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***Götterdämmerung: cultural appropriation
and manipulation in Wagner's *Ring des
Nibelungen*.***

Supervisor

Ch. Prof. Chiara de Bastiani

Assistant supervisor

Ch. Prof. Federico Boschetti

Graduand

Carlo Alberto Magri

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Zusammenfassung

Das Ziel der vorliegenden Arbeit ist es, zu bestimmen, ob Wagners *Ring des Nibelungen* ein Prozess der kulturellen Manipulation und Aneignung darstellt und, wenn das der Fall wäre, in welchem Maße. Die Ergebnisse, die mit traditionellen und mit computergestützten Methoden erhalten wurden, geben eine positive Antwort auf die Forschungsfrage dieser Masterarbeit.

Zunächst wird die kulturelle Aneignung als die ungerechtfertigte Übernahme eines kulturellen Inhalts definiert, der eigentlich einer anderen Kultur gehört. Diese Übernahme wird durch einen bewussten Anspruch auf Besitz oder Mitbesitz ausgelöst, und die betroffene Kultur würde den Akt, wenn sie reagiert, als unrechtmäßig betrachten, weil er ihren kollektiven kulturellen Wert schädigt (Lenard und Balint 2020). Im Fall Wagners bedeutet das eine Aneignung nordischer kultureller Elemente, die für einen Teil der modernen deutschen Identität gehalten und willkürlich manipuliert wurden, damit sie der ästhetischen und politischen Weltanschauung Wagners besser entsprachen.

Die Untersuchung des historischen Hintergrunds zeigt, dass die Aneignung fremder kultureller Elemente – vor allem nordischer (Zernack 2011) – in einigen intellektuellen Kreisen positiv gesehen wurde. Sie half nämlich gegen den Mangel an Zeugnissen, der die Rekonstruktion des vergangenen Selbstbildes erschwerte – ein Bedürfnis, das aus der Entwicklung der modernen deutschen kollektiven Identität stammte. Diese aneignende Tendenz ging von einem neuen Kulturkodex aus, der von der aufsteigenden Mittelschicht der Romantiker und von einer idealistischen Auffassung der Vergangenheit geleitet wurde. Die Ereignisse, die zwischen dem 18. und dem 19. Jahrhundert die Gesellschaft politisch und kulturell erschüttert hatten, entwickelten in der romantischen Generation ein Misstrauen gegenüber Politik und Wirtschaft, also gegenüber jenem Glauben an den rationalen Fortschritt und an den Staat, der die Mitglieder des vorhergehenden Bildungsbürgertums verband. Dieser Kulturkodex wurde durch eine transzendente Idee der Überlegenheit ersetzt, die eine ästhetische Distanz von der körperlichen Welt bot: Die Kräfte der Geschichte wurden zu einem kollektiven Individuum des historischen Handelns erhoben (Eisenstadt und Giesen 1995). Kein *Staat*, sondern eine *Nation* mit einer Spannung zu ihrer eigenen Vergangenheit, die aus unabhängigen Stufen des *Volksgeistes* besteht – eine Weltanschauung, die auch Wagner teilte (Salmi 2020).

Die Lücke mit fremden Elementen zu füllen, war an sich nicht verwerflich, wie Schlegel argumentierte, solange der *Geist* bereichert und nicht vom Fremden beherrscht wurde: Solange der kulturelle und sprachliche Kern unversehrt blieb, war die Aneignung eine gültige Antwort. Darüber hinaus war dem Geist die Fähigkeit zugeschrieben, fremde kulturelle Elemente aufnehmen, verarbeiten und erheben zu können – in Übereinstimmung mit seiner universalen Rolle als Erzieher

der Menschheit. Langsam setzte sich in den intellektuellen Kreisen die Idee durch, dass *deutsch* und *universell* dasselbe seien, auch bei Wagner (Berry 2004; Vick 2003).

Die größte Lücke lag zwischen der *Germania* des Tacitus, die zur Beschreibung einer frühen, idyllischen Siedlung von rohen, aber unschuldigen germanischen Stämmen idealisiert wurde, und dem *Nibelungenlied*, einem mittelhochdeutschen Gedicht, dessen Ereignisse in der Völkerwanderungszeit wurzeln (Ghosh 2007). Diese Ereignisse zeigten sich in einer mündlichen literarischen Produktion, aus der zwei verschiedene Traditionen entstanden. Beide bewahrten Strukturen und Motive, passten sie aber an die jeweilige kulturelle Schicht an. Die Ähnlichkeiten zwischen den Traditionen – zu denen auch der gemischte Ursprung der *Thidrekssaga* beitrug, einer norwegischen Niederschrift auf norddeutschen Geschichten beruht – dienten als Brückenkopf, um den Besitz der nordischen Literatur zu beanspruchen. Weil diese Texte vorchristliche Elemente enthielten, wurden sie für eine ältere Variante des ursprünglichen Mythos gehalten, die dem kulturellen Kern näher stand als die mittelalterliche deutsche Produktion.

In diesem Kontext, in dem sowohl der Anspruch auf Besitz als auch der Akt der Übernahme durch das Gesetz der Notwendigkeit und eine Idee der kulturellen Überlegenheit gerechtfertigt wurden, beteiligte sich Wagner an der Rekonstruktion des nationalen Mythos. Er wählte, manipulierte und setzte nordische und deutsche kulturelle Elemente willkürlich neu zusammen, in einer angeblichen Erneuerung des deutschen Mythos, nämlich *Dem Ring des Nibelungen*. Dieser Opernzyklus entspricht jedoch keineswegs der Absicht des Autors: Die Analyse des *Rings* und seiner Quellen zeigt eine formale Ähnlichkeit, aber eine inhaltliche Abweichung – schon in der Handlung nachweisbar, die nur aus dem ersten Teil des Völsungar-Nibelungen-Stoffes schöpft.

