htm> accessed 15/04/14

⁶⁷ Byock, VS p. 60

⁶⁸ <http://www.snerpa.is/net/forn/volsung.htm> accessed 15/04/14

“And while he was working on it, an old man with a long beard came to him and asked what he was doing. Sigurd told him. Then the old man responded: “That is ill-advised. Dig several ditches for the blood to run into; then you sit in one of them and thrust at the heart of the worm.” Then this man disappeared. And Sigurd dug the ditches in the manner described to him.”⁶⁹

The word '*gröf*' can be translated as grave instead of ditch or trench. It is not impossible that the saga author may have been playing on the double meaning here. Sigurd enters the earth like he would a grave, or indeed any liminal place or crossing place where two 'planes' meet – here from surface to underground, the trench providing the in-between space. In two ways has Sigurd separated himself from the normal world, first in travel to the ritual site and second by entering a physical space between two planes, in order to access the otherworld.

The liminal phase is the third and main stage of the ritual, it is in this stage that the numinous knowledge is obtained via successful completion of the test. In VS, the killing of Fafnir comprises the test which the initiand, Sigurd, must undergo to complete the ritual. After having travelled to the separate space in which the ritual is to take place in the previous stage, the appearance of Fafnir, a supernatural creature of the otherworld, fully establishes the presence of Sigurd in the liminal phase between the otherworld and the human or real world. Fafnir represents a crossing over of the supernatural into the natural, and as a character who is sometimes human and sometimes a dragon, embodies the liminal state. Sigurd mortally wounds Fafnir and talks with him before he dies. The conversation between Sigurd and Fafnir is part of the liminal phase in the sense that Sigurd is obtaining knowledge from the otherworld. This is particularly evident if we see knowledge as power. In trying to avoid the curse of a dying man, it seems that the conversation is still part of the test which Sigurd must overcome. Sigurd gains the ability to understand birds from eating a section of Fafnir's heart. In the consumption of the heart, Sigurd directly imbibes within himself an aspect of the otherworld, and gains from that a supernatural power. Upon hearing the advice of the birds and killing Regin, Sigurd then takes Fafnir's treasure. The hoard is both a prize for completing the ritual and a part of the ritual where he obtains numinous objects, which are liminal, with their power being derived from the otherworld.

The next part of the narrative has Sigurd travel away from the site of the killing of Fafnir but this is not yet part of the reintegration phase. Sigurd's encounter with the valkyrie Brynhildr takes place in

⁶⁹ Byock, VS p. 63

another part of the otherworld, marked by a great light which Sigurd approaches. Brynhildr is herself in a sleep like state, possibly a trance wherein she has access to supernatural knowledge or power of the otherworld, similar to the trance-sleeps of Odin or indeed of Bödvar at the end of HSK. The knowledge divulged to him by Brynhildr is key to our understanding of the nature of this ritual, it is the most significant gain of power or knowledge Sigurd makes in this episode and clearly fits into Schjødts's liminal phase.

The liminal phase is followed by the reintegration phase. This phase is one of the more difficult to identify in VS as there is a significant amount of overlap between the phases which precede and follow the reintegration. Brynhildr's advice turns from verse to prose in chapter 22, which could represent a slow return to normality for Sigurd, as the verse is a high point in his reception of numinous power. The meeting with Brynhildr ends abruptly in the narrative with the following chapter immediately deviating to describe Sigurd's appearance. In this description of his appearance, itself a rare occurrence in Old Norse texts, it is possible that we may be seeing the reintegration of Sigurd back into the human world.

*“Og fyrir því eru vopn hans öll gulli búin og brún að lit, að hann er langt umfram aðra menn að kurteisí og allri hæversku og nálega að öllum hlutum. Og þá er taldir eru allir hinir stærstu kappar og hinir ágætustu höfðingjar þá mun hann jafnan fremstur taldur, og hans nafn gengur í öllum tungum fyrir norðan Grikklandshaf og svo mun vera meðan veröldin stendur.”*⁷⁰

“All Sigurd's weapons were ornamented with gold and were brown in colour since he far surpassed other men in courtesy, in noble bearing, and in most other things. When all the mightiest champions and the most famous chieftains are reckoned, he will always be counted among the foremost. His name is known in all tongues north of the Greek Ocean, and so it must remain while the world endures.”⁷¹

The narrator describes him clearly, and in certain terms, as a man with natural ability and now also identifies his newly won ability to understand the speech of birds and his precognition, in addition to saying he never knew fear. Sigurd is reintegrated back from the liminal world by being described in terms of the world of men, while also describing his new numinous powers.

The final phase of the ritual comes when everything is complete and the initiand has achieved the change in status brought about by successful completion of the initiation. In this episode in VS, the final phase has an amount of overlap with the reintegration phase. Sigurd won from the ritual

⁷⁰ <http://www.snerpa.is/net/forn/volsung.htm> accessed 15/04/14

⁷¹ Byock, VS p. 72

supernatural abilities, mental and physical power and supernaturally acquired wealth, all of which changed his status from dependent warrior to independent hero. The final phase of the ritual is perhaps best realised, when Sigurd is recognised for the renown and fame he has won from killing Fafnir – when he is immediately accepted as a renowned man at the first court at which he arrives.

*“Og er þeir sjá reið mannsins að bænum, hætta þeir leiknum og undrast manninn því að þeir höfðu engan slikan séð. Gengu í mót honum og fögnuðu honum vel. Alsvinnur býður honum með sér að vera og af sér að þiggja slíkt er hann vill. Hann þiggur það. Honum er og skipað veglega að þjóna.”*⁷²

“But when they saw the man riding up to the dwellings, they called a halt to their game and marvelled at him, for they had never seen his like. They went to meet him and received him well. Alsvind asked Sigurd to stay and receive from him whatever he wished. Sigurd accepted this offer. Preparations were made to serve him nobly.”⁷³

Sigurd at this point has been irreversibly changed by supernatural power, both mental and physical, and the independence brought by possessing the treasure of Fafnir; which he gained during the ritual. From this point in the narrative onwards he never reverts to a status similar to that which he had before the ritual – the criteria of the final phase are fulfilled.

Third, the oppositional pairs:

Schjødtt says that “in most rituals we encounter a series of oppositional pairs, which are found on the emic level and which may be analysed as analogues to the etic category liminal versus non-liminal.”⁷⁴ Schjødtt further argues that examining these sets of opposites helps us to understand how the otherworld, in which the ritual takes place, is constructed. The otherworld is created by lifting restrictions on certain normal behaviours and allowing different, opposite states of being, to exist within the ritual environment. This extends to abstract ideas such as mock death. Indeed one of the most universal binary opposites, that of life and death, appears frequently in initiation rituals where the otherworld itself is related to an idea of the world of the dead. This world is accessed by the initiand becoming 'dead' for purposes of the ritual and being reborn upon successful completion of the ritual in the reintegration or final phase. We have seen that in VS, it appears that there are remnants of the idea of mock death present in the slaying episode. Before killing Fafnir, Sigurd lies down in a trench in the earth, similar perhaps to lying down in a grave. The killing of Regin by Sigurd could perhaps also have developed from ideas of mock death in initiation rituals where the initiand has to overcome the person leading him through the ritual.

⁷² <http://www.snerpa.is/net/forn/volsung.htm> accessed 15/04/14

⁷³ Byock, VS p. 73

⁷⁴ Schjødtt, IBTW, p. 74

One of the issues with finding the life versus death opposition in VS is that there is not an overly obvious description of Sigurd undergoing anything that fits with ideas of rebirth, that being the binary opposite of death in terms of process.⁷⁵ This is interesting because it is possible to argue that Sigurds 'rebirth' comes from defeat of Fafnir, and following conversation with Brynhildr, where upon he rejoins the human world as a man of changed status. The rebirth implicit in this change of status. Schjødtt makes brief mention of a way of looking at the concept of death and rebirth which fits better with the narrative we are looking at in VS - "death essentially understood in spatial terms... a metaphor of travel could become part instead of rebirth as representing the reintegration phase."⁷⁶ Sigurd's movement in location during the ritual from the site of Fafnir's lair to where he meets Brynhildr, while not the final stage in the ritual, perhaps goes some way to representing rebirth in the narrative. Sigurd travels towards a large light where he has an otherworldly meeting with a valkyrie, the location of which is also described as a hill. Sigurd thus travels through space upwards toward a light.

“Sigurður ríður nú langar leiðir og allt til þess er hann kemur upp á Hindarfjall og stefndi á leið suður til Frakklands. Á fjallinu sá hann fyrir sér ljós mikið sem eldur brynni og ljómaði af til himins. En er hann kom að, stóð þar fyrir honum skjaldborg og upp úr merki. Sigurður gekk í skjaldborgina og sá að þar svaf maður og lá með öllum hervopnum.”⁷⁷

“Sigurd now rode a long way, until he came up on Hindarfell; then he turned south toward Frakkland. Ahead of him on the mountain he saw a great light, as if a fire were burning and the brightness reached up to the heavens. And when he came to it, there stood before him a rampart of shields with a banner above it. Sigurd went into the rampart and saw a man [person] lying there asleep, dressed in full armour.”⁷⁸

This appears as a suitable metaphor for rebirth in the ritual. Schjødtt is unsure what the exact symbolism behind this episode is, but in the valkyrie's seemingly death like state, he sees a connection to the underworld.⁷⁹ Schjødtt argues that the motif of going up to a mountain may be reminiscent of ideas of the dead supernaturally entering the mountain, again continuing his underworld theme. It is problematic either way (rebirth or underworld) because we consider the conversation with Brynhildr as being part of the liminal stage, but as Schjødtt acknowledges, there is bound to be a level of overlap between the stages.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Schjødtt, IBTW, pp. 76-77

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 78

⁷⁷ <http://www.snerpa.is/net/forn/volsung.htm> accessed 15/04/14

⁷⁸ Byock, VS p. 67

⁷⁹ Schjødtt, IBTW, p. 293

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 74

As almost an afterthought Schjødt mentions that particularly for Scandinavia there is a sexual aspect to the liminal phase which may become apparent in ideas of rebirth.⁸¹ The sexual theme ties in with the VS narrative if the meeting with Brynhildr can be considered as representing part of the rebirth motif. It is possible that there is a sexual tone in the meeting, Sigurd first cutting the valkyrie from her armour and by the end of the meeting the two part having promised themselves to each other. Schjødt notes that it is not unreasonable to see the marriage vow as equating to sex.⁸² While only subtle, this lends itself to the argument that travelling to meet Brynhildr could represent a kind of rebirth, furthering the episodes fulfilment of the death versus rebirth opposition.

