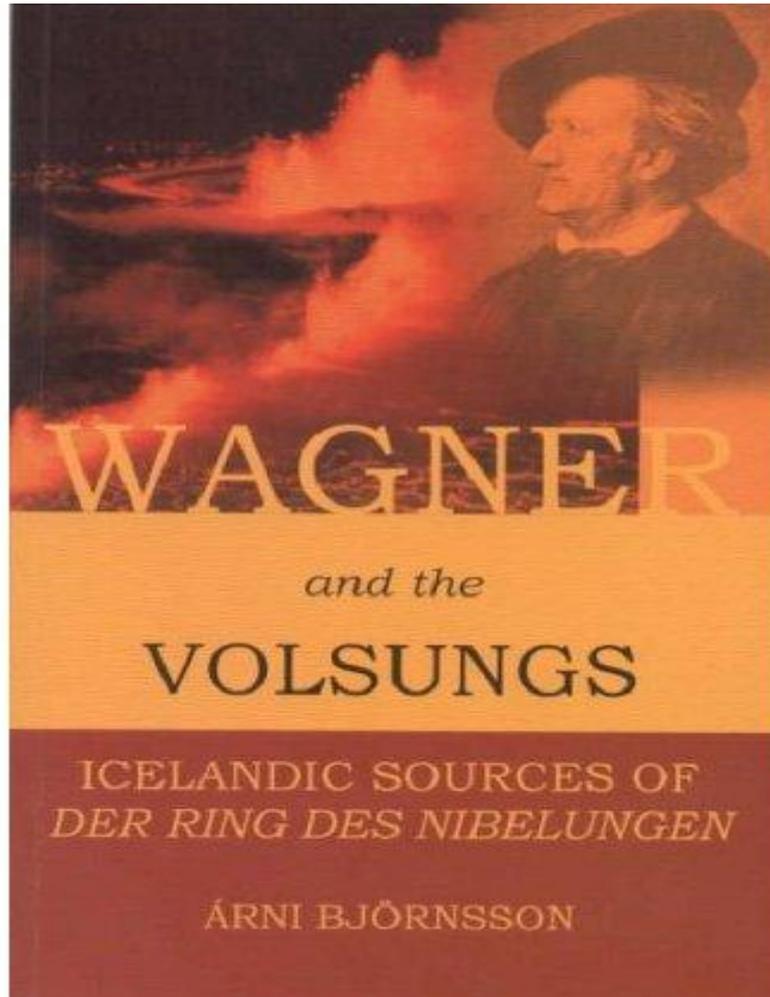


Wagner and the Volsungs
Árni Björnsson



In *Wagner and the Volsungs* the sources Wagner used for his great work, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, are detailed scene by scene through all four operas of the cycle. Many people will be surprised to learn that no more than 5% of his material is derived solely from medieval German books such as *Das Nibelungenlied*, while at least 80% is from Old Icelandic writings. The concept of *Götterdämmerung*, for example, in which the world is consumed by fire, as well as the flickering flame surrounding Brünnhilde's rock, were known to Wagner from Icelandic sources alone.

The book also contains a brief account of Wagner's life, and tells how he came to know Icelandic literature through the spread of knowledge of Old Icelandic texts in the German-speaking world. It examines the reasons why Germanic mythology was almost exclusively preserved in Iceland in the Middle Ages, but became so popular in Germany in the nineteenth century.

In the scene-by-scene analysis of the Ring and its sources, all the texts are quoted in their original languages with full English translations.

The author, Dr Árni Björnsson, was head of the Folklore Department of the National Museum of Iceland from 1969 to 1994, and before that was guest lecturer in Icelandic language and literature at the University in Greifswald and at the Free University, Berlin. This English edition is a translation of a revised and expanded version of *Wagner og Völsungar* (Reykjavik 2000). It has been edited by Anthony Faulkes, who until his retirement was Professor of Old Icelandic at the University of Birmingham.

‘The conclusion, that the Ring owes more to Old Icelandic sources than to any other body of literature, evolves carefully and systematically through Björnsson's profound scholarship.’

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After many twists and turns in the story of the Volsungs, Sigurd, the greatest of them all, is about to burst onto the scene. In our last installment, we saw Sigmund taking a second wife, the beautiful Hjordis, daughter of King Eylimi. But another man desires her, and is enraged when her marriage to Sigmund takes place. Chapter Nine of the Volsung Saga is devoted to Helgi, and it constitutes a rich and entertaining digression from the main story. At one time, Helgi must have been a very important hero. The anonymous author of the Volsung Saga draws on two poems concerning Helgi compiled in the Poetic Edda: Helgakvitha Hundingsbana I (The First Poem of Helgi, Killer of Hunding; henceforth HH I), and Helgakvitha Hundingsbana II (or HH II). Read more | The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs (1876) is an epic poem of over 10,000 lines by William Morris that tells the tragic story, drawn from the Volsunga Saga and the Elder Edda, of the Norse hero Sigmund, his son Sigurd (the equivalent of Siegfried in the Nibelungenlied and Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung) and Sigurd's wife Gudrun. It sprang from a fascination with the Volsung legend that extended back twenty years to the author's youth, and had already resulted in several other