Die nordischen und die deutschen Quellen sind zweifellos feste Punkte in der Zeit, mit den Worten Assmanns (1995), und zeigen verschiedene Ähnlichkeiten, die sie zur selben Herkunft binden; nichtsdestoweniger sind sie einerseits Ausdruck verschiedener Kulturen, andererseits sind sie nicht repräsentativ für die neuhochdeutsche kulturelle Identität. Der Wagnerische Mythos ist die künstlerische Manifestation eines post-romantischen, ästhetisch-politischen Manifests, das Wagner in seinen Züricher Schriften dargelegt hatte: Der rekonstruierte Mythos sollte das Modell der zukünftigen Gesellschaft sein, in der jede soziale Dimension zusammengefasst und von der Liebe geleitet wird. Seine Quellen kreisten jedoch um andere Kulturkodexe: Ziel der deutschen Quellen war die Vermittlung des rekonstruierten Selbstbildes und der kulturellen Werte durch negative Beispiele – wie der *übermuot* im *Nibelungenlied* (Bockstock 1960) – oder positive Modelle – wie es im Prolog der *Thidrekssaga* erklärt wird (Haymes 1988). Die nordischen Quellen, nämlich eine weitere Veränderung des ursprünglichen Mythos, sollten altes literarisches Wissen bewahren, ohne jedoch ihre heidnische Weltanschauung zu teilen, wie bei Snorri, oder auf eine göttliche Genealogie einer

adligen Familie hinweisen, wie in der *Völsunga Saga* und beim norwegischen Königshaus. Welche Funktion sie auch hatten, ist es klar, dass die historischen Ereignisse einen Prozess der Mythisierung durchliefen, dessen Substanz an den kulturellen Rahmen jeder historischen Stufe angepasst wurde, ohne Anspruch auf Treue zum Original.

Außerdem drehen sich ihre Themen um den sozialen Stand, den Mut vor Herausforderungen und die Familienwerte, wobei der Einfluss der Götter – wenn sie überhaupt da sind – nicht so stark ist, wie Wagner ihn darstellte, und auch nicht die einigende Kraft der Liebe des *Rings*. Selbst jene Elemente bei Wagner, die auf eine Idee der rassischen Reinheit hinweisen – wie der Dialog zwischen Siegfried und Mime über die Blutsverwandtschaft oder die Verbindung Sieglinde und Siegmunds –, fehlen in den Quellen völlig. Ein Merkmal der Primordialität, nämlich das nicht erwerbbares, natürliche Recht zur Gruppenangehörigkeit, findet sich nicht im *Volksgeist*, sondern eher in der *Sippen-* oder in der Klassenzugehörigkeit.

Die Abweichung von den Quellen wird durch die Ergebnisse des computergestützten Topic-Modells NMF bestätigt (Anhang II), auch wenn die Verteilung der Themen noch weiter verfeinert werden könnte: Von Themen wie *T03 At Etzel's court* und *T07 At Gunther's court* hatte man im *Nibelungenlied* einen höheren Wert erwartet, da die Handlung vor allem in diesen beiden Umgebungen spielt. Außerdem gab es keine Spur der christlichen göttlichen Dimension, während das nordische mythologische Merkmal erkannt wurde. Ob diese Resultate eine neue Interpretation der Werke eröffnen könnten, soll in weiteren Forschungen überprüft werden. Trotzdem hob das Modell die Eigenständigkeit jeder Form des *Nibelungenstoffes* hervor – die nordische, die mittelalterliche deutsche und die Wagnersche – sowie die thematische Verschiedenheit zwischen den alten Werken und Wagners *Ring*. Seine Ergebnisse wurden außerdem durch die Analyse der *Leitmotive* gestützt, die durch die Annotation jedes *Leitmotivs* in einer TEI-XML-Datei am entsprechenden Element `<l>` und `<stage>` durchgeführt wurde: Die Ergebnisse zeigten eine thematische Übereinstimmung mit den NMF-Ergebnissen und bestätigten so den großen thematischen Abstand zwischen dem *Ring des Nibelungen* und seinen Quellen.

Der *Ring* ist also weder eine bloße Bearbeitung alten Materials noch eine treue philologische Rekonstruktion des Mythos, und sicher ist er *an sich* nicht repräsentativ für den deutschen *Volksgeist*: Er ist das Ergebnis eines Besitzanspruchs, der nur auf kultureller Ähnlichkeit beruht und die fremden kulturellen Elemente manipulierte, um eine kulturelle Lücke zu füllen und eine idealisierte Version einer kollektiven Identität darzustellen. Im Hintergrund steht die Aufforderung, die ursprüngliche harmonische Totalität der Wirklichkeit wiederaufzubauen – ein Konzept, das jedoch der klassischen Welt näher ist als der nordischen.

Ironischerweise, und doch nicht überraschend, machte die weitere Entwicklung der nationalen Identität Wagner zum Opfer desselben Prozesses, den er selbst vollzogen hatte: Aus ideologischen und ästhetischen Gründen wurde Wagners Werk gleich nach seinem Tod manipuliert, um es für die *völkischen* Kreise attraktiver zu machen. Sein revolutionärer Kern, von anarchistischer und sozialistischer Inspiration, wurde beiseitegelassen und ignoriert; man betonte stattdessen eine pessimistische und transzendente Weltanschauung und deutete sogar Figuren wie Mime und Alberich als Teil eines antisemitischen und rassistischen Programms. Das Ausmaß von Wagners Wirkung und Wagners Manipulation wäre der Anlass für eine weitere Untersuchung, deren Blick von einer *interkulturellen* zu einer *intrakulturellen* Perspektive wechseln würde, mit einem tieferen Einblick in die Dynamiken und Gefahren der kulturellen Aneignung. Tatsächlich hat die Verbindung zwischen der nordischen Kultur und ultrakonservativen, völkischen oder sogar nationalsozialistischen Kreisen die Wahrnehmung der kulturellen Elemente unvermeidlich verändert und ihre Werte in Richtung eines politischen Manifests rassistischer Überlegenheit verschoben (Butters 2023).

1. Introduction.

This study analyses the formation and evolution of the German collective cultural identity between the 18th and the 19th century, specifically concerning the impact provided by the manipulative appropriation of Nordic cultural elements and on the basis of an investigation of the processes underlying the genesis of Wagner's *Ring des Nibelungen*

Regarding the concept of appropriation, a part of the wider umbrella term of *cultural engagement* (Lenard and Balint 2020, 322–3), the scholarly debate is still active and an agreed definition, along with its implications, has yet to be reached. Considering historical evidence, cultural engagement is seen as an inevitable development, further intensified in the contemporary era of globalisation and scientific progress (Afzal 2023, 105–7).

Such encounter plays a key role in the cultural shaping of a group, namely its collective identity and codes to interpret and understand reality. Common ground to the heterogeneous scholarship is the conception of cultural appropriation as the act of taking a cultural element from another culture with claim of property. The debate focuses on the nature of the appropriated element, the relationship between the two cultures, and the impact on the subjected group. On this last topic, while there is general agreement about its negative impact, the possibility of a positive outcome continues to divide scholars (Matthes 2019; Young 2008, 2021; Rogers 2006). Wrongfulness of appropriation, indeed, has been found on various occasions within the affected cultures; nevertheless, it also seems to spread deleterious seeds in the identity formation of the group enacting it, especially if the collective memory lacks historical records.