Schjødt argues that the liminal aspects of rituals are often expressed in monstrous forms, as monstrosity represents the unusual, the non-normal, and thus is a marker of the liminal world.⁸³ In VS we know that the character Fafnir can appear in either human or dragon form and it is the latter form of the monster – which appears to Sigurd in the ritual. The object of the test, the supernatural trial which Sigurd has to undergo, manifesting itself as a dragon instead of a man or animal ties the episode further into the liminal world. It represents a binary opposition of man versus monster, the monstrous versus the human. Yet while doing so this blurs the lines between the worlds, by being a creature that exists in both. Fafnir as a man in the human world and a dragon in the otherworld is a truly liminal character. This embodiment allows the character of Fafnir to represent the very nature of the ritual as a trial of the otherworld.

A further binary opposition highlighted by Schjødt is that of wisdom versus foolishness.⁸⁴ This opposition is perhaps better understood as knowledge versus no knowledge, or more specifically supernatural knowledge versus no supernatural knowledge. The initiand may occupy the default wise or knowledgeable side, before entering the otherworld, but once there, can occupy the foolish or un-knowledgable side before acquisition of numinous knowledge in the otherworld through the ritual. The normal pole of the pair is no supernatural knowledge and as such the marker of the human world and the usual situation.⁸⁵ It is only through the ritual and access to the otherworld that supernatural knowledge can be obtained, therefore its presence is one of the oppositions that marks the otherworld, just by virtue of being available. In VS Sigurd is a reasonably accomplished warrior,

81 Schjødt, IBTW, p. 78

82 Ibid., p. 294

83 Ibid., pp. 75-76

84 Ibid., p. 75

85 Ibid., p. 75

having avenged his father before facing Fafnir, but he lacks the supernatural power or knowledge he then gets from the initiation ritual. Sigurd attains numinous knowledge in the otherworld from eating part of Fafnir's heart and conversations with Fafnir and Brynhildr. The very availability of such knowledge suggests that the ritual is taking place in an otherworld environment. By eating the heart Sigurd gains the supernatural power to understand birds, thus he moves from un-knowledgeable to knowledgeable across the binary opposition. Sigurd's transition from one pole to the other is reinforced by the wisdom he gains from Brynhildr. The problem with this opposition in VS is that Sigurd's knowledge persists after he has completed the ritual. It is not unreasonable to argue however, that opposition holds true for this episode, because of the availability of supernatural knowledge, rather than Sigurd himself possessing it or not. Only in the otherworld is the numinous knowledge available, fulfilling the wisdom binary which is the marker of the otherworld. In the human world this knowledge was not available to Sigurd, thus the marker of normality which is the foolishness binary, in terms of no knowledge of a supernatural type, holds true.

Fourth and finally, the numinous object:

Schjødt says that acquisition of numinous power through an object “...is the very reason for the ritual...” as it is through possession of this supernatural power that the initiand changes his status.⁸⁶ Schjødt argues that what distinguishes the knowledge or power or the object which represents it as numinous “...is that it is supposed to be fundamentally secret or unknown to those who are not initiated...”⁸⁷ The 'object' can take many forms and generally represents an acquisition of power, whether physical or mental but always supernaturally derived. The primary acquisition of numinous knowledge Sigurd makes in VS is the ability to understand birds. Sigurd achieves this power through eating part of the heart of Fafnir, an object itself imbued with numinous power. The heart represents Sigurd's trophy from successfully dispatching Fafnir in the ritual situation, an object he takes from a liminal creature of the otherworld, and thus is clearly numinous in nature. Schjødt argues that Fafnir's blood is “...structurally a variant of Fafnir's words...” as blood is associated with wisdom and knowledge in the wider corpus.⁸⁸ The ability to understand birds itself is a numinous power acquired in the ritual and can therefore be its own 'object' for the purpose of this category. Two further more straightforward numinous objects Sigurd acquires in the ritual are the Helm of

⁸⁶ Schjødt, IBTW, p. 78

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 78

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 290

Terror and the coat of golden chain mail from Fafnir's hoard. The fact that these objects are named suggests that they are special, and indeed as part of Fafnir's treasure they originate from the otherworld. Fafnir and Sigurd discuss the Helm of Terror and it is inferred that the helm grants some form of power to the wielder, whether this is meant in a more figurative or literal sense is ambiguous, however the helm can exist in a physical form in the otherworld and once taken out can exist as more figurative numinous power.

“Enn mælti Fáfnir: “Eg bar ægishjálmm yfir öllu fólki síðan eg lá á arfi míns bróður. Og svo fnýsti eg eitri alla vega frá mér í brott að engi þorði að koma í nánd mér og engi vopn hræddist eg og aldrei fann eg svo margan mann fyrir mér að eg þættist eigi miklu sterkari, en allir voru hræddir við mig.” Sigurður mælti: “Sá ægishjálmur, er þú sagðir frá, gefur fáum sigur því að hver sá er með mörgum kemur má það finna eitthvert sinn að engi er einna hvatastur.””⁸⁹

“Again Fafnir spoke: “I have borne a helm of terror over all people since I lay on my brothers inheritance. And I blew poison in all directions around me, so that none dared come near me, and I feared no weapon. I never found so many men before me that I did not think myself much stronger, and everyone was afraid of me.” Sigurd said: “This helm of terror you speak of gives victory to few, because each man who finds himself in company with others must at one time discover that no one is the boldest of all.””⁹⁰

It is not unreasonable to suggest that the helm and the mail represent part of a more physical supernatural power gained by Sigurd through completion of the ritual. Schjødtt maintains that part of understanding the liminality of these objects is that they originate in the otherworld and cannot be used until they are brought to the human world.⁹¹ Through his new ability to understand birds, Sigurd is able to have a conversation with the valkyrie Brynhildr. In what is perhaps a dream state, Brynhildr has accessed wisdom from the otherworld which she then imparts to Sigurd. Sigurd's acquisition of her knowledge constitutes acquisition of a numinous 'object'. Schjødtt argues that the plethora of numinous objects which Sigurd receives serve the role not only of increasing his status, but they all have an affiliation with the underworld.⁹² There is less to specifically preference use of underworld over otherworld when looking alone at VS. However the underworld or world of the dead is one of the strongest representations of the idea of the otherworld. It is a supernatural knowledge which he takes away from the initiation and which leads to his change in status, the wisdom and physical power gained by Sigurd is both his prize for completing the ritual and the reason to undergo it in the first place.

⁸⁹ <http://www.snerpa.is/net/forn/volsung.htm> accessed 15/04/14

⁹⁰ Byock, VS p. 64

⁹¹ Schjødtt, IBTW, p. 296

⁹² Ibid., p. 291

In summary:

This concludes the application of Schjødt's framework for identifying an initiation ritual in the slaying episode in VS. It has been demonstrated that Sigurd's killing of Fafnir and the narrative which surrounds it fulfils all of the criteria set down and as such can be positively identified as fitting the initiation ritual type. Sigurd's new post-ritual status as an independent hero invested with new knowledge remains for the duration of the saga and is a distinct improvement on his pre-ritual status. Thus the episode fulfils the notion of irreversibility. The VS episode also fits into the expanded tripartite system which Schjødt argues for. By looking at the episode as part of its larger narrative, and understanding that elements of the ritual are spread a little apart in the narrative, it is clear that the slaying episode fits into the suggested five phases. Sigurd enters the initial phase when the challenge is proposed by Regin; the separation phase in his travelling to the site of Fafnir's lair; the liminal phase in his mock death and killing of Fafnir, with ensuing supernatural knowledge acquisitions; the reintegration phase through his travelling to the meeting with Brynhildr; and the final phase in Sigurd's emergence as a renown and fundamentally changed hero. It has been demonstrated that a number of significant oppositional pairs can be identified in the episode, most notably life versus death and death versus rebirth. Monstrosity versus humanity is of course also significant in that it relates to the very nature of Fafnir and the otherworld as a space. Finally, it has also been ascertained that there are numerous examples of objects of a numinous power present in the episode. Sigurd gains access to the supernatural knowledge by eating part of Fafnir's heart – literally ingesting liminality. The knowledge itself is clearly of a supernatural nature, being granted by an otherworldly valkyrie; a bird which Sigurd gained the power to understand. It is the finding of the present project that this slaying episode as it exists in VS constitutes a prime example of an initiation ritual in an Old Norse text.

Bödvar and Hottr in HSK:

Schjødt in *Initiation Between Two Worlds* looks at the nature of the slaying episode in HSK where Bödvar and Hottr kill the animal or beast which menaces the hall of King Hrolf. Schjødt identifies that both characters are closely connected in the narrative and should both be carefully examined in terms of the initiation ritual.⁹³ Schjødt does however separate the characters for his analysis, making an initial brief survey of Bödvar, before he tackles Hottr in whom he is more interested.⁹⁴ Schjødt says that Bödvar's journey to the court of King Hrolf prepares him for life when he arrives there.

