




KORNELIA LASOTA

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3448-8847>

University of Silesia in Katowice

Faculty of Humanities

The Holy Serpent: Snakes in the Old Norse Worldview

Święty wąż: wizerunek węża
w światopoglądzie staroskandynawskim

Abstrakt

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie wizerunku węża w literaturze staroskandynawskiej oraz analiza jego poszczególnych wyobrażeń w literaturze staronordyckiej. W artykule zawarta jest dogłębna analiza obrazu zwierzęcia w ważnych tekstach Pólnocy, takich jak mit stworzenia i utworów ściśle z nim związanych. Ponadto przedstawione zostają przykłady zaczerpnięte z najistotniejszych sag legendarnych: *Sagi o Wolsungach* oraz *Sagi o Ragnarze Lodbroku*. Wężę okazują się nie tylko przerażające, lecz także majestatyczne i przede wszystkim wszechobecne w mitologii skandynawskiej.

Słowa kluczowe: Skandynawia, mitologia, wąż, gad, saga staroskandynawska, mit

Святая змея: образ змеи
в древнескандинавском мировоззрении

Абстракт

Цель статьи – представить и проанализировать образ змеи в древнескандинавской литературе. В статье дается углубленное исследование изображения этого животного в важных северных текстах, таких как миф о сотворении мира и работы, тесно связанные с ним. Кроме того, представлены примеры из важнейших легендарных sag: *Сага о Вёльсунгах* и *Сага о Рагнаре Лодброке*, которые помогают показать змею как существо не только устрашающее и величественное, но и, главное, вездесущее в скандинавских мифах.

Ключевые слова: Скандинавия, мифология, змея, пресмыкающееся, древнескандинавская сага, миф

Nowadays, the most common association of the snake is the one triggered by the image of the animal in the biblical Genesis. Ever since, the snake seems to have maintained its trickster reputation, which has contributed to the tendency to regard the animal as a metaphor for evil. This article will aim to illustrate how the snake is represented in Old Norse literature, especially in the Norse cosmology. Two of the most notable Scandinavian sagas—*The Saga of the Völsungs* and *The Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*—will also be touched upon, since both of them deliver significant information on the popular reception of the serpent and creatures similar to it.

In order to properly understand the Old Norse perception of serpents it is essential to understand the creature's name. Most snake-like creatures, including what we would nowadays consider dragons, were referred to as *ormr*. In the *Icelandic-English Dictionary* this term is defined as: “worm, snake,”¹ while another edition of the very same dictionary only provides the reader with the translations: “snake, serpent.”² Therefore, many scholars argue that *ormr* was not a particularly specific term and referred to multiple types of creatures, such as worms and even caterpillars. Despite the existence of the word *maðkr*, which in most translations of the *Prose Edda*—a work by the Icelandic poet and politician Snorri Sturluson, which is considered one of the main sources of Norse myth—stands for maggots, a clear differentiation is impossible since dictionaries also use “worm” as one of the possible translations. The word has since lost its original meaning, evolving from *ormr*, through *wyrm*, up to “worm.” Hence, there arises an argument that *ormr* was used as a defining term for many legless creatures. The word possessed negative associations, for example, worms infecting decaying meat, which would cause a man to feel unwell if consumed. It did, however, also correlate with such wonders as snakes shedding their skin and caterpillars turning into butterflies. Generally speaking, the term alone creates a duality in the perception of serpents. Below I will discuss instances of this phenomenon. This non-unified image of the snake is also represented in many artworks depicting the biblical Genesis. Nowadays, we tend to associate dragons (also qualified as serpents in Old Norse) as creatures with limbs. Eric W.A. Mulder points out that this seems to be a prevailing theme. Mulder notices that such artworks as, for example, *The Last Judgment* by Hieronymus Bosch, do not contain even one clear indication of the looks of the biblical snake. The author also mentions how the meaning of the Latin-based word *serpens* is not necessarily indicative of a snake, but rather is the equivalent of “reptile.”³

¹ Geir Tómasson Zoega, *Icelandic-English Dictionary* (Reykjavik: Sigurður Kristjánsson, 1922), 382.

² Geir Tómasson Zoega, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1910), 399.