In this regard, Wagner's *Ring des Nibelungen* is an example of product as well as subject of this phenomenon, driven by ideological purposes that aimed to define the nature of the German *Geist*. As a matter of fact, Wagner aimed to represent the German Spirit in its fullest and to exhort the creation of a pure German cultural society on the image of an idealized Germanic community. The concepts of *Volksgeist*, *Volksgemeinschaft*, and the legitimacy of cultural appropriation had been *Leitmotive* since the rise of a German cultural self-awareness during the late Enlightenment, opening the path that led more than a century later, through different stages, to a totalitarian regime (Butters 2023; Zernack 2011).

In this context, the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied*, with its similarities with the Nordic sagas, worked as a bridgehead that legitimised claims of property over ancient Norse literature such as the *Poetic Edda*, the *Snorra Edda*, and the *Völsunga Saga*. These texts were thought to represent a stage in time where the Germanic society was thought to be prosperous, harmonic, and virtuous, which was compared to a present where the *Deutschtum* seemed decadent, fragmented, and corrupted by the influence of foreign forms, which barely contained and mostly suffocated the *Volksgeist*. The

cure to this disease was offered on one side by the cultivation of the *Geist* and its expression in Germanic forms, on the other by the purification of culture and society from foreign elements – especially of romance origin.

However, by the time they were composed and transcribed, both were not representative of neither the modern national identities nor the original Germanic core, if one could even speak of an original Germanic culture. Nonetheless, the Nordic texts were removed from their original environment, underwent a process of reinterpretation within the cultural framework of the modern *Deutschtum*, in such manner that their original substance dissolved and was subsumed into the historical development of the German *Volksgeist*.

After Wagner's death, with the formation of a new cultural perspective, *Der Ring* along with all his works underwent a process of manipulative reinterpretation. The *Meister's* social and aesthetic programme, preserved in forms but not in contents, served another ideological purpose that overlapped the transcendent cultural *Geist* into the genetic terms of a racial superiority.

Due to the posthumous *völkisch* image, *Der Ring des Nibelungen* – and generally Wagner's work – is still the subject of a debate that seeks to define if – and to what extent – the *Meister* was closer to the romantic or the *völkisch* nationalism. On one side there is indeed a portrayal of Wagner as a cultural pioneer of those ideologies that later converged into the National Socialist programme, but it is also argued that it is a deception provided by a *völkisch* manipulation. In this regard, the discussion around the extent of Wagner's antisemitism is an example; on the other side, Wagner himself does not show an inflexible and monolithic consistency, but rather a redefinition of his thought throughout his life.

Before proceeding with the analysis of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, the study will first go through the concept of cultural appropriation (chapter 2). In the next stage, the inquiry will examine the definition of the modern German identity, focusing on the redefinition of its cultural code and the role that collective memory plays in this process (chapter 3), along with the solution applied when the past seemed inaccessible due to the lack of historical evidence (chapter 4). Then the study will present a qualitative analysis of Wagner's *Ring des Nibelungen* and its main sources regarding the *Nibelungenstoff*, namely those literary products of medieval German (*Nibelungenlied*, *Þiðreks saga af Bern*¹) and Norse tradition (*Poetic Edda*, *Snorra Edda*, *Völsunga Saga*) included in the Völsungar-Nibelungen cycle (chapters 4-5). The comparison between the *Ring* and its sources will try to determine whether Wagner's creative process involved a process of manipulative cultural

¹ The *Þiðreks saga af Bern* has been included among the German sources because of its origins: as declared in the Prologue, the tales were brought to Norway by North German sailors. Therefore, they originated from the continental tradition, although the *Saga* shows a strong influence of the Norse traditions, especially the variant of the characters' names. Such position is also shared by Bertagnolli (2020)

appropriation and the results of such analysis will be then compared with the quantitative results obtained through computational methodologies, namely the XML-TEI annotation of Wagner's *Leitmotive* and the topic modeling with an NMF model (chapter 6). Such methodologies allowed a more immediate and detailed overview of the themes delivered by the orchestra, Wagner's modern equivalent of the ancient Greek chorus; the topics extracted with NMF, on the other sides, were based on the textual data: comparing the topic distribution of each document, *Ring* and sources, confirmed the distance between the Wagnerian myth and the ancient traditions.

2. Cultural appropriation and the example of Wagner's *Ring des Nibelungen*

As historical evidence suggests, cultural engagement has always been an inevitable characteristic of human societies. In the contemporary era boundaries are made thinner by scientific development and globalization, consequently intercultural interaction has become a daily aspect of reality, with both positive and negative impact. On one side, cultural encounter stimulates development and creativity – the adoption of a new, more efficient technique as the domestication of plant or animals or the French influence in the rise of the German *Minnesang* –, on the other side it might contribute to the oppression and further marginalization of minority or non-dominant cultures (Arya 2021) – as in the Italian attempt to absorb local minorities in Südtirol (Augschöll Blasbichler 2021) and the Croatian territories (Bartulin 2009).

Cultural appropriation is a term often used to describe a specific type of cultural encounter based on property claim, but the debate around its definition and its implications is still ongoing. Common ground to the different perspectives on the matter is the idea of appropriation as the act of taking a cultural element from another culture, while the discussion revolves around the relationship between the two cultures, the nature of the element, its impact, and its leading motif.

Lenard and Balint (2020) define it as a conscious or culpably negligent appropriation of an element of cultural value, usually a symbol or a practice, to others, who oppose a certain degree of contestation. This definition, as they stated, corresponds to Young's (2008) third type of appropriation, namely about the content, arguing that Young's definitions of subject and object appropriation are respectively closer to misrepresentation and theft. It is also to notice that object and subject may surely be manipulated and distorted, but it is not always the case in which claims of cultural ownership are raised. Concerning misrepresentation, parodies are pejorative caricatures, certainly harmful for the cultural identity as it spreads a misleading portrayal, which however do not seem to state a rightful ownership on the caricatured elements; theft or unfair acquisition, on the other side, are closer to the idea of *physical* property of a *cultural* object, not of a *cultural* property of the *physical* object. Moreover, if it is true that a fair exchange should not raise concerns, it is also to acknowledge that contestation requires the understanding of the enacted process as well as the conditions to express it. This option, however, is not always available, as the German-Jewish community experienced in the 20th century: with the rise to power of the NSDAP, the German-Jewish community was excluded from the German culture and their contribution, namely their intellectual and cultural co-ownership, in its development was rejected. Concerning music, the eradication of Jewishness from the *Deutschtum* manifested also by prohibiting the music of Jewish composers as

Felix Mendelssohn or by requalifying the works of German authors: it is the case of Franz Schubert's *Lieder*, several texts of which were composed by Heinrich Heine (Levi 1990). In Blessinger's words:

"These masters did not recognize the grimace of the Jew and therefore ignored them in their wonderful compositions. But even if we fail to appreciate the clash between the spirit of the text and the spirit of the music in these examples, there is no reason to remove them from our repertoire. What always remains decisive for us is whenever we hear such a *Lied*, it is not Heine who speaks to us but Schubert and Schumann."²

As an oppressed and subordinate group, the German-Jewish community was in no position to contest the Aryanisation of music or to raise claims to rightful participation in German culture.