⁹³ Schjødt, IBTW, p. 312

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 319

Schjødt draws particular attention to the part of Bödvar's journey which has him drink blood from his brother's leg.⁹⁵ Expanding on Schjødt's analysis, we can understand Elk Frodi as a liminal creature as his feet are described as being those of an elk, clearly supernatural attributes. Indeed Bödvar's encounter with his brother here could be considered a miniature initiation ritual in its own right. Elk Frodi challenges Bödvar to fight him, himself representing an otherworldly creature, fulfilling the idea of the monstrous versus human oppositional pair. Bödvar loses the fight but nevertheless is able to imbibe some of his brother's blood, a numinous object. The blood makes Bödvar stronger and permanently changes him, fulfilling the irreversibility criteria.

“Síðan tók Fróði ok stjakaði honum. Þá mælti Fróði: ”Ekki ertu svá sterkr, frændi, sem þér hæfir. Fróði nam sér blóð í kálfanum ok bað hann drekka, ok svá gerir Bööðvarr. Þá tók Fróði til hans í annat sinn, ok þá stóð Bööðvarr í sömu sporum.” Helst ertu nú sterkr, frændi,” sagði Elg-Fróði, “ok vænti ek, at þér hafði komit at haldi drukkrinn, ok þú munt verða fyrirmaðr flestra um afl ok hreysti ok um alla harðfengi ok drengskap, ok þess ann ek þér vel.””⁹⁶

“Then Frodi reached over and pushed Bodvar, saying “Kinsman, you are not as strong as you should be.” Frodi drew blood from his own calf, telling Bodvar to drink of it, and Bodvar did so. Then Frodi shoved his brother for a second time, but Bodvar stood firm in his tracks. “You are now exceedingly strong kinsman,” said Frodi. “I believe the drink has been of use to you. From now on, you will be ahead of most men in strength and prowess as well as in courage and nobility. This thought pleases me immensely.””⁹⁷

Though the five phase sequence is condensed here, we can see the three more basic phases. The invitation to fight as the initial phase, the fight and consumption of the blood as the liminal phase. Then the final phase has Bödvar leave with his new numinous power and the blessing of his brother. Schjødt identifies however that the episode with Elk Frodi is part of a broader initiation sequence. He demonstrates that Bödvar's Journey contains several oppositional pairs. Civilised versus uncivilised is one of the binary pairs which characterises Bödvar's early career. He begins his life in royal halls and transitioning to caves and huts on his journey before reaching his destination, another royal hall.⁹⁸ There is a sexual element in Bödvar's bedding of his brother's wife, while it is not explicit that he has sex with her, as the narrative relates that they remained separated by a blanket, which is similar to the section of VS where Sigurd lies with Brynhildr incognito.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Schjødt, IBTW, p. 320

⁹⁶ <http://www.snerpa.is/net/forn/hrolf.htm> accessed 15/04/14

⁹⁷ Byock, HSK, p. 46

⁹⁸ Schjødt, IBTW, p. 320

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 321

“*Bödvarr vill eigi liggja undir þeiri blæju, sem hún hefir.*”¹⁰⁰

“But Bodvar would not get under the bed cover with her...”¹⁰¹

Schjødtt places this in the liminal phase of Bödvar's initiation.¹⁰² Interestingly Schjødtt briefly suggests that Bödvar's second brother's wife, in talking to him at night may equate to passing Bödvar some supernatural knowledge the like of which can be obtained through dreams.¹⁰³ Bödvar's initiation sequence is spread out over all of the early narrative concerning him until his arrival at Hrolf's hall. Once at the hall Bödvar takes part in Hottr's initiation sequence where Schjødtt says he acts as initiator.¹⁰⁴ Bödvar may however play a larger role as part of the ritual slaying episode.

Schjødtt maintains that Hottr undergoes a fairly straightforward initiation process, in what we are terming, the slaying episode, in HSK.¹⁰⁵ Schjødtt examines the narrative systematically and concludes that the episode makes for one of the most convincing initiation rituals among the corpus he examined in *IBTW*.¹⁰⁶ Schjødtt identifies Bödvar's washing of Hottr as the possible memory of a purification rite which fits into the initial stage of the ritual.¹⁰⁷ The liminal phase he then describes as beginning when the animal or monster arrives at Hrolf's hall.¹⁰⁸ Hottr and Bödvar travel to an otherworld, as part of the separation phase, where Hottr waits in a liminal watery area before eating some of the heart and drinking of the blood (which are both numinous objects) of the beast which Bödvar has killed, this being the main event of the liminal stage.¹⁰⁹ Schjødtt then argues that the sequence is concluded with the return of Bödvar and Hottr to the hall, as part of the reintegration phase, where Hottr demonstrates his new powers through a mock killing. The final phase has Hrolf bestow the new name of Hjalti upon Hottr. Schjødtt mentions that Hottr and Bödvar fight as part of Bödvar's role as initiator and equates this fight with the fight between Bödvar and Elk Frodi earlier in the narrative.¹¹⁰ It is perhaps better to see the fight between Bödvar and Hottr as part of the test in that Bödvar represents the part of the supernatural assailant for Hottr; Bödvar occupying a testing

100 <http://www.snerpa.is/net/forn/hrolf.htm> accessed 15/04/14

101 Byock, HSK p. 46

102 Schjødtt, *IBTW*, p. 321

103 *Ibid.*, p. 321

104 *Ibid.*, p. 322

105 *Ibid.*, p. 322

106 *Ibid.*, p. 325

107 *Ibid.*, p. 322

108 *Ibid.*, p. 322

109 *Ibid.*, p. 323

110 *Ibid.*, p. 324

role often associated with berserkers (figures with whom Bödvar has an obvious association) in Old Norse texts.¹¹¹ Schjødt rightly associates the episode with the berserker motif.¹¹² Schjødt notes that, in the HSK slaying episode, the animal or monster Bödvar and Hottr face seems to represent a thematically appropriate test for a young warrior set to enter a band of elite warriors or berserkers.¹¹³

The sham killing of the animal is itself explained by the ritual nature of the episode. The initiation validates the killing because Hottr only has to make a symbolic action to join the group facing no actual danger. One aspect of the slaying episode which Schjødt overlooks in Hottr's story is his discovery by Bödvar lying in a pile of bones. It is not unreasonable to suggest that this represents a mock death in a ritual sense, as Hottr is covered with bones, which has strong associations with death, he is also dirty and blackened. Further to this, it is apparent that Hottr's low status at the hall in the beginning is not, as Schjødt suggests, part of an almost folk tale depiction of a frightened boy, but moreover represents ritual marginalisation from society.¹¹⁴ Hottr is embodying Van Gennep's identification of the initiand being ostracised from his normal society.¹¹⁵ As part of the ritual stages of becoming a new man, Hottr has to live temporarily on his own apart from other people, and thus the narrative describes him as being at the edge of the hall and divided from the warriors by a pile or wall of bones. The bones, more than just being associated with death, may represent a line or barrier between the world of the living and the world of the dead where Hottr is temporarily residing. The retainers mistreatment of Hottr also appears to be connected with the initiation ritual and therefore more than just context for Hottr's early life at the hall. An initiation ritual changes the status of an individual permanently but it also means that the initiand loses his pre-ritual status. His life before has been permanently destroyed and irreparably lost.

The retainers who throw bones at Hottr are not folk tale villains, they are moreover active participants in the ritual. Hottr as the initiand has no status, having lost his previous position when beginning the process of initiation. Hrolf's warriors are treating Hottr as a person without status, as someone who is outside of their community to the extent that he is ritually dead. This view gives agency to Hrolf and his warriors as the implied architects of Hottr's initiation instead of Bödvar. This reading is reasonable as Hrolf would seek to initiate new warriors into his band, and it explains

111 Arent, *The Heroic Pattern: Old Germanic Helmets, Beowulf, and Grettis saga* (1969) p. 151

112 Schjødt, IBTW, p. 324

113 Ibid., p. 325

114 Ibid., p. 322

115 Van Gennep, p. 75

Hottr's presence at the hall in the first place. Further to this, in the final phase, Hrolf is carrying the sword Golden Hilt which is not his own sword; it is possible that this sword is being carried by Hrolf specifically for the initiation of Hottr.¹¹⁶

*“Höttr mælti: ‘Gef mér til sverðit Gullinhjalta, er þú heldr á, ok skal ek þá fella dýrit eða fá bana.’ Hrólfur konungur mælti: ‘Þetta sverð er ekki beranda nema þeim manni, sem bæði er góður drengur ok hraustr.’”*¹¹⁷

“Hottr said, “For this task, give me the sword Golden Hilt, the one that you are holding, and then I will either kill the beast or find my own death.” King Hrolf said, “That sword is not to be carried except by a man who is both strong in body and noble in spirit.”¹¹⁸

The idea of the gift of the sword shows that Hottr is to become worthy of it through the initiation making him '*drengur ok hraustr*'. This understanding of the episode additionally fits with the idea of Bödvar fulfilling the berserker motif. In later Icelandic sagas, contemporaneous with HSK, the character of the berserker provides an itinerant test for saga heroes. Overcoming them seen as a test of manhood. Bödvar's arrival at the hall fits this itinerant motif and of course his relation to the bear in origin, and later transformation, serves to support this. Bödvar is a positive force for Hottr and his initiation which is opposed to the more negative portrayal of berserkers elsewhere in Old Norse literature. However he still occupies this character type and provides a test of manhood to Hottr when they fight during the ritual. It is perhaps a remnant of the idea of hostility in this motif which is preserved in Hottr's declaration that he is no longer afraid, of not only Hrolf's warriors, but Bödvar too.