³ Eric W.A. Mulder, “On the Lost Legs of the Snake that Seduced Eve,” *Zoophilologica*, no. 3 (2017): 191–197.

Old Norse cosmology suggests the existence of nine realms situated around an ash tree called *Yggdrasill*. At the heart of this tree lies the home of humans—*Miðgarðr* (“the central enclosure” in the literal translation). *Miðgarðr* is separated from the rest of the realms through its general structure. To be more precise, according to the Norse our world has two oceans, one of which is placed around all land. In this ocean, there lurks a humongous serpent called *Jörmungandr*, who is often referred to as the *Miðgarðsormr* (alternatively *Miðgarðs-ormr*), so the Serpent of Midgard.⁴ It is said to take the shape of the Uroboros, which is most likely meant to underline its size—the serpent is able to wrap around the entire human realm and still bite its own tail. *Jörmungandr* is one of the monstrous children of the trickster god *Loki* and the giantess *Angrboða*. Also, *Jörmungandr* is the mortal enemy of the well-known and loved *Thor*. The serpent does not, however, pose any active threat to humans, which is clearly shown in a lyric from the *Elder Edda*—a collection of poems concerning Old Norse gods and heroes, which were compiled to produce manuscripts such as the *Codex Regius* (ca. 13th century)⁵ and the *Hauksbók* (ca. 14th century). The poem *Hymiskviða* (found in the *Codex Regius*) tells the story of *Thor*’s fishing expedition. The god arrives at a farmer’s home, where he proceeds to feast on what is offered to him. *Thor* does, however, not realize the scale of his hunger and ends up eating all of his host’s food supplies. In consequence, the god and his host, *Hymir*, decide to go on a fishing trip in order to replenish at least some of the farmer’s stock and avoid him starving. It comes as no surprise that the god goes beyond all measures in his quest, wanting to make up for his behavior, because him and *Hymir* end up catching two whales. *Thor*, however, has even bigger ambitions. Using an ox-head as bait, he decides to fish for *Jörmungandr*. His attempt is successful, but all *Thor* does is smack the giant snake in the head with his hammer. The terrified *Hymir* cuts the fishing line and steers their boat in a different direction. In *Snorri Sturluson*’s retelling of this story, *Hymir* is killed during this event. Both sources mention the snake slipping away back into the depths of the ocean, since by fate it is bound to partake in *Ragnarök*, the dawn of the gods.⁶ *Jörmungandr* and *Thor* are bound to kill one another at the end of days. One of the most famous depictions of this story can be found on the *Altuna runestone* in Sweden. The stone dates back to the year 1161, so it is a century older than the manuscript containing the poem. Nevertheless, the existence of the runestone underlines the importance of this mythical story and the significance of the serpent in Old Norse culture.

⁴ Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary* (Oxford: University Press, 1874), <https://www.old-norse.net>, accessed February 04, 2020.

⁵ Andy Orchard, *The Elder Edda: A Book of Viking Lore* (London: Penguin, 2011), xvii.

⁶ Carolyn Larrington, *The Norse Myths. A Guide to the Gods and Heroes* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2017), 105.

Another crucial *ormr* in Norse cosmology is Niðhoggr, a dragon that dwells far under the roots of the world tree. The dragon is extremely dangerous, even more than Jörmungandr, as he “continuously gnawed the roots [of the world tree], and was helped in his work of destruction by countless worms, whose aim is to kill the three, knowing that it’s death would be the signal for the downfall of the gods.”⁷ He is also mentioned to nibble on people who have broken social and judicial norms, thus going to hell for crimes such as murder, adultery or oath breaking. The Eddic poem *Völuspá* mentions:

And so sucks *Niðhöggr*
on the blood of the dead,
like a wolf he bites.
Do you know enough already, or what?⁸

The prefix *Nið-* on its own was used to signify a social stigma, implying the loss of honor and the gained status of a villain. Therefore, Niðhoggr is a serpent/dragon generally feared in the Old Norse view. It is, however, an inevitable part of all existence. There are no mentions of Niðhoggr’s fate after the end of the existing world, which implies that the *ormr* is timeless, and cannot be influenced by any events, even ones involving gods. The obscurity of its existence seems to be a fear-inducing factor when it comes to the perception of the creature.