About the impact of cultural appropriation, if Balint and Lenard's perspective is negative, Young recognises the positive potential in the cultural exchange. He argues that, even though this may lead to appropriative claims, the act of taking is not necessarily driven by them and it may even stimulate creativity. It is the leading intention that determines the legitimacy or the wrongfulness of the act (Young 2021). Matthes (2019) denies this positive consideration, as he understands the phenomenon as rooted in power imbalance. According to his research, the appropriation is the result of a dominant culture taking away an element from a non-dominant one. Although he does not seem to stress the importance of the conscious awareness of the act, as Balint and Lenard do, he states that the nature of the impact can only be negative, since it supports the power imbalance and, consequently, oppression.

In this active and populated debate, there are a few commonly shared features, listed here below with their concretisation in Wagner's context:

- I. The act of taking is unilateral, otherwise it would be an exchange – in this context, it refers to Wagner and the German nationalists.
- II. The act implies a claim of property or co-ownership – by the German nationalists, this claim was based on a pan-Germanic ideal of cultural sharing.
- III. The claim causes the act and it regards the cultural dimension; was the claim itself to be missing or to follow the act, it would be more accurate to call it acculturation or exchange – the absence of historical evidence led the German intellectuals to fill the void with extra-cultural elements.

² Blessinger, *Judentum und Musik: ein Beitrag zur Kultur- und Rassenpolitik* (Hahnefeld, 1944), 79. Quoted in (Levi 1990, 20)

- IV. The negative impact is recognised at least as a possible outcome and its wrongfulness lies in detrimental harm inflicted to the collective identity whose element has been appropriated – the harm is visible in the distorted identity that led to extremists, purist movements.
- V. The appropriated object is a content, which represents a cultural value in its original environment – the Norse literary tradition, not their physical witnesses.
- VI. The subjected culture opposes or contests such act if it is in conditions to do so – visible in the disagreements of the Norwegian Sophus Bugge and the German Konrad Maurer (Zernack 2011, 170–71).

In summary, an unambiguous definition of cultural appropriation would be the unjustified taking of a cultural content, led by conscious or culpably negligent claim of ownership or co-ownership, which rightfully belongs to another culture and whose reactions, if any, would contest the act as illicit, since it harms the collective cultural value³.

The research focused on the possible harming effect on the identity of the subjected culture, while not much has been formulated on the culture perpetrating the act. Making something culturally proper means to make it part of the cultural identity; therefore, in order to fit the content into another cultural framework, a certain degree of adaptive manipulation is required, if not even a dangerous distortion. An example can be found among the Māori people, whose culturally meaningful tattoos have lost their original value associated with family heritage and culture affiliation and got absorbed into the Western body aesthetics or in the use of ancient Norse symbols by neo-Nazi contemporary groups, who tend to extend the concept of Viking to the whole pre-Christian Nordic society (Butters 2023). Wagner's *Ring des Nibelungen* is part of a tradition that, since the birth of a collective national identity, attempted to fill the void in the development of the German *Geist* with a literary tradition that, as it appears, is representative exclusively of the Norse ancient culture, justifying their act on the ground of common roots among Germanic cultures.

³ In the case of Wagner, the asymmetry of the appropriation is further determined by the fact that the Norse culture had already evolved into new stages by the time Wagner dedicated himself to renovating the German myth. Therefore, there was no one alive that could protest nor that could defend their culture from an act of cultural appropriation.

3. The rise of the *Volksgeist*: from the late Enlightenment to the early 19th century.

3.1. Collective cultural identity and the rise of the *Kulturnation*

The formation of the modern German identity is a phenomenon that originated during the second half of the 18th century and underwent a series of changes in time (Eisenstadt and Giesen 1995).

Cultural identity is a social construct, consequence of patterned and structured interactions. More specifically, it is produced by the social construction of boundaries, which establish a demarcation between realms and, consequently, it implies a process of inclusion and exclusion.

This last dichotomy affects not only objects and contents, but people as well: in fact, the demarcation of realms presupposes the shared use of symbolic codes of distinction, which enable us to recognise differences and order the fluidity and chaos of the world into social frameworks. Basic codes, socially constructed, revolve around spatial (*inside* and *outside*), temporal (*past* and *future*), and reflexive dimensions (*centre* and *periphery*). These dichotomic distinctions hide a mediation, making them trichotomies: the boundaries separating external and internal space, the present connecting past and future, the human subject interposed between God and the world. Overlapping these codes means also to create a coincidence between the subject, the present, and the centre. Therefore, constructing a world means starting at the given time and extending the identity to transcendental realms and to both peripheries of the temporal line – past and future.

Being part of the same community means being entitled to its accumulated resources and this right is translated into the need of each member to recognise the others. Should this requirement be missing, it would be impossible to build trust and solidarity. As a result, the distinction between *us* and *them* is the core of all codes and the difference in cultural identities lies on how the ideal types of coding – primordiality, civility, culture or sacredness – are combined into real codes (Eisenstadt and Giesen 1995).

Despite each code being a social construct, primordiality relies on the concept of naturally given: each feature handed down generations, unchangeable, unreplaceable, and unacquirable. Kinship, gender, ethnicity, and territoriality: on the one hand they represent a stable perspective on an ever-changing world, on the other hand it develops a conception of other as dangerous, naturally excluded, and even inferior. In the context of German history, before the late 18th century it manifested in class affiliation. It is to note that, unlike France or England, the German identity developed before the formation of a statal union. It was a slow process that started during the late Enlightenment with the rise to power of the *Bildungsbürgertum*, an educational class of higher state

officials, lawyers, professors, engineers, and army officers. The growth in size and social importance of such class and the princes' efforts towards modernization expanded the access to public offices, which were no longer allocated according to a primordial sense of social class affiliation, but based on education and qualification.