*“Böðvarr mælti: ‘Helst ertu nú sterkr orðinn, ok ekki vænti ek, at þú hræðist nú hirðmenn Hrólfis konungs.’ Höttr sagði: ‘Eigi mun ek þá hræðast ok eigi þik upp frá þessu.’”*¹¹⁹

“Bodvar said, “You have become remarkably strong, and I expect that from this day forward you will have no fear of King Hrolf's retainers.” Hottr replied, “From now on, I will fear neither them nor you.”¹²⁰

This serves to expand Schjødt's analysis and further cement this slaying episode as an initiation ritual.

116 Van Gennep, p. 76

117 <http://www.snerpa.is/net/forn/hrolf.htm> accessed 15/04/14

118 Byock, HSK p. 52

119 <http://www.snerpa.is/net/forn/hrolf.htm> accessed 15/04/14

120 Byock, HSK p. 51

In summary:

Schjødt's analysis of the slaying episode in HSK suitably covers the basic narrative and allows for a comprehensive understanding of the test as an initiation ritual. We have sought to apply ideas from other scholars such as Van Gennep to expand upon ideas of ritual as contained within the narrative and implied by the narrative context of the events which take place. It is the finding of this project that the slaying episode in HSK does indeed represent a very good example of the initiation ritual type motif in Old Norse text, and, within the narrative, it contains an interesting connection to the berserker motif.

Comparison of HSK and VS:

There are a number of parallels in the two slaying episodes that it is pertinent to highlight as a cross examination of the structure of the initiation rituals. The table below identifies where the stories contain parallel elements in a loose chronological order as they appear in the narrative.

Hottr lying in the bone pile.	Sigurd lying in the trench.
Bödvar washing Hottr in a lake.	Sigurd expecting the dragon blood to cover him.
Travel to the site as a pair.	Travel to the site as a pair.
Hottr is afraid and hides.	Regin is afraid and hides.
Bödvar has his fathers magic sword.	Sigurd has his fathers (reforged) magic sword.
Bödvar kills the beast with one stab.	Sigurd kills Fafnir with one stab.
Hottr drinks the beast's blood.	Regin drinks Fafnir's blood.
Hottr eats the beast's heart.	Sigurd eats Fafnir's heart.
Bödvar and Hottr wrestle.	Sigurd kills Regin.
Hottr gains new strength.	Sigurd gains new knowledge.
Hottr becomes a warrior.	Sigurd becomes independent.

We have seen from the application of Schjødt's framework to the two slaying episodes that both of the narratives fit well into the structure of initiation ritual. It is not too much of a stretch to suggest that there is a possible commonality to the origin of the slaying motif which both sagas preserve. Both Fafnir and the animal in HSK occupy the same role in the narrative, which is to act as the object of a ritual test that the hero must undergo as part of an initiation rite. Saxo Grammaticus records a version of the slaying episode from HSK in his Latin *History of the Danes* where the test which Bödvar and Hottr face is described explicitly as facing a bear:

“When a gigantic bear met him among the thickets he dispatched it with his javelin and then told Hialti [Hottr], his comrade, to apply his mouth and suck out the beast's blood so that he might achieve greater strength...”¹²¹

This is interesting to note, as the image of the dragon may have been a narrative evolution, that is, an evolution of motif or character type, from the image of the bear. Arent, who writes about the berserker motif in saga literature, in Arent, *The Heroic Pattern: Old Germanic Helmets, Beowulf, and Grettis saga* (1969), argues that bear or monster myths are very much interchangeable.¹²² The motif is simply describing the nature of the creature that constitutes the test for the hero of the saga. Arent writes that the encounters represent a “tribal mythical struggle against the chthonic monster.”¹²³ The evolution of the nature of the test or chthonic monster may be considered natural narrative progression through exaggeration and influence from other sources and cultures. This is especially relevant to the oral tradition which preserved the stories both in HSK and VS. The '*dyr*' which menaces the hall in HSK can be confidently translated as 'animal'. At the first appearance of the animal it is described as the '*mesta tröll*' and as “...*mikit ok ógurligt, - “ok hefir vængi á bakinu, ok flýgr þat jafnan...*”.¹²⁴ It is likely that these descriptions constitute exaggeration for effect in the narrative. The creature is made more fearsome and the ensuing combat with the animal made to seem more daunting and impressive feat. In addition the use of '*tröll*' gives the creature a supernatural quality. The supernatural description sets up the creature as originating in the supernatural otherworld ready for its role in the initiation ritual.

Describing a large animal as flying and causing destruction is tantamount to describing it as a dragon. A dragon represents a distinct progression in the narrative from an animal. Through this exaggeration or half development from an animal in terms of description, we can see how the nature of the chthonic monster can change. HSK appears to have preserved the oral tradition at a point where the motif was changing, perhaps to make the story more impressive or perhaps from the influence of chivalric stories from other areas of Europe. In VS Fafnir is described as a dragon and occupies the same role in the narrative as the animal in HSK – the chthonic monster. If we accept the idea of a progression in the character type it is possible that the idea of the dragon may have

121 Saxo Grammaticus, *History of the Danes* trans. Peter Fisher in ed. Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Text Volume I* (Cambridge, 1979) p. 55

122 Arent, p. 141

123 Ibid., p. 141

124 Trans: 'Greatest Troll'. “Huge and monstrous – and has wings on its back and always flies.”

stemmed from the idea of a dangerous animal as the chthonic monster; more specifically, the bear, and the object of the supernatural test implicit in initiation rituals. Tracing the motif through Saxo to HSK and VS it is possible the idea of a large beast that tests the hero originates with the bear. It was the largest predatory dangerous animal which people living in the Nordic world and wider related area would have ever experienced.

Both saga episodes contain an idea of mock death or temporary death, Hottir in the bone pile and Sigurd in the ditch, experience a temporary death like state as part of the ritual. As we have seen this corresponds to Van Gennep's idea of social isolation through 'death', and also to Gaster's ritual type of the disappearing god.¹²⁵ The latter related to fertility figures which must enter the ground before returning in much the same image as the cycle of sowing and reaping crops. This descent into liminal areas, also present in Hottir's hiding place, when the animal is confronted, represents the cross over into an otherworld distinct from human society. When tracing the ritual pattern back to a basic origin we have to look at some of the earliest iterations of human society. One of the fundamental ways to describe space as a concept is inside and outside, the human world and the otherworld – at a very basic level, as the village and the forest. The saga characters travel away from human settlement into the wilderness or forest for their encounters with the chthonic monster. This is analogous to the idea of the forest being the domain of animals, and in northern cultures, the chief of the forest was the bear, the forest ruler.¹²⁶

The large number of distinct parallels between the two slaying episodes and a commonality of motif both lead back to the idea of the bear as chthonic monster. This gives grounds to compare the slaying episodes, the initiation rituals, to rituals from within the Bear Cult.

¹²⁵ Grimes, p. 136

¹²⁶ Honko, Timonen and Branch, *The Great Bear A Thematic Anthology of Oral Poetry in the Finno-Ugrian Languages* (Oxford, 1994) p. 118

The Bear Cult:

The Bear Cult is scholarly shorthand for a belief system which, at its height in the stone age, and into the bronze age, was prevalent not only in Scandinavia and northern Europe but likely extended around the northern zones of the entire northern hemisphere.¹²⁷ It is possible that it is the oldest known religion across the Eurasian continent.¹²⁸ There are arguments for the persistence of belief related to the Bear Cult as it is still practised in the modern era up to and including the present day in areas of Siberia and in the belief systems of various Native American tribes.¹²⁹ There exists only a very small amount of practice that may be attributed to remnants of the bear cult in modern day Europe. However it is significant for the present study that such practices do remain in Europe. The longevity of the rituals associated with the Bear Cult is astonishing. Examination of rituals which have survived in an altered way, but are still ultimately derived from the same common practice across a vast geographical area, is an invaluable asset to the study of the Bear Cult. There is a particular link to fertility festivals and rituals which still take place in the present day Basque country and in relatively isolated areas of Bulgaria and the Caucasus.¹³⁰ Other sources for the presence of the Bear Cult include archaeological finds of bear figures made of amber in areas of Scandinavia and the Torslunda helmet plates.¹³¹ There have additionally been finds of bear bones and rock art across Europe, including southern Europe, which are thought to be associated with the Bear Cult.¹³²

One of the places in Europe where the Bear Cult survived until the modern era was in what are now the modern Nordic countries, particularly Finland and what is now Russian Karelia.¹³³ The Bear

127 Campbell, *The Way of the Animal Powers: Historical Atlas of World Mythology* (London, 1984) p. 153

128 Sarmela, p. 80

129 Honko, p. 117

Dusenberry, *The Montana Cree, A Study in Religious Persistence* (Uppsala, 1962) p. 80

130 Frank, 'Hunting the European Sky Bears: Germanic Straw-Bears and their Relatives as Transformers', in eds. Michael and Barbara Rappenglück, *Symbole der Wandlung – Wandel der Symbole: Proceedings of the Society for the Scientific Study of Symbols* (Kassel, 2004) p. 5

Sarmela, p. 1

Creed, *Masquerade and Postsocialism: Ritual and Cultural Dispossession in Bulgaria* (Bloomington, 2011) p. 1, 2, 28, 29

Davidson, *Scandinavian Mythology* (London, 1969) p. 51

See also the following articles and galleries:

<http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/spring-welcomes-wild-men-europe-article-1.1297371>

<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2013/04/europes-wild-men/shear-text>