Other important mentions of snakes in the Eddic poems and the *Snorra Edda* (another name for Sturluson’s prose retellings of Norse myth) appear in the creation myth. Snorri mentions the fact that dwarves, the finest craftsmen known in the mythical Old Norse world, had been created from the aforementioned maggots or worms, which can also be described by the term *ormr*. The worms supposedly crawled inside the flesh of Ymir, whose body was used to create the entire world.⁹ Both sources also speak of the punishment of Loki. The god contributed to the death of Baldr, the most beautiful and most beloved of the gods. The details of this crime will not be dwelled upon in this article, the punishment itself is, however, important when analyzing the depiction of snakes. Among other things, Loki had “a serpent directly over his head, so that its venom would fall, drop by drop, upon his upturned face.”¹⁰ The god’s faithful wife, Sigyn, would hold a bowl over Loki’s head and collect the venom, so that it did not hurt the god. During her short absences, when she emptied the vessel, drops would reach the culprit’s face and cause pain so intense that the earth would tremble when the god writhed.¹¹

⁷ Helen A. Guerber, *Tales of Norse Mythology* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2017), 13.

⁸ My translation.

⁹ Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, trans. Jesse L. Byock (London: Penguin, 2005), 22.

¹⁰ Guerber, *Tales of Norse Mythology*, 247.

¹¹ Jackson Crawford, *The Poetic Edda: Stories of the Norse Gods and Heroes* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2015), 114.

Outside of the Eddic poems, we need not look far for more depictions of serpents. The crucial sources to examine in this context are the Old Norse heroic sagas, in particular *The Saga of the Völsungs* and *The Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*, the first of which is a story that has stood the test of time and gained the status of the best preserved tale among Old Norse texts. The latter of the sagas has gained a lot of notoriety in recent years due to the hugely popular TV series *Vikings*, which borrowed major parts of Ragnar's story and adapted them into a series that quickly became a worldwide phenomenon. For the purpose of this article only parts of the sagas concerning animals will be highlighted, as the entire stories—although quintessential to Old Norse studies—would require detailed explanation and in-depth analysis. *The Saga of the Völsungs*, although qualified as a legendary saga, is also a so-called family saga. This means that it tells the story of many generations, thus covering a very long period of family history before reaching the culmination point of the saga, namely, the hero Sigurðr and his adventures, which will be discussed later in this article. However, in this context, the term “family saga” has no connotations of the general saga genres, as it is a term generally used to describe literary works about more than one generation. Nevertheless, all crucial context required to understand the upcoming fragments will be supplied.

Sigurðr the Völsung is one of the most famous heroes in the Old Norse texts. He comes from a family who are said to be descendants of Odin himself. This, of course, means that Sigurðr is bound to become a hero and maintain his family's reputation. During one of the many adventures the young hero is told about a dragon named Fafnir. Regin, Sigurðr's companion (who also happens to be Fafnir's brother), tells the hero: “His [Fafnir's] size is within the normal range for snakes, and only rumor has made him out to be larger.”¹² What is interesting is the dragon's backstory. Fafnir is also related to an otter and a dwarf, which once again leads us to the species dilemma. It seems that in Old Norse a snake, an otter, and a dwarf are all closely related. This phenomenon could be explained by the snake-like moves otters make while maneuvering in the water, whereas the dwarf-maggot/worm origin has been mentioned previously. This could be read as an early attempt at classifying species according to some of their notable features and mythological backstories known to early Scandinavians.

When Sigurðr decides to bring an end to the dragon's life, it turns out that the creature is much larger than anticipated. Nevertheless, our brave hero manages to slay Fafnir by stabbing him “beneath his left armpit, so deep that the sword sank up to the hilt.”¹³ Aside from the questionable snake/dragon anatomy, the scene is a defining point of the dragon's portrayal. Fafnir turns

¹² Jackson Crawford, *The Saga of the Völsungs with The Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2017), 24.