However, neither primordality nor the civic sense of tradition were codes serving as a guidance for the *Bildungsbürger*: civility, indeed, defines identity and insiders through a pattern of social interactions repeated through time, the surviving of which offers a sense of familiarity, and their origins are often noble and mythical. The knowledge and the partaking of these traditions is the key to recognise the insiders as part of a generational stream of notions. Since the *Bildungsbürger* were assigned to locations distant from their regions of origins, neither tradition nor language was familiar, posing an obstacle to building ties with the local bourgeoisie and aristocracy. Uprooted and disembedded, the *Bildungsbürger* eventually found an identification with the enlightened absolutism of Frederic the Great and, more generally, with the ideals of modernity and progress: it was the birth of a new cultural code. This development was favoured by the peculiar situation of Germany compared, for instance, to France: the main opposition in Germany did not occur between *Bildungsbürgertum* and State, as it happened in France, but rather between the modernizing élite and the State on one side and the traditional and local bourgeoisie on the other, whose values were of no longer use for the new educational class (Eisenstadt and Giesen 1995)..

The realm of sacredness or culture, the last main code, represented the social compass for the scattered *Bildungsbürger*. This code overlaps the dichotomy *us-them* with *sacred-profane* and it is the only code presenting a universalistic feature: fragility and fluidity of social boundaries are overcome by relating the collectivity to the eternal, static realm of sacred – God, Progress or Rationality that it might be –, extending the identity to a supernatural source. As a universalistic concept, everyone seems to be allowed to become a member, especially with a qualitative perspective of inside and outside. As inferior and non-enlightened, outsiders need education and formation, a purifying conversion that insiders seem to feel like a mission. The adoption of cultural features, however, is neither easy nor fast process, but the sacred centre needs to stay pure; consequently, a social stratification arises, where pure members are on top in, while new members and outsiders – potential contaminating dangers – occupy the lower grade and are kept at distance. Besides conversion, the problem of purity finds an otherwise solution, especially if cultural and primordial codes are mixed: purity and impurity follow the same pattern as natural and unnatural, civilised and uncivilised, us and them. Consequently, conversion is now barely effective to maintain the sacred centre uncorrupted and a conceivable way of protecting it from the distorting influences of the outsiders is a stricter control on the peripheral access or the firm neutralisation of them. This

overlapping finds different expressions, from exclusion and intellectual silencing to physical elimination and it will be manifest from the late 19th century.

The development of a new cultural code was fostered by the rapid expansion of public communications and the institution of *Lesevereine*⁴ and consisted in a solution for the need of a cultural identity beyond a fragmented and disunited world. The code was based on morals and virtue, provided a modern framework for interpreting reality, and addressed a wide-spread anonymous public, whose membership was determined by the conscious choice to adopt and embrace the new code. It was the genesis of the national identity, whose foundational code was *Patriotism*. Unlike the previous codes, it gave everyone the possibility to partake to the group through spontaneous conversion, regardless of descent and region.

At the turn of the century, however, the environment deeply changed. The new challenges brought at first by the Napoleonic war, the crisis of Enlightenment with the bloodshed of the French Revolution, and the dissolving of the statal unity of the Holy Roman Empire with its fragmentation into tens of independent statal entities could not be resolved into the simple patriotic frame. Unlike the *Bildungsbürgertum*, the emerging Romantic generation – the new élite of the middle class, intellectually ambitious but scattered and isolated – despised the bourgeoisie and were in the peripheric position of small towns. Reunited in small, informal clique based on personal communication and friendship, they yearned “to a new and deeper foundation of the charismatic centre beyond the world of money and politics”⁵. Culture, in fact, represented everything denied in politics and State, namely freedom and pride.

The new binding element was no more a matter of moral and virtues, but rather a transcendental idea of superiority that offered an aesthetic detachment from the mundane world. Still, it had political implications: aesthetics was a fundamental part of the national education and was considered as a cultural remedy to political problems. *Volk* and *Nation* focused the collective identity in “a transcendental realm of sublime essences and forces of history”⁶, making it a sublime collective individual of historical action, whose purest expression manifested in the lower classes. *Nation* referred to the cultural unity, a thought consistent with their disappointment and refusal of a statal entity.

Originally restricted to the Romantic field, this new culture expanded to the rest of the German people during the Napoleonic wars, spreading the conception of sacred as moral, aesthetic, and cultural, while the profane was identified in the economics and politics.

⁴ The *Lesevereine* (pl.) were reading associations that spread rapidly during the late 18th century and “provided a modern institutional pattern of social life and association for the enlightened *Bildungsbürgertum*” (Eisenstadt and Giesen 1995, 85-87).

⁵ (Eisenstadt and Giesen 1995, 88)

⁶ (Eisenstadt and Giesen 1995, 88)

A sense of primordiality emerged in the idea that the *Volksgeist* as it appeared was the result of a long historical evolution. Conversion was possible, as it rooted in a particular moral commitment to the transcendental realm. At first, such code did not imply a racial perspective. Vick (2003) argues that at the beginning of the 19th century the nationalist current was divided in two parts: one disdaining the idea of strangeness and defending the pure character of culture; the other acknowledging the mixed origins of the German culture and nurturing a more cosmopolitan vision. Only by the late 19th century, with the changes in political culture, the idea of a defence of the sacredness from the outsiders slowly impressed a racial perspective on the primordial code. The result was the dichotomy of *Volk* and *Rasse*, implying the idea that only a pure-blood German could be part of the *Volksgemeinschaft*.

3.2. Collective memory: historical identity and the role of the past.

As already mentioned, the perception of the past plays a significant role in the identity formation process, as it represents an extension into the temporal dimension. Regardless of which code is prevailing, this extension is deeply linked to the collective historical memory, which allows a group to maintain certain cultural characters over time. It is a collective concept that directs interactions in the social framework, obtained through the legacy of repeated social practices and initiation. Collective memory can refer to cultural or communicative memory.

Communicative memory is central to oral history. It is characterised by thematic instability, disorganization, and typically the speakers can change roles. Through communication, each individual composes a memory that is socially mediated and relates to a group. This group, as seen above, is not randomly chosen; on the contrary it is a set of people sharing common traits, in this case a self-image of the past. As individuals belong to distinct groups, they recognise different collective self-images and memories. This kind of memory extends back in time for no more than a century, namely three or four generations, making it a memory of recent past for contemporaries.

Beyond this period there's what Assman (1995) calls, in Vansina's words⁷, the *floating gap*, the historical discontinuity that gives way to mythic origins. Genealogy offers an example of it, linking present generations to foundational legends, connecting the present to the cultural genesis.