The Wilder Mann section on <http://www.charlesfreger.com/>

131 Campbell, pp. 150-151

Arent p. 132

132 Sarmela, p. 80

133 Frank, p. 19

Honko, p. 120

Cult in Finland survived as actual practice up to the beginning of the industrial era. It is likely that Lönnrot in his life long collection of poetic sources, to create a national epic for Finland, encountered some of the last communities who still had remaining practices related to the Bear Cult. These practices themselves were remnants of a swidden culture which itself preserved remnants of the earlier Bear Cult.¹³⁴ By the time of his collection it is reasonable to believe that the practices of the Bear Cult had entirely been reduced to traditions and motifs remembered in the songs of oral tradition kept alive in rural communities. The start of the nineteenth century can be considered as the cut off point for actual practice of Bear Cult related activities, before the rituals associated with the bear occupy Gaster's burlesque category, in that they have passed from supernatural power into entertainment.¹³⁵ Ritual burials of bears, a mark of the high status the animal held, are thought to have continued in parts of Scandinavia as late as the nineteenth century.¹³⁶ Finland was a largely illiterate society for most of the early modern period, especially in the rural areas, and only during Lönnrot's lifetime began developing a culture of language and literature; Lönnrot was the first secretary of the Finnish Literature Society.¹³⁷ Lönnrot himself became involved in the movement for recognition of Finnish, in addition to Swedish as an official language in Finland and he was instrumental in establishing literature in the country.¹³⁸ Due to the lack of a literate society until comparatively very recent times, the oral tradition remained very strong as it was the primary way of preserving the history and culture of local communities and wider areas. Du Bois argues that "...scholarly perspectives on intertextuality and multigenericity..." should be applied to understand the complexity of the oral tradition, given that all of the songs or poems existed in the same tradition, which the audience would have been familiar with.¹³⁹

Lönnrot's *Kalevala* was created by collecting a huge corpus of poetic material from singers in rural areas of Finland and Karelia and into Russia as far as Archangel.¹⁴⁰ Lönnrot collated this material and identified alternate versions of the same stories in an attempt to find the ur-versions of the poems he recorded.¹⁴¹ The alternative versions of many of the poems are still extant in Finland and a

134 Sarmela, p. 80

135 Ibid., p. 103

Grimes, p. 137

136 Jennbert, *Animals and Humans, Recurrent symbiosis in archaeology and Old Norse Religion* (Lund, 2011) p. 111

137 Anttila, 'Elias Lönnrot' in *Iso Tietosanakirja*, 2, vol. VII (Helsinki, 1935) reproduced in Magoun, *The Kalevala* (Cambridge, Mass. 1963) p. 342

138 Ibid., p. 344, 346

139 Du Bois, *Finnish Folk Poetry and the Kalevala* (London, 1995) p. 133, 140

140 Anttila, p. 343, 344

141 Du Bois, p. 133

select few have been made available in translation into English. There are six poems from Finland and Karelia concerning Bear Rites which are available in translation in the *The Great Bear*. These poems shall be used as supplementary material in the present project (see appendix 2). Lönnrot largely succeeded in his work and created the *Kalevala* as the national epic of Finland.¹⁴² The *Kalevala* when taken as a whole should very much be considered a creation. Lönnrot edited a number of the poems and crafted them to fit together as a verse narrative that told a complete story from beginning to end, instead of leaving the *Kalevala* as a collection of related but disconnected poems.

There is one chapter or canto of the *Kalevala* which records a narrative episode relating to the Bear Cult. Canto 46 describes a traditional Bear ceremony and its attendant rituals and conventions (we know that this canto suffers little from Lönnrot's curating due to its similarity to variant poems and that it conforms to the *Viitasaari Text*) through the character of Väinämöinen a wise old man and central figure in the *Kalevala*.¹⁴³ At this point it is worth briefly relating the basic narrative. Louhi a witch and antagonist in the epic conjures a bear to attack Väinämöinen's village. The old man knows this is going to happen and has the craftsman Ilmarinen make a spear with which he could kill the bear. Väinämöinen enters the forest outside the village looking for the bear. He then recites the charms of a bear hunter before killing the bear, while disclaiming responsibility for his actions. The dead bear is then brought back to the village in such a fashion where the spirit of the bear is still considered to be alive. The bear is accepted ceremoniously into the village as a benign spirit and guest of the villagers. Continuing to praise the bear, Väinämöinen brings its body into a house in the village and treats it with the utmost respect. The bear is then skinned and its meat cooked and a fine meal is prepared which is to form part of a wedding ceremony for the bear's spirit. While the preparations are being made, Väinämöinen informs those present of the origin of the bear among the heavens, how it came to the human world and especially of the bear's relationship to the personified female spirit of the forest. He tells of how the bear got its attributes such as teeth and claws.

Once this is done Väinämöinen ritually takes these attributes from the skull of the bear and takes the numinous power associated with these attributes to enhance his own. After the attributes of the bear are transferred to Väinämöinen, he leads the bear spirit away from the village and tells of how he

¹⁴² Magoun, p. xiii

¹⁴³ Ibid., pp. 305-13

ceremoniously attached the skull of the bear to a pine tree, in a particular position, which was pleasing to the bear's spirit. The placing of the skull in a ritually appropriate position is related to the finds of bear burials where the bones of a bear are found often at the bases of trees. One example is the site at the Frösö Church in Jämtland, where excavations of a tenth to eleventh century church, revealed that the chancel was built upon such a bear burial.¹⁴⁴ This find is considered evidence which suggests what Jennbert calls “creolized” ritual, that is that Finno-Ugric and related Lappish peoples had influenced the rituals of the nordic people living further south in Scandinavia.¹⁴⁵ The canto ends with Väinämöinen praising the Christian God, a motif that occurs throughout the *Kalevala* and is considered likely to be an addition made by Lönnrot unrepresentative of the original material.¹⁴⁶ The canto reads as an instruction on how to correctly perform the ritual of the Bear Ceremony and contains many elements found in other sources related to the Bear Cult. By analysing the elements of the Bear ceremony we can understand how the bear plays the role of chthonic monster in Finno-Karelian rites, and how the rituals of bear hunting are related to the Old Norse sources. By looking at the possible connections between the two different bodies of literature, we are exploring Sarmela's question about how far it is possible to relate the material preserved in the Finno-Karelian sources to the Old Norse texts.¹⁴⁷ In addition to understanding the role of the Bear Cult material in relation to the slaying episodes, it will be important to look at the threads of animism in these two saga episodes and the animism that runs through the comparative material.

Comparisons:

In the bear poems and the *Viitasaari Text* we learn how the hunters went about killing the bear. It was done by approaching the lair of the bear and preparing to kill it upon awakening it from its winter hibernation.¹⁴⁸ Once the hunters are prepared the den is broken open and the bear is killed by a single thrust with a spear or later a single shot from a bow or gun.¹⁴⁹ It is thought that the bear is dazzled by the sudden bright light and shock, which awakens it making the kill relatively devoid of danger if preformed correctly.¹⁵⁰ The location of the bear is tracked by the hunters while it is near their village. If the bear then makes a winter den nearby, the hunters mark this so they can find the

144 Jennbert, p. 99

145 Ibid., p. 101

146 Bosley, *The Kalevala* trans. (Oxford, 2008) p. xxxiii

147 Sarmela, p. 92

148 Ibid., p. 82

149 Poem 45 appendix 2

150 Honko, p. 137

bear later. It is thought that this practice helped associate the bear hunt, kill and subsequent ceremony with midwinter.¹⁵¹ The bear also acts as a living source of guaranteed food in the harsh northern winters.¹⁵² There are several parallels with this aspect of the Bear Cult and the saga slaying episodes. In HSK the animal is specifically described as arriving at Hrolf's hall at around midwinter, linking the arrival of the animal with the midwinter bear hunts "Ok sem leið at jólum...".¹⁵³ The bear which is sent to Väinämöinen's village is sent by a witch of Northland who is associated with the elemental characteristics of winter.¹⁵⁴ There seems to be an association of bear figures and midwinter which runs through Nordic tradition in a broader sense. *Njals saga* records a berserker arriving at a farm to challenge a farmer during Yuletide.¹⁵⁵ Though only tangentially related, there is a Norwegian folk tale called *The Cat on the Dovrefjell* in which a man tricks a giant into believing his pet bear is actually a cat, and in doing so, saves a farmstead – this also takes place during Yule.¹⁵⁶ This all speaks to the idea of the animal in HSK being identified as a bear.

It is notable that both Sigurd and Bödvar dispatch the chthonic monster they are fighting with relative ease. Each hero makes a single stab with his weapon which kills the monster. This is reminiscent of the bear spear and the ambush killing of the bear by the hunters.¹⁵⁷ In Saxo's version of the HSK slaying episode, Bödvar is described as using a javelin, similar perhaps to a bear spear, while preserving the notion from the bear hunting sources that the weapon would have likely been a projectile.¹⁵⁸ Both Bödvar and Sigurd are described as aiming their attacks at the heart of the beasts. The hangover from the Bear Cult here may simply be in the technique of killing a large animal, but it is significant even in that regard – if actual technique is replicated, that is a sign of actual practice. There is further reason to connect the slaying episodes to this manner of killing. In the two saga texts it seems that there is little probability of any harm being done to the initiator in the same way that the killing of the bear is straightforward. Poem 45 is a hunting charm to be recited outside the lair of the bear before the kill; it asks the spirits that the bear be blinded by swirling mists, a supernatural explanation for the ease with which the bear is killed.¹⁵⁹

151 Honko, p. 135

Sarmela, p. 88, 89

152 Ibid., p. 90

153 HSK, <http://www.snerpa.is/net/forn/hrolf.htm> accessed 21/05/14

154 Magoun, p. 305

155 Cook, *Njal's Saga* trans. (London, 2001) pp. 178-179

156 <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/type1161.html#dovrefjell> accessed 21/05/14