¹³ Crawford, *The Saga of the Völsungs*, 31.

out to be a sentient creature; what is more, he possesses tremendous amounts of knowledge. The mortally wounded creature quickly realizes who convinced the young hero to perform this fearless deed, but also manages to warn Sigurðr of the dangers that lie ahead. The serpent also gives answers to some questions concerning the world and cosmology, for example, Fafnir and Sigurðr discuss the origin of the Norns (also called the Fates). Their conversation mirrors the one that would be held with a *völva*, a wise seeress able to predict and explain events. Even the mightiest and brightest of gods would turn to such women in search of the truth. This is not the end of the wisdom Sigurðr gains through his encounter with Fafnir. Regin requests the cooked dragon's heart as compensation for the death of his brother. The hero follows this request, but when checking if the heart is fully cooked he burns his finger. "He then put his finger in his mouth, and when the blood of the dragon's heart touched his tongue, he could understand the language of birds."¹⁴ The birds inform Sigurðr about the mischievous plots Regin has in store, so the hero slays his companion as well in order to save himself.¹⁵ The encounter of Sigurðr and Fafnir is also one of the key themes in the previously discussed Eddic poems. *Fáfnismál* deals in detail with the killing of the dragon and the hero's pursuit of knowledge. Henry Adams Bellows notes that "although the *Völsungasaga* does not actually quote any of the stanzas, it gives a very close prose parallel to the whole poem in chapters 18 and 19,"¹⁶ which highly accentuates the importance of this encounter in the studies on Old Norse literature and culture.

The Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok is very closely connected to the story of Sigurðr the Dragonslayer. In order to properly understand the parallels between the two, it is crucial to remember Sigurðr had a daughter by the name of Aslaug. After the death of the rest of the Völsung family, the girl is disguised as a farmer's daughter and continues her life under the name Kráka (crow). Under this name she meets Ragnar Lothbrok.

Ragnar is the son of Sigurðr Ring, the Danish king. In pursuit of his first wife Thora, Ragnar—just like Sigurðr Völsung—has slain a dragon, which has brought him fame all across Scandinavia. After Thora's passing, the hero was eager to marry again, but instead of choosing a royal, he chose Kráka. Aslaug reveals her true ancestry to Ragnar only after the hero was urged to wed another woman, the beautiful princess Ingibjorg of Sweden. As proof she prophesizes that she will be pregnant and her next son will have an unusual trait—a snake in his eye. This is supposed to be proof and commemoration of the great deeds of both Sigurðr and Ragnar. The woman decides her child would be named Sigurðr, so there can be no more doubt about the bravery that will run in the

¹⁴ Crawford, *The Saga of the Völsungs*, 34.

¹⁵ Guerber, *Tales of Norse Mythology*, 301.

¹⁶ Henry Adams Bellows, *The Poetic Edda: Translated from the Icelandic with Introduction and Notes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1936), 370.

boy's blood. As a sign of his good will the king waits for Aslaug to give birth. She does indeed have a boy, and when the midwives show the baby to the king Ragnar is in awe. Kráka's prophecy has turned out to be true. At the sight of his newborn son, he recites a poem:

I never saw
brown serpents
in the eyes of any boy,
except in Sigurðr's alone.
He is easy to recognize,
this ungreedy boy,
he's sharp in the eye—
he's got a snake there.¹⁷

In order to make the following part of the story a bit less convoluted, it will be ignored that many modern sources link Ragnar to another woman—Hlaðgerðr (anglicized as Lagertha). Her tale is mentioned in Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum*. However, *The Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok* does not acknowledge her existence.

The unsuccessful betrothal to Ingibjorg does, however, have its consequences. Eirek and Agnar venture out to battle the enraged Swedish army. Despite their best intentions they are defeated by another creature worth mentioning. Although not related to the snake in any way, the magical cow Sybilja defeats an entire army with her ferocious mooing.¹⁸ I believe this deserves a special mention purely because of how unexpected an event this is. A cow, which under different circumstances would be regarded merely as cattle, becomes a frightful enemy to an entire army.

Just as every heroic tale has a start, so it also has an end. In the case of Ragnar Lothbrok the end could not have been more symbolic. After an attempt to conquer England, King Ella (Aelle of Northumbria) sentences Ragnar to death by throwing him into a snakepit. At first, the snakes do not bite the brave Dane, as if showing their respect towards the dragonslayer. It is only after Ella orders to remove Ragnar's clothes that the creatures start to bite. Moments before his death the hero says: "I never expected that worms would kill me,"¹⁹ thus bringing us back to the extremely blurred Old Norse nomenclature. The hero's end can be interpreted in two ways. Carolyne Larrington sees it as "ironically recalling his first mighty adventure,"²⁰ but it could also be read against

¹⁷ Crawford, *The Saga of the Völsungs*, 104.

