

The Lay of Sigrdrifa

Translated by W H Auden & P B Taylor

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Sigurd rode up to Hindfell and headed south towards Frankland. On the mountain he saw a bright light like a fire burning and shining towards Asgardhr. But when he arrived he found a shield-wall and over it a banner. Sigurd went to the shield-wall and saw a man in full armour lying asleep. He took the helmet from his head whereupon he saw that it was a woman. The byrnie was stuck fast as if it had grown into her flesh. With his sword Grani he slit the byrnie through from the neck down and through both sleeves, and removed it from her. She awoke, sat up and said:

Who has slit my byrnie and from sleep roused me,
Who has broken the spell that bound me so long?

Sigmund's son, Sigurd, who lately
Killed the Raven's Carrion Tree.

Long have I slept, long was I sleeping,
Long are the miseries of men: Odhinn chose to charm me to sleep
When he spoke a spell over me.

Sigurd sat down and asked her her name. She took a horn full of mead and gave him a remembrance drink.

Hail Day, Hail, Sons of Day!
Hail Night and New Moon!
With kind eyes look hither and grant us
Victory while we live.

Hail Gods! Hail Goddesses!
Hail bountiful Earth!
Grace us both with the gift of speech
And leech hands while we live.

Her name was Sigrdrifa, meaning Victory-Granter, and she was a Valkyrie. She said that two kings had fought. One was named Helm Gunnar; he had grown old but was still the greatest warriors, and to him Odhinn had decreed victory. The other Agnar, Hauda's brother, who never had hopes of being favoured. Victory-Granter felled Helm Gunnar in battle. In revenge Odhinn pricked her with a sleep thorn and said that she should never there-after fight for victory but should be married. But, she said him, I in my turn bind myself by a vow to marry no man except one who knows no fear. Sigurd asked her to make her wisdom known to him, since she had knowledge of all the worlds, Sigrdrifa said :

Sea runes you should know to save from wreck
Sail steeds on the Sea:
Carve them on the bow and the blade of the rudder,
Etch them with fire on the oars;
Though high the breakers and blue the waves.
You shall sail safe into harbour.

Limb-runes you should know if a leech you would be,
Who can properly probe wounds:
It is best to carve them on the bark of trees
Whose limbs lean to the east.

Speech-runes you should know, so that no man
Out of hatred may do you harm:
These you shall wind" these you shall fold,
These you shall gather together,
When the people throng to the Thing to hear

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Just judgements given.

Thought–runes you should know if you would be thought by all
The wisest of mortal men:
Hropt devised them,
Hropt scratched them
Hropt took them to heart
From the wise waters the waters then run
From the head of Heidraupnir
From the horn of Hoddrofnir.

On the Ben he stood with Brimir's sword"
A helmet upon his head:
Then Mimir's head uttered for the first time
Words of great wisdom.

He spoke runes on the shield that stands before the shining god,
In the ear of Early Awake and on the hoof of All–Wise
On the wheel that turns ever under Hrungrnir's chariot,
On the sled straps and on Sleipnir's teeth.

On the bears paw and on Bragi's tongue,
On the wolfs foot and the falcons beak,
On the bloody wings and at the bridges end,
On the palm of child loosener and the path of comfort .

On glass and on gold and the fore–guesses of men,
In wine and in malt and in the mind's seat,
On Gungnir's point and on Grani's breast,
On the nails of the Norns and the Night Owls beak.

All were scratched off which were scratched on,
Mingled with holy mead
And sent on the wide ways,
Some to gods some to elves,
Some to the wise Vanes,
Some to the sons of men

There are Beech runes, there are Birth Runes,
And all the ale runes
Precious runes of power!
Unspoiled they are un–spoiled they are,
Learn them and use them long
Till the high powers perish.

Now you shall choose, for the choice is given you,
Maple – of – well – forged – weapons,
Speech or silence, you shall say which:
Evil is allotted to all.

I shall not flee, though fated to die,
For never have I known fear.
Grant me but this give me all
Your love counsel while I live."

I counsel you first , among kinsmen remain
Free from fault and reproach:
Be slow to wrath though they wrong you much,
This will do you good in death.

I counsel you second; swear no oath

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But what you mean to abide by:
A halter awaits the word breaker,
Villainous is the wolf-of-vows.

I counsel you third; at the Thing never bandy
Words with unwise men,
For the unwise man often speaks
worse words than he knows.

But speak your mind; of the silent it is often
Believed they are low-born cowards,
That their foes are speaking the truth .
Famous-at-home may fail abroad
When strangers test his truth:
The reward of the liar is not long in coming;
He dies the very next day.

I say to you fourth; if a sorceress dwell,
A witch by the way side,
It is better to leave than to be her guest
Though night fall on your faring.

Fore sighted eyes need the sons of men
Whenever they come to combat;
By the broad road may sit bale wise women
Who blunt both blades and courage.

I counsel you fifth; though fair be the maids
On the benches within the hall,
Let your sleep not be ruled by the silver of marriage,
Nor beguile the girls with kisses

I counsel you sixth; if you sit with warriors
And the ale talk turns ill,
Bandy no words with bragging drunkards:
Wine steals the wits of many.

Quarrels and ale have often been
The cause of ill to heroes:
Death to some, to some bewitchment,
Many are the grief's of men.

I counsel you seventh; if you Come disputing
With fierce hearted fighters,
To battle is better than to be burned in the hall,
Although it gleam with gold.

I counsel you eighth; of evil beware,
Of charming smiles of deceit:
Let no maidens entice you, nor men's wives,
Nor lead them into lawless pleasures.

I counsel you ninth; cover the dead
Whenever on earth you find them,
Be they dead of sickness. or drowned in the river,
Or warriors slain by weapons.

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Dead corpses you should clean with water,
Wash their hands and heads,
Comb and dry them. in their coffins lay them,
And bid them a blessed sleep.

I counsel you tenth; trust not ever
the words of a wolf's kin,
If you have killed his kin
Or felled his father:
Wolf's bane is in his blood
Though he be glad of your gold.

Anger and hate are ever awake,
So is harm also:
The boar visored, when vain—glorious.
Lack both wit and weapons.

I counsel you eleventh; there lurks evil
Round each bend of the road:
A long life you must not look to have,
So great are the hatreds grown.