157 Sarmela, p. 89

158 Saxo, p. 55

159 Poem 45 appendix 2

Where HSK differs from VS is that the animal arrives to menace the hall of King Hrolf, while Fafnir is found at his lair. Bödvar and Hottr still travel away from the hall to kill the animal but in HSK the narrative specifically describes the beast as coming to threaten the hall. It is argued that in the earlier eras of Bear Cult practice there had to be specific justification to kill a bear.¹⁶⁰ The bear will have to have transgressed in some ways against the villagers, the transgressions are in line with the origin story of the bear as recounted in canto 46 of the Kalevala.¹⁶¹ The bear is meant to behave in accordance with the promises of behaviour it made as part of being permitted to live on earth. The bear was only killed when it attacked or threatened livestock owned by the villagers, the villagers themselves, or other disruptive behaviour such as eating recently buried corpses.¹⁶² The marking of the den of the bear to kill one with seasonal regularity is thought to be a later development.¹⁶³ In threatening Hrolf's hall, the killing of the monster is not only justified but sanctioned. Canto 46 from the Kalevala describes the bear as being sent to attack the livestock owned by Väinämöinen's village. It is notable that both Bödvar and Väinämöinen travel to meet the animal or bear before it reaches settlement. This may represent the killing of the animal in the liminal area between settlement and forest. The animal is travelling, therefore going through a spatial transition between the otherworld of the forest and the normal world of the hall or village. Before the hunters entered the forest to slay the bear they engaged in purification rituals. These rituals include washing at the boundary of the village, using a sauna, or jumping through fire – a motif later associated with bersekers; this possibly bears some small relation to the purification of Hottr in the lake where he is washed by Bödvar.¹⁶⁴ The notion of the bear or animal threatening livestock comes across in a choice of translation in HSK. The animal threatens Hrolf's 'fǣ' which is usually translated as wealth. 'fǣ' can however be translated as livestock, as notions of wealth and livestock were largely interconnected.¹⁶⁵ It is not unreasonable to detect a possible double meaning here preserved in a transitional narrative, a dragon threatens wealth, while a bear threatens livestock – the definitions of wealth, as the definition of the monster, changing over time.

¹⁶⁰ Sarmela, p. 83, 90

¹⁶¹ Magoun, p. 310

¹⁶² Honko, p. 125

¹⁶³ Sarmela, p. 90

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 88

Honko, p. 122

Cook pp. 178-179,

Wawn, 'The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal' trans. in ed. Örnólfur Thorsson, *The Sagas of the Icelanders: A Selection* (London, 2001) p. 266

¹⁶⁵ Zoëga, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic* (Toronto, 2004) p. 132

When considering the nature of the arrival of the animal in HSK it is important to consider variables, where they exist, in the Bear Cult material in search of comparison to this motif. The earliest forms of the Bear Cult were based on hunting societies. This society, by a later period, had developed into a swidden culture. That was a culture based on more permanent settlement in man made clearings in the forest. The nature of the Bear Rites changed with the changing of society to this different structure. The bear was still respected in this culture but it played a different role compared to its previous status as forest ruler.¹⁶⁶ As humans were changing the landscape and creating forest clearings for pasture and crops, the sense of inside and outside, the village and the forest, became a stronger dividing line, relying less on the forest and game for survival. The outside, the forest otherworld, developed more negative connotations. The bear became more of a negative creature for the threat it posed to the fields of livestock consequently charms changed to concentrate on trying to spiritually influence the bear to keep away from human settlement.¹⁶⁷ The swidden culture is likely to have existed in areas of Finland and Sweden at a time contemporary to the writing of the sagas in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Is it possible that there would have been cross cultural influence on the saga writers? Unlikely. The sagas were preserved in Iceland, the furthest flung part of the Nordic world and far removed from both Finland and Sweden making an Icelandic experience of this culture very unlikely. Iceland was a frontier society which held on tightly to the stories and history of the mainland Nordic culture from which it emanated. Indeed Icelanders had a contemporary reputation for their skalds and preservation of history.¹⁶⁸ The latter here making it more likely that the idea of the bear approaching the settlement, and further ideas which have resemblances in the swidden culture, stems from remembered older tradition which organically developed in the oral tradition of the recorded stories.

The most distinct aspect of the Bear Cult is that human interaction with the bear is characterised by deception and taboo. This thesis proposes that these two aspects help to explain three seemingly unusual aspects of the slaying episode in HSK; the animal being unnamed, the strange sham-combat motif and the reactions of Hrolf's warriors. In the poems and verses recording the rites of the Bear Cult we learn that the bear is seldom referred to by name rather it is mostly referred to by a large catalogue of euphemistic terms.¹⁶⁹ The names used for the bear often describe its physical

166 Sarmela, p. 95

167 Ibid., p. 96

168 Byock, HSK p. viii

169 Honko, p. 136

characteristics or allude to the supernatural origin of the bear and its relation to man. Such names include “Good One”, “Honeypaws” and “Forest King” among many other positive terms.¹⁷⁰ These names were used out of respect for the bear as it was a supernatural semi-divine figure. Such was the strength of the taboo that the strongest oath possible to make in this culture is on the name of the bear.¹⁷¹ Given the distinct possibility that the animal in the HSK slaying episode was at some point equated with a bear, it is possible that the main noun '*dyr*', which is translated as animal, was used as a hangover from this taboo.

The reaction of Hrolf's warriors, who as an elite retinue, should be strong and accomplished warriors and who indeed show little weakness in other parts of the saga, is unexpected. The warriors appear frightened or at least reluctant to take on the animal threatening their land. The respect and taboo status granted to the bear as part of the Bear Cult meant that killing the animal was also taboo. Doing so could bring retribution from the spirits or the gods. The female aspect of the forest or the female pine spirit protected the bear and were invoked for protection and success by the hunters.¹⁷² As we have discussed, Hrolf's warriors are active participants in Hottr's initiation ritual, they are not participating in the fight because the combat is specifically part of the ritual. It is possible however that there may be some element of the taboo in Hrolf ordering his men not to attack the animal. When it became necessary to kill a bear, the taboo had to be broken/transgressed.¹⁷³ The poems provide us with evidence as to how the breaking of this taboo was rationalised or justified.¹⁷⁴ The rite of killing the bear, and the ceremony afterwards both use ideas of deception and delusion to protect the hunters from the negative effects of breaking the taboo.¹⁷⁵ We can see from canto 46 of the *Kalevala* and poem 45, that immediately upon killing the bear, the hunters recite a verse to the bear or to the forest; they say that they had not killed the bear but that by some accident or misfortune the bear had killed itself.¹⁷⁶

There is an Ob-Ugrian ritual skinning of the bear immediately after the kill where the hunters say

170 Poem 48 appendix 2

Magoun, p. 306

Sarmela, p. 85

171 Honko, p. 126

172 Sarmela, p. 81

173 Honko, p. 136

174 Sarmela, p. 83

175 Ibid., p. 83

176 Magoun, p. 306

poem 45 appendix 2

that they are unbuttoning the coat of the bear, a further euphemism.¹⁷⁷ After the kill, the bear is transported back to the village and treated as though it was an honoured guest. For the duration of the ceremony, the bear is considered still alive, and only truly dies at the end of the ceremony when it's skull is placed in a tree.¹⁷⁸ The bear is brought into a house, usually the house of the hunter who made the kill, and an elaborate ceremony begins with the bear playing the role of guest and depending on the sex of the bear, bride or groom, as a villager is married to the bear as part of the festival.¹⁷⁹ For the entire duration of the ceremony the bear is considered to be alive and an active participant in the rituals. Due to the strangeness of the episode in HSK where the slain animal is propped up and killed again in a mock killing, it is possible that some long preserved element of the delusion idea is present here.¹⁸⁰ It is certainly not just “clumsy” narrative as suggested by Jones.¹⁸¹ The animal in HSK, like the bear in the hunting rites, is given agency. It is described as rushing towards the hall after it has already been killed by Bödvar “...*at dýrit færi þar ok heldr geyst at borginni.*”¹⁸² This improbable situation may be explained by reference to this aspect of the Bear Cult. In VS, Fafnir is stabbed by Sigurd and then divulges his knowledge before finally dying, this is perhaps similar to the idea of the bear giving its numinous knowledge to the hunters after it has been killed.

The element of the bear ceremony that resounds most stridently with the slaying episodes in both HSK and VS is connected with the acquisition of numinous power. The bear was a supernatural creature with an established origin in the otherworld. A liminal creature which had descended from the heavens to spend time in the human world. The bear was considered the forest ruler and as such was the lord of the world outside of the village. The vast and seldom broken wilderness was its domain. It is very clear that the bear is a supernatural creature and therefore it can be a source of numinous power and knowledge which originates in the otherworld. In canto 46 of the *Kalevala* and poem *Eating the Bear's Head* in FFA, we learn that during the ceremony the bear is divested of its attributes by ritual consumption of parts of its body.¹⁸³ Sarmela identifies that eating parts of the bear to consume its power is also described in the *Viitasaari* text which also further emphasises the significance of the head of the bear.¹⁸⁴ Väinämöinen ritually removes parts of the bears head, and

177 Honko, p. 121

178 Magoun, p. 313

179 Honko, p. 137

180 Schjodt, IBTW p. 325

181 Jones, *Kings Beasts and Heroes* (London, 1972) p. 157

182 HSK, <http://www.snerpa.is/net/forn/hrolf.htm> accessed 20/05/14

183 Sarmela, p. 86

184 Ibid., p. 84

gains the power of that body part, the eye of the bear improves his own eyesight and so on.¹⁸⁵ In this way Väinämöinen, and the hunters who were involved in this ritual, would gain numinous power from the consumption of parts of a creature derived from the otherworld. In the same way Bödvar, Hottr and Sigurd all gained numinous power from otherworldly creatures. Sarmela mentions that any aspects of the bear feast known as *peijaiset* which survived in more modern times in Finland, were associated with rites of passage.¹⁸⁶