¹⁸ Crawford, *The Saga of the Völsungs*, 105.

¹⁹ Crawford, *The Saga of the Völsungs*, 120.

²⁰ Larrington, *The Norse Myths*, 164.

the words: “For you were made from dust, and to dust you will return,”²¹ as it is ultimately worms and dust that await us.

In conclusion, I believe that the recounted stories clearly show that the Old Norse did not view the snake as a purely evil creature. Despite it being feared, there is a clear indication that serpents, as an inseparable element of the cosmos, thus become a crucial element of the world’s existence. Moreover, there is not one definite side to the animal. It is shown to be both harmless and dangerous, depending on the situation. Needless to say, the snake is a keeper of knowledge, and could be seen as having an equal value not only to humans, but also the gods themselves. Artur Szejter goes as far as to suggest that through the consumption of the dragon heart Sigurðr connected to the serpent on a deeper level—they become one.²² The author also uses this argument to stress the later snake-related events on the Völsung bloodline. While this is, without doubt, a very controversial view, it does help manifest the snake as an important creature in Old Norse culture. And it was not only serpents that were perceived in that way, as it is shown in the example of the cow Sybilja.

It seems that in the Old Norse worldview all animals were respected and valued, for they were a crucial and inevitable part of human existence. As Kaitlyn Gutierrez notes, “Animals clearly play a myriad of roles within the mythological world of the Norse gods, acting as confidants, companions, as creatures that embody concepts like wind, and are even imperative in the creation and destruction of the realm of the gods.”²³ Life in such harsh environments forced the people of Scandinavia to rely on natural resources and use them to the fullest possible extent, therefore each animal was seen as extremely valuable. Taking into consideration that, despite the modern preconception, the Old Norse were mostly farmers—not raiders, it is needless to say how much they relied on their livestock as a means of food, transportation, and clothing. Animals would also be sacrificed only for the gods and the greatest of warriors, evidence of which can be seen in archaeological findings, such as in Uppsala, Sweden.²⁴ “It seems that animals not only represent status for the deceased, especially rare animals, and animals that have a distinct and important function in society, but also the status of the person or people burying the individuals, potentially showing that they could let go of creatures that could still be of use, and that they were

²¹ *The Holy Bible* (New Living Translation), “Genesis 3:19,” www.biblehub.com/genesis/3-19.htm, accessed February 5, 2020.

²² Artur Szejter, *Herosi mitów Germańskich: Sigurd Pogromca Smoka i inni Wölsungowie* (Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy Erica, 2015), 257.

²³ Kaitlyn A. Gutierrez, “Animals in the Viking World: Dogs in Society and Burial.” Unpublished dissertation (University of Glasgow, 2017), 9.

²⁴ On display at the Gamla Uppsala Museum and Swedish History Museum in Stockholm. Michelle Starr, “A Man, a Horse and a Dog Found in Extremely Rare Boat Burial Unearthed in Sweden,” *Science Alert* (July 9, 2019), <https://www.sciencealert.com/a-man-a-horse-and-a-dog-were-found-in-a-rare-intact-boat-burial-unearthed-in-sweden>, accessed February 4, 2020.

able to contribute to the deceased.”²⁵ In today’s urbanized world we tend to overlook the tremendous impact animals had in helping create and maintain societies, such as the Old Norse. When analyzing the old texts we can see the unbreakable bond between man and beast much more clearly, and while the notoriety of it seems to have faded with the progression of civilization, this bond will and should not be severed.

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²⁵ Gutierrez, *Animals in the Viking World*, 18.

Kornelia Lasota

Kornelia Lasota – doktorantka literaturoznawstwa na Uniwersytecie Śląskim w Katowicach. Jej zainteresowania naukowe obejmują kulturę i literaturę staroskandynawską, powieść gotycką oraz literaturę fantastyczną. W wolnych chwilach miłośniczka podróżowania i gier wideo.

Kornelia Lasota – a PhD candidate in literary studies at the University of Silesia in Katowice. Her research interests include Old Norse culture and literature, the Gothic novel, and fantasy literature. In her free time, she loves to travel and play video games.