As the communicative memory is crystallised into objectivised culture – as in the textual witnesses of the Nordic sagas or their visual depiction on the Ramsund carving⁸ – a close connection

⁷ (Vansina 1985)

⁸ Found in Ramsundsberg in Sweden (about 100 km west of Stockholm), the carving was dated to the first half of the XI century. On a surface of less than 5 m there are depicted events and characters from the Volsung/Nibelung cycle, surrounded by a dragon/serpent. Sigurðr appears on the margin as he is stabbing the dragon's heart. It testifies the circulation of the story long before its transcription and far away from its attributed historical setting. The runic

is preserved between the new forms and the group identity, as well as the structure of memory itself. Following a process that Assman (1995) defined as concretion of identity, the group consciousness of unity and specificity is based on the knowledge of culture, from which formative and normative impulses are derived and allows the group to reproduce its identity.

Differently from communicative memory, the temporal horizon does not change or shift, there are fixed points in time, fateful events whose knowledge is passed down through generations, the so-called figures of memory. More than preserving the past in a timeless dimension, memory is responsible for its reconstruction into contemporary frames of references. This manifests into symbolic figures attached to memory, among which the myths. Cultural memory does not differentiate between myth and history as it is interested in remembered history, not factual. The myth offers a primordial explanation for the living time and the link with the past offers the basis for the identity. Its knowledge, however, does not just spread around the group members, but it can only be achieved through a cultural formation. Therefore, it requires an institutionalisation provided by a special carrier – bards, shamans, priests, teachers, to name a few. It does not simply spread around like communicative memory: its distribution is controlled and it may withhold the right to participate. Furthermore, this distribution of culture needs to be reenacted at every generational change. This ritualistic repetition is not a mere reconstruction of past events, but it also realises meaning. It manifests in traditional rituals and festivities performed cyclically, or even in texts. Assman (2011) retains texts to be more dangerous as it is easier to remove these from circulating rather than rituals and traditions. On the other side, written texts offer a content accessible at any time unlike annual performances. Indeed, since they can be copied on other media and preserved, they interrupt the ritualistic repetition and do not provide the continuity that is so integral to oral tradition. On this regard, Assman argues that literary transmission has a wider range of variation than orality:

“The public expects the bard to deliver the familiar, and the writer to give them something new. In the world of oral tradition, the rank of the singer is determined only by the extent of his knowledge, for example, if he can recite 7, 20, or 300 tales. [...] The singer’s memory is the only means of storing knowledge. There are no other forms of accessing that knowledge, other than the prescribed forms of his performance. Repetition is therefore not a problem but a structural necessity. Without it, the tradition would break down. Innovation would mean forgetting.”⁹

inscription states the work has been commissioned by Sigríðr, wife of Sigrödr, to commemorate her father-in-law Holmger. (Bertagnolli 2020, 61).

⁹ (Assmann 2011, 82)

It only appears problematic when it does not result of importance anymore for the process of tradition or, as in the case of written cultures, when the content is independent from the performer and the rites. Since there has been a break between the bearer and the content, the author gains the freedom necessary to introduce novelties into the familiar material, which can be now observed with a critical approach. Thus, a contrast is created between the present of the observer and the past of the content.

Concerning the preservation of the past, the very conception of history, a basic attitude of a culture, introduces another variable: history might be considered exemplary on a positive or negative level, a model to follow or to avoid or even to erase, as in the case of Jewish German authors under the Nazi regime. An example of a different attitude towards the same past object is provided by the different perception of the medieval Ages during the Enlightenment: The French *Philosophes* disdained it, while the Germans *Aufklärer*, influenced by the work of Bodmer, appreciated it (Salmi 2020).

Past, nonetheless, cannot be preserved in its integrity: it is observed under the reference of a contemporary cultural frame. As Burke states “as we read the writings of memory, it is easy to forget that we do not read memory itself but its transformation through writing.”¹⁰ The dynamics proceed from a central present to a peripheral past, where the present, on a variable degree, is an influential key to the interpretation and reconstruction of the past itself. The stored knowledge becomes fundamental for the awareness and definition of a group identity, through affirmation and negation, and plays a formative role of education and humanisation as well as a normative function in providing rules of conduct.

The understanding of the past itself, and not merely of its events, displays in Germany a peculiarity compared to other European cultures: The *Philosophes* considered history as a mechanistic and uninterrupted series of events, a *chaîne des événements*, as Voltaire called it¹¹, ordered by means of inevitability and not teleologically connected. On the other side, Germany was more focused on history and culture, less exotic-oriented, and its universalistic approach was more moderate: history was seen as a macro-cosmos made of independent layers. Each layer was a microcosmos, heir of what preceded and forerunner of what followed, a view influenced by Leibniz’ idea of *monad* (Salmi 2020). The term refers to an independent basic unit of the universe, not a mere fragment of the whole. Each era was coherent and to be observed in its context, opposing the universalistic approach typical of French Enlightenment (Salmi 2020). On this subject, Wagner attacked Voltaire’s comprehension of history and compared it to Schiller’s poetic inspiration:

¹⁰ (Burke 1989, 101), quoted in (Roffi 2021, 19)

¹¹ Voltaire. 1767. *Dictionnaire philosophique*, 77.

“The great critic Voltaire, that idol of all ‘free minds’, judged the Maid of Orleans on the testimony of the historical documents of his own day, and accordingly felt justified in the view set forth in his filthy poem on the ‘Pucelle’. Before Schiller there lay no other documents: but either another, presumably a faulty mode of criticism, or that Inspiration so decried by our free-spirits, led him to recognise in this maid of France ‘humanity’s all-noble type.’ — not only did his poetic canonisation of the heroine bestow upon the Folk an infinitely touching and e’er-loved work, but it also anticipated Historical criticism, hobbling after, which a fortunate discovery has at last put in possession of the rightful documents for judging a marvellous phenomenon.”¹²

Unlike the enlightened *Bildungsbürgertum* and its tension to the future, the new élite based their present self-image on the past. As the aristocracy had based their superiority on a primordial code of lineage, namely the historical evolution of their family, the new middle-class élite based their present identity on national descendance. Their anti-statist mistrust influenced also the perception of the past, which promoted the history of culture rather than a history of the State. In his 1889 work *Die Aufgaben der Kulturgeschichte*, Gothein highlighted the dominance of the former over the latter, which was certainly to be preserved, but subordinated to the former (Elias 1991, 152).

A primordial dimension appeared in the meaning of culture and civility, immutable and symbolising a familiar common ground for a collective identity based on past action of common ancestors; a conception that lacked the universalistic validity of morals or realisation, as opposed to the French concept of *civilisation*, but would still imply a leading educative mission of the *Volksgeist*.

However, the early stage of nationalism was not focused on race and purity. On the opposite, it acknowledged the mixed origins of Germans and was more oriented towards assimilation and absorption rather than xenophobic exclusion. The rediscovery of Tacitus’ *Germania* certainly brought up a national and genealogical pride: authors such as Schlegel and Herder certainly retained the idea of a rude, but innocent barbarian¹³ who subjugated the powerful Roman empire. Nonetheless, there was a degree of awareness about influences and contacts with Romans, Celts, and Slavs. These contacts were positively valued as the assimilation of ancient Roman culture created the preconditions for all that was valuable in medieval culture – and, therefore, following its evolution, in the modern culture as well. Schlegel (Vick 2003) also believed that isolating a national development against the foreign influence was illogical and claimed that an autonomous appropriation which does not delete

¹² Wagner, *Public and Popularity*, p. 79. In: *Prose Works* (1893–99; repr. 1993–95), quoted in (Salmi 2020, 89)

¹³ The term *barbarian* as a synonym for *member of the Germanic tribe* is used from an roman-centric perspective, which highlighted the difference between the civilised Rome and the savage Germania.

the cultural and linguistic core is not blameworthy. Wrongfulness laid in imitation or dominance of foreignism, something even Wagner despised; on the opposite side, assimilation according to nationalist canons of originality, continuity, and autonomy of the German national identity was considered at least a legit way by the most chauvinistic, while even a cosmopolitan act by the others.

In other words, acceptance or rejection of an external element was determined by the extent to which such element could be integrated in the historical extension of the *Ursprache* and the *Urvolk*, leaving the nature of the *Geist* intact. Even chauvinistic nationalists as Friedrich Ludwig Jahn – who strongly held the principle of “the purer, the better” – admitted the mixed origins of Germany. The purity lied in the idea that the German culture had never been fully conquered and had remained Germanic throughout the centuries. On this regards, Phillips and Arndt reached the conclusion that the German *Volk* who lived in those areas prior to the Slavic settlement never disappeared under the Slavic overlordship until the German *Ostsiedlung*.

This character of purity, continuity, and coherence supported the idea of cultural superiority and of the missionary and world-civilising role of the *Volksgeist*. In this regard, Gustav Stenzel observed the Germans as people who were able to assume all foreign cultural elements, absorb, and ennoble them, and so represent the universal role of educator of the humankind.

At this early stage, a cultural collective memory rose with a strong connection to history, which was seen as the evolution of a *Geist* reuniting in its nature – i.e. culture – every German living in the present and existing in ancient time. The past itself provided the information to understand the present, but it lacked records of an objectivised culture. The expansion of the German identity reached the medieval ages, leading to the rediscovery of works like Walther von der Vogelweide’s *Minnesänge* and the *Nibelungenlied*, but – compared to the Italian and the French – it found there its own limits: in fact, more ancient sources, as Tacitus’ work, represented an external perspective.

It was at this point that the idea of absorption and assimilation began to shift into manipulative appropriation.

4. The birth of the *Volksgeist*: Reconstruction of the *lost Paradise*.

4.1. An image from the past: a Tacitean picture before the void

The present framework of the newly formed modern German identity had to deal on one side with the abundance of Greek-Roman representations and on another side with the lack of figures of memory of the same period. In fact, the descriptions of the Germanic culture such as Caesar's or Tacitus' were written from an external point of view and, despite being appreciated and deeply taken into consideration by German scholars of the Early Modern period (Zernack 2011), Tacitus' *Germania* remains a 1st century CE Latin description, made by a Latin author for a Latin audience.

Tacitus wrote his *De Origine et situ Germanorum* in the late 1st century, resulting in the first ethnographic description of the Germanic peoples. While he intended his work as a warning to the decadent Rome against the threat of the vigorous Germanics, his portrayal of these tall, light-haired, blue-eyed warriors from the North received the appreciation of German nationalists since the very beginning, from Herder and Schlegel to the late 19th and 20th *völkisch* radicals. The nationalist current gave a flattering interpretation of *Germania*, particularly by the descriptions of the Germanic populations as unmixed and indigenous¹⁴ (Vick 2003). This evoked a sense of purity and innocence that would subsequently converge in the idea of a lost Paradise.

It was not, however, only a matter of fascinating myths and legends: the political fragmentation, the statal mistrust, and the yearning for a *Nation* brought the nationalist current to seek for a source of strength not in some institutions, but in their own history. That stage of the *Volksgeist* described by Tacitus – so far in time and so little documented, yet so stable, especially if compared to the precarious present – was interpreted as an idyllic settlement and was perceived as an example of cultural cohesion.

Roffi (2021) highlights the importance of the past in the identity formation: the distorted interpretation of Tacitus' *Germania* aimed to rely on ancient sources that would define a cohesion among the insiders that survived the passing of time. Furthermore, she adds, the yearning for a mythical past – a *lost Paradise* – hid a search for legitimisation of a new power, here a new cultural code, in a future perspective.

Although knowledge and collective memory were primarily orally transmitted, the Germanic peoples possessed a runic writing system. In its early stage, between 200 to 500 CE, it was often

¹⁴ Tac. *Germ. IV*. "For my own part, I agree with those who think that the tribes of Germany are free from all taint of intermarriages with foreign nations, and that they appear as a distinct, unmixed, race, like none but themselves. Hence, too, the same physical peculiarities throughout so vast a population. All have fierce blue eyes, red hair, huge frames, fit only for a sudden exertion." (Church and Brodribb 1899, 89)

inscribed on objects, like weapons, and shows a high degree of uniformity (Salmons 2018), but it was not used to write extensive texts¹⁵. Nonetheless, historical events and figures were narrated and orally passed on to the next generations, but the consequent absence of fixed points in time and textual objectivized culture made the temporal horizon constantly shift. Following a natural evolution of language and culture, the matter was adapted each time to new forms and cultural codes with no preserved memory of the original version, as exemplified by the historical fall of the Burgundians. Such event was reported or referred to in different texts – *Nibelungenlied*, *Waltharius*, *Atlakviða* to name a few – but, as Ghosh (2007) states, although they show no direct correlations with one another, they contain enough common elements to suggest a common oral origin based on historical events: the kings' names, their Burgundian origins, their war against the Huns, and their fall. If it is true that the extent of Germanic literature is of little use to the interpretation of the pre-literacy stage of poems, it still shows evidence of its existence: an example is given by the incipit in the *Nibelungenlied*:

[C 1]

“Uns ist in alten mæren wunders vil geseit
 Von heleden lobebæren, von grozer arebeit,
 von freude vnd hochgeciten, von weinen vnd klagen,
 von kvner recken striten mvget ir nv wnder horen sagen.”¹⁶

“We hear in ancient stories wonders many told:
 of heroes rich in glories, of hardships manifold,
 of joys and days of feasting of tears and hearts nigh broken,
 of noble warriors battling may now you hear of wonders spoken.”¹⁷.

According to these traces and the historical evidence, it is generally agreed that the surviving poems refer to a historical nucleus dated back to the migration age between the 4th and the 7th century, supporting the idea of a poetic tradition long before its transcription (Fleet 1953; Ghosh 2007; Kratz 1962; Müller 2012).

In a parallel between the Germanic and the Romance cultures, the two sources available to the modern Germans, the shift from orality to literacy among the Germanic cultures resulted simultaneous to the fall of the Western Roman Empire. In terms of identity, it means that the first

¹⁵ Examples of extensive runic writing are dated back to the medieval times in the Scandinavian area. Such system, the dotted runes, derived from the young futhork. However, such texts were written after the process of Christianisation was completed or almost completed, framing them as an expression of Norse – and therefore post-Germanic – cultures (Schulte 2019).

¹⁶ (Batts 1971, 2)

¹⁷ (Whobrey 2018, 1)

native cultural traces of a Germanic identity are contemporary to the end of a millennium-long attested civility. The problem of the reconstruction of the earlier stage remains and it is only partially covered by Tacitus.

Ghosh faces the question about the cultural identity of the Germanic peoples – Burgundians as well as others – and believes little could be added to the current knowledge. Since it is too ancient and too little attested, the Germanic identity¹⁸ escapes both history and collective memory. However, the same transmission of knowledge shows an enrichment of the cultural memory and the presence of the same matter in so many unrelated texts suggests that a cultural identity existed and was acknowledged by outsiders. This thesis is supported by the very existence of two codes of law based on ethnic diversity, as in the case of the Burgundians (*Lex Burgundionum* and *Lex Romana Burgundionum*) and the Visigoths (*Lex Visigothorum* and *Lex Romana Visigothorum*).

The narratives probably started as more adherent to the historical facts and, following the temporal development of each culture, moved to the fiction realm (Haymes and Samples 2020). Oral tradition was certainly responsible for the identity formation, group cohesion, and collective memory. Furthermore, they can be observed as part of a civic code: songs and poems, along with their meaning, were known and understood only by insiders and passed down to the next generation. In this sense, a repetition through generations occurred, extending the present identity into a past in the attempt to preserve it, regardless of the shift of the temporal horizon. Evidence that these poems from the migration era were central to the Germanic identity is provided by the existence of these narratives only in Germanic cultures who preserved their Germanic identity, as in Germany or Iceland, while those who shifted to a Romance culture, as the Franks, seem to preserve such legends only during the Germanic stage¹⁹, only to lose them after the Latin shift.

With this little evidence, a detailed identity of the Germanic peoples during the migration era is hard to define. What is certain, however, is that these narratives as they were transcribed are representatives of neither the Germanic peoples of the migration era nor the modern German identity originated during the *Aufklärung*. This raised the problem of a coherent reconstruction of the *Volkgeist* in its stages, an issue that was overcome through the reinterpretation of *Germania* and the manipulation of sources of Norse origins. As a matter of fact, Herder explained in his *Iduna, oder der Apfel der Verjüngung* the legitimacy of the appropriating foreign elements whereas the native narrative lacks an ancient tradition:

¹⁸ If one could speak in the first place of *one* Germanic identity, it would necessarily be a multifaceted identity, since the existence of many Germanic tribes. In the present research, the singular form will be used mainly in regard to the modern German idea of a sole and shared identity.

¹⁹ Cf. the *barbara et antiquissima carmina* that, according to Einhard's *Vita et Gesta Caroli Magni*, Charlemagne ordered to collect and write down.

“If the mythology of a neighbouring people, whose roots were also German, gave us a substitute that was so to speak born for our language – that followed completely and remedied its lack of cultivated fictions – who would take exception to it?”²⁰

The use of German as a synonym for Germanic exploits on one side the similarities and common origins and the lack of records that could distinguish the identities to raise claim of co-ownership. Herder extended the German identity to the Germanic stage to support the idea of a German past in the Germanic events and the claim that Old Norse poetry was a predecessor of German poetic tradition, a view also reinforced by the similarities between the newly discovered *Nibelungenlied* and the Norse sagas (Zernack 2011).

4.2 German sources: *Nibelungenlied* and *Þiðrekssaga af Bern*

4.2.1 *Nibelungenlied*

The *Nibelungenlied* was probably composed and transmitted around 1200 and had been transmitted until the early 16th century. After almost two centuries, it was rediscovered in 1755. It contains ca. 2400 quatrains, divided in 39 âventiuren of variable length (Bertagnolli 2020).

The first 19 âventiuren are almost completely set at the Burgundian court in Worms and they end with Sîvrit's death; in âventiuren 20-39 the action takes place among the Huns, on the other side of the Danube, ending with the fall of the Burgundians. The witnesses, written between the first half of the 13th century and the early 16th, are all located between the eastern Alemannic area and the Austro-Bavarian area or along the Franco-Rhine area, reflecting the two important settings of the story: the Rhine and the Danube.

In the *Nibelungen-Werkstatt* (Kofler 2023), a synopsis of the complete witnesses, the manuscripts are divided into three categories (fragments in italics; lost mss. in bold):

- 3 PRIMARY REDACTIONS: *A (mss. *A, L, g*); *B (mss. *B, M, c, i*); *C (mss. *C, a, E, F, G, R, U, X, Z*).
- 3 MIXED REDACTIONS OF THE ABOVE MENTIONED: *D (mss. *D, b, N, P, S, V, AA*); *I (mss. *I, h, K, Q, W, Y, l*); *d (mss. *d, H, O*).
- 4 SPECIAL REDACTIONS: T (ms. *T*); k (ms. *k*); m (ms. *m*); n (ms. *n*). Of these, mss. T, K result deeply revised in form, while mss. m, n in length.

²⁰ Johann Gottfried Herder, "Iduna, Oder der Apfel der Verjüngung," in *Herders sämtliche Werke*, ed. Bernhard Suphan, vol. 18 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1883), 488. Quoted in and translated by (Zernack 2011