It is thought that there is a level of initiation involved in the bear hunts. The youngest men in the village would want to participate to prove their status as hunters. The sources are not explicit but there are allusions to a tiered society where those men who had completed a bear hunt before held higher status than those who had not. The charm *Hunter's Praise*, which Sarmela provides in FFA, suggests that those who have not killed a bear are just boys: “Not Everyone is a hero, no not half the boys! Only heroes will do here, here only men are chosen, to ski for the forest elk, to slay the backwoods bear.”¹⁸⁷ For part of the ceremony only the men considered hunters could participate. This possibly extended to the acquisition of numinous power from the bear. It is noted that only the hunters are given teeth of the bear as part of the ceremony.¹⁸⁸ The new hunter therefore gains supernatural powers from consuming the attributes of the bear as part of being accepted into the status of hunter. It is identified among other Ob-Ugrian peoples that if the ceremony did not take place in the house of the hunter who had killed the bear, the festivities would be held in the house of a village elder, usually a relation of the successful hunter.¹⁸⁹ This was because the bear ceremony was expensive and may have involved neighbouring villages travelling to participate. The ceremony therefore happens in a place which is analogous to a king's hall. The poems indicate that the usual procedure for the hunting of the bear was for two hunters to kill the animal, or at least for one other hunter perhaps more experienced to be present at the den of the bear.¹⁹⁰ This evokes the idea of the initiand and initiator pair. In canto 46 it is wise old Väinämöinen who kills the bear which does not fit with the idea of initiation.¹⁹¹ This can be explained by understanding the composed nature of the Kalevala. Lönnrot is likely to have attributed this otherwise independent episode to Väinämöinen as part of his effort to construct a grand narrative bringing together many disparate poems. The

185 Magoun, p. 312

186 Sarmela, p. 86

187 Ibid., p. 85

188 Ibid., p. 85

189 Honko, p. 123

190 Sarmela, p. 89

191 Magoun, p. 306

Kalevala canto is the only bear hunting poem in which we find the legendary Väinämöinen or any equivalent figure.

These are the main parallels it is possible to draw between the ritual slaying episodes in the Old Norse saga texts and the Bear Rites. Some are more tenuous than others when taken individually. But when looked at collectively, there is an indication of a connection between aspects of the Bear Cult and motifs latent in the saga narrative. The most notable connections we have discussed are the acquisition of numinous power through consumption, the aspect of delusion and the very nature of the chthonic monster. The hunter travels outside of the village to kill a bear, does so, and after a ceremony upon returning, gains numinous power through consumption and increases his status in a permanent way. Thereby joining the high status group of hunters. The initiation pattern is preserved.

Animism:

These similarities are only one aspect of the Bear Cult which is relevant to these Old Norse texts. In both HSK and VS there is a strong animistic thread running through the narratives. It is the animism which first draws Byock and Sarmela to mention that there could be a connection between the sagas and the ancient Bear Cult.¹⁹² The animism in VS is mostly centred around the narrative episode of Sigmund and Sinfjotli, which occurs earlier in the saga than the slaying episode. Sigmund is Sigurd's father and Sinfjotli is both Sigurd's half brother and his cousin. In the story of these two characters there is a theme of animism especially related to wolves. A wolf kills Sigmund's brothers and provides the means of his escape from capture. The most prominent instance is of Sigmund and Sinfjotli wearing magic wolf skins which transform them into wolves

*“Þeir Sigmundur fóru í hamina og máttu eigi úr komast og fylgdi sú náttúra sem áður var. Létu og vargröddu. Þeir skildu báðir röddina.”*¹⁹³

“Sigmund and Sinfjolti put the skins on and could not get them off. And the weird power was there as before: they howled like wolves, both understanding the sounds.”¹⁹⁴

¹⁹² Byock, HSK, p. vii
Sarmela, p. 92

¹⁹³ VS, <http://www.snerpa.is/net/forn/volsung.htm> accessed 20/05/14

¹⁹⁴ Byock, VS, p. 44

As wolves they perform acts of violence and kill many men. In this way they are associated with the Old Norse literary figure and historical warrior known as the berserker. Berserker imagery and attendant animism is particularly strong in HSK; the character of Bödvar embodies both.

Bödvar's origin story has undeniable roots in the Bear Cult. Bödvar is the child of a human woman and a bear who had once been a prince. There are stories related to the Bear Cult where various tribes attribute their ancestry and origin to a woman who bore the children of a bear.¹⁹⁵ There are several such stories from across the wide geographical area where the Bear Cult flourished.¹⁹⁶ The details of Bödvar's father's story are distinct parallels to these Bear Cult stories, especially the prepared and foreseen manner of his death. Further evidence is provided by the name of Bödvar's mother, *Bera* – the female Old Norse form of bear. Bödvar's mother bears three children and they are changed supernaturally due to another consumption: Bera is forced to eat some of the heart of her slain bear husband. The inherent numinous power acquired in this consumption affects her children. Two of her children are born with physical features of animals, the feet of an elk and the paws of a dog respectively. Both brothers are strong and of harsh temperament like berserkers, they live secluded in the wilderness away from other humans. They are hybrid man/animal creatures who exist like the bear in the liminal otherworld of the forest. Indeed both brothers are figures in Bödvar's own initiation. As we have discussed, Elk Frodi takes the position of chthonic monster for Bödvar. Bödvar is himself the third and final child of Bera and has no outward animalistic features. Bödvar however is the most closely associated with the animalistic berserker figure. In the climatic final battle in HSK, Bödvar, through use of a trance like sleep, controls a bear in the battle from a more distant location. Jennbert argues that this type of trance, where the human becomes an animal or controls an animal, contains strong elements of animist shamanism and reoccurs in Old Norse literature in Odin myths.¹⁹⁷ Prior to this final transformation Bödvar exhibits a great ferocity and competence in combat associated with berserkers.

It is strange perhaps that Bödvar is not named as a berserker, but this can be explained by the literate development of the berserker character. Berserkers came to be seen as distinctly negative characters, who exist solely as a narrative device to provide the saga hero with an opportunity to test himself or his manliness.¹⁹⁸ They are often described as unreasonable and out of control. Distinctly

195 Honko, p. 126

196 Sarmela, p. 94

197 Jennbert, p. 199, 200

198 Liberman, 'Berserker: A Double Legend', in eds. Simek and Meurer, *Scandinavia and Christian Europe in the*

they are a character type, which, thanks to their strong association with animism, does not fit well with Christianity. The authors of the sagas, though anonymous, were certainly Christian, and as such there is little surprise that the portrayal of such pre-Christian hangovers as berserkers became increasingly negative. We have discussed episodes in the wider Old Norse literary corpus where a bishop defeats or bests a berserker, emphasising this point. Bödvar is not described as a berserker because he is a positive character in the saga. This omission is also present with Jokul in *Vatnsdalsaga*. He exhibits the characteristics of a berserker but is never so named because he is a positive character, instead he is just described as a quarrelsome figure.¹⁹⁹ The berserker idea ties into HSK again with the idea of initiation rituals. Schjødt writes in 'The Notion of the Berserker' that in HSK the saga heroes replace the berserkers at the courts of both Adils and Hrolf and become the new elite retinue – they are likely just not named as berserkers because they are positive characters.²⁰⁰ The images on the Torslunda helmet plates (see appendix 1) are thought to depict weapon dances related to initiation into elite warrior groups such as the berserker retinue of a king.²⁰¹ We know of the existence of such groups, all male warrior societies such as the *Jomsvikings* are a famous example. The helmet plates depict human figures with bears and half human/animal figures associated with the wearing of skins or masks. This leads us to the argument for berserker figures taking on the properties of the chthonic monster from initiation rituals. Terry Gunnell tells us that the wearing of masks allows an individual to ritually take on characteristics of an animal or of a god – whatever the mask represents.²⁰² There is little reason that this cannot extend to the wearing of animal skins, which is evocative of Sigmund and Sinfjolti running as wolves. Jennbert argues that the line between humans and animals in Old Norse texts appears to be “...ambivalent and capable of being stretched in various ways.”²⁰³ She goes on to suggest that “Hybrid beings and the symbiosis between animal and human could this be expected to play a highly concrete role in rituals...”²⁰⁴

Middle Ages, Papers of the 12th International Saga Conference Bonn, Germany 28th-2nd August 2003 (Bonn, 2003) p. 33

Schjødt, 'The Notion of the Berserker and the Relation Between Óðinn and Animal Warriors', in eds. McKinnel, Ashurst and Kick, *The Fantastic in Old Norse/Icelandic Literature Sagas and the British Isles, The 13th International Saga Conference Volume II* (Durham and York, 2006) p. 888

199 Wawn, p. 242

200 Schjødt, 'Berserker' p. 888

201 Arent, p. 139, 132

202 Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia* (Cambridge, 1995) p. 70, 80, 224

203 Jennbert, p. 189

204 Ibid., p. 199

As we have discussed, berserkers act as a challenge to the saga heroes, and in doing so they occupy the role of the chthonic monster in these episodes. HSK and VS represent an intermediate stage in a distinct narrative progression from bear hunting to saga heroes. This is expressed through the changing nature of the chthonic monster in Nordic culture. The bear provided the original means of supernatural test for initiates into a fraternity of status. As society progressed and cultures altered, the bear had to become more supernatural, exaggerated and updated to a stronger figure, a dragon – worthy enemy of a saga hero. As time progressed literate culture progressed with it and the nature of the chthonic monster changed again. Man became the monster, the animalistic nature of the berserker, the new object of the test, connected this figure with the animal which formed the original supernatural test: the bear. The animism in HSK and VS further validates the comparison between the poems of the Bear Cult and the Old Norse saga texts. All of the reasonable connections have been explored in terms of the connection between the ritual structures of the slaying episodes and the threads of animism in the sagas.

Conclusions:

In this project we have analysed the slaying episodes from both VS and HSK. We have used ritual theory and a framework for understanding initiation rituals devised by Schjødt. This framework has allowed us to see that these narrative episodes do in fact conform to expected ritual patterns. Both the Sigurd story in VS and the story of Bödvar and Hottr in HSK have been positively identified as initiation rituals. We have seen that there is a universality to certain ritual types, like initiation, but that the actual parallels in different rituals hold more value if they stem from the same culture. Further to this we have identified that ritual patterns may be perpetuated for centuries, as culture changes and transforms with the passage of time and the development of society. Rituals drawn from a large cultural 'semantic field', represent some of the oldest practices of that society. Even when a ritual encountered in extant sources appears to be mostly a form of entertainment, we see that the cultural memory of the ritual is likely to be based on long held traditions. Rituals recorded by oral tradition and later written down are unlikely to be dramatic or literate creations. This suggests that the structure of the narrative in both VS and HSK has roots in actual historical practice. We have taken the idea of relation to actual practice and followed up on scholarly considerations from Byock and Sarmela that there may be a connection between these rituals and the northern Bear Cult.

There is significance in that there are so many parallels between the two sources, Old Norse and Finno-Karelian. It is notable that there are such specific similarities of motif that run deeper than the more universal elements of ritual. The question of cross cultural influence can be addressed by noting that the Bear Cult, and remnant practices, once occupied the same geographical areas as those from which the saga stories originate. While the Bear Cult faded in western Scandinavia, it persisted in eastern and northern Scandinavia, and neighbouring Finland, at least up to the sixteenth century. The value of making the comparison with the Bear Cult material, is that it preserves an ancient ritual type into much later eras, through the strong Finno-Karelian oral tradition. These rituals which remained largely unchanged for centuries, may have once been practised in the same geographical areas as the setting, and origin, of the stories told in the sagas.

Once the slaying episodes are understood as rituals, it becomes much easier to see that elements of these stories have their roots in actual historical practice. In an effort to understand the influences on these rituals and motifs, we have examined the material related to the Bear Cult which has been often suggested as a possible relation to these sagas. This thesis has examined the possibility of this connection and identified overlapping motifs. This examination goes some way towards showing that, in all likelihood, there was a connection between the Bear Cult and the slaying episodes. By demonstrating that there are valid links between the Bear Cult and the slaying episodes in VS and HSK this project has provided further evidence for the historical reality of the underlying ritual framework in the two sagas. Sigurd's encounter with Fafnir and Bödvar and Hottr's encounter with the animal are not fanciful creations of the saga authors. These episodes represent memory of the actual historical practice of fighting a chthonic monster. This practice has roots both in the initiation culture of berserkers and elite warriors and, beyond this, in the ritual practices of the ancient Bear Cult.

With further study it would be possible to expand the comparative study of the aspects of the Bear Cult to other types of ritual present in the saga texts. This is beyond the scope of the current project. A comprehensive analysis could additionally look at the entire corpus of Ob-Ugrian poetry, especially the Lapp rites, for any further relation to the Old Norse stories. The limitation here, of course, is that analysis and identification can only go so far with the extant sources and limited evidence available from disparate time periods. This thesis has aimed to remain within reasonable bounds of links it is possible to make without pushing the evidence too far. The validity of the

conclusion that the slaying episodes have roots in the Bear Cult, is supported by the examination of animism in the Old Norse texts. We have shown that animism related to the Bear Cult has survived to a remarkable extent in VS and HSK. The animism, though slightly transformed by cultural developments, remained part of the story of these saga heroes right up to the time the sagas were written down. Such animism further connects the slaying episodes to their ritual ancestors in the Bear Cult.

It is possible that the slaying episodes in HSK and VS represent the last influences of the ancient northern Bear Cult in Old Norse culture and story telling tradition. While we cannot say for certain, we have seen that there is compelling evidence for the possibility.

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Poems:

43 *Setting out to Hunt*

44 *Where Bruin was Given Birth*

45 *At the Bear's Lair*

46 *Off you Go, Gold On*

47 *Welcome Home, Bruin*

48 *The Bear Feast*

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Appendix 1

Torslunda, Sweden – Helmet Plates



Appendix 2

Poems from Honko, Timonen and Branch, *The Great Bear A Thematic Anthology of Oral Poetry in the Finno-Ugrian Languages* (Oxford, 1994) pp. 183-189

43 Setting Out to Hunt

*Where was the Bruin born
did the thin-haired grow
was the blue-tailed begotten?
In the dark Northland
in careful Tapiola
beside a green wood
beneath a rough branch
and the root of a dwarf spruce.
There the bear was born
the thin-haired grew up
the blue-tailed was begotten.*

*Guide the skier by the sleeve
direct him by the coat-skirt
lead him towards that headland
move him towards that hillock
where the quarry may be caught
and the game brought home!
Our men are children
our fellows sleepy
our dogs are mere pups.*

45 At the Bear's Lair

*Get up, sooty maid
away from the sooty fire
from the beds of evergreen:
those who take are at the doors
at the gates those who bear off.
Sift the mist now with a sieve
wave away the gloom
before the beast's brow
as I get my bow ready
and as we prepare to shoot!
The men are young, the bolts stick
up, the shooters are clumsy.
I did not intend to shoot
nor did I stalk with a gun:
you yourself strayed from the brush
you tumbled out of a tree
split your darling maw
your belly full of berries*

44 Where Was Bruin Given Birth

*Where was Bruin given birth
the bear's cub brought up?
In a little woollen box
in a little iron box.
Where was Bruin given birth
the bear's cub brought up?
On the peg of a small cloud.
How was he let down to earth?
On a nameless, quite
untouchable string.*

46 Off You Go, Gold One

*Off you go, gold one
silver one, make yourself scarce
precious one, trample a path!
Which way shall I take my guest
which way convey my darling?
I've a shed made long ago
with feet of silver
and with spurs of gold.
Beware, poor women
when I convey my darling
that no beast may disappear
none of the mistress's stock
as Bruin comes to the fire
the honey-thing to the farm.*

*in my hunting-days
in my game-seeking times.*

47 Welcome Home, Bruin

As they come home:

*Listen to this noise
this racket, shouting:
pipes shrill back from the forest
the horns of Tapio blow!
Are the old awake
those at life's end sitting up?
Will someone receive a man
and ask after a fellow?*

The folk answer:

*Welcome home, Bruin
come in, honeypaws!
I've been hoping all my life
all my days I've been longing
and the next generation
for my guest to come
the visitor to arrive.
Evenings at the windows I've
sat, mornings on the shed steps
stood till snow became hard ground
until the hard ground softened.
Here liquor has long been put
down, for ages barley beer
the benches washed with honey
and the floorboards swept with mead
for the coming guest
the arriving visitor.
I've been hoping all my life
all my days I've been longing
and the next generation
yes, waiting for you
like a maid for a young man
a red-cheeked one for a mate
or like a ski for fresh snow
a right ski for a firm crust
a left ski for a smooth slide.*

As it is brought indoors:

*Lower the threshold
and raise the door-beam
that his cap may not fall off!*

48 The Bear Feast

*O God! The one you gave shall
not be eaten without song
and its head borne to the tree!
Out of the Forestland we come
that is, from Tapiola;
the forest gave us a sign
that is, your spell Tapio
when I went to Forestland.*

This is sung as the head and paws are taken to the fire:

*Let us be off, let us go
to the great woodpecker's fire
the beak-bird's bonfire.
There are three hooks in the hut:
one hook is an iron hook
one hook is a copper hook
and the third is a silver hook.
Go straight to the third
the good silver one
to hang from the beam
to rest on the crook.
We have the wood grouse boiling
the forest bird simmering
the capercaillie bubbling.*

When it is cooked it is taken in a dish to the house from the hut:

*The cook is dead in the hut
and the cook's son in the porch
meat in mouth and bone in hand
still grasping a little knife.
Bruin, my dear bird
my fair honeypaw
come here in light shoes
in black stockings strut!
You have long been in the cold
for ages in a dim place:
come into the warm
step under the roof!*

This is asked at the door:

*Now, where shall I take my guest
whither guide my famous one?
Under the fair roof
under the famous roofree
to the top of the pine bench.*

*Have the planks been scrubbed
have the floors been swept
and the benches wiped
and the lintels raised
and the tables laid with gold
for the Good One to come in
for the Great Man to step in?*

The answer from within; the door is opened:

*The floors have been swept
the planks have been scrubbed
and the benches wiped
and the lintels raised
and the tables laid with gold
for the Good One to come in
for the Great Man to step in.*

The one who brings in the meat:

*Don't beware of the women
and don't fear the bonnet-heads
for the women are shining
and the sons in their half-boots
the daughters adorned with tin
for the Good One to come in
for the Great Man to step in.*

The meat on the table:

*I put him upon clean wood
lay him down on a good board:
the boards all began to sing
and the windows to rejoice
that the Good One has come in
for the Great Man has stepped in.*

When the head is removed and the meat taken off:

*Now the time has come
to crunch bones, to crack
heads and to break teeth!*

The skill is carried out to be hung on the tree:

*Let us be off, let us go
up the golden lane*

*up the silver road
where the planks are laid with silk
planks with silk, swamps with velvet
and the gates with a black rim.*

The skull is fastened to the tree:

*I'll not put him on a willow
nor on a sallow set him up:
I'll put him on a clean tree
on a good fir tree
on a fair pine tree
sit him facing east
tilting to the north.*

When everything has been done, this is said:

*There I left my handsome one
left the one I keep in mind
left to watch the moon
to admire the sun
sat him facing east
tilting to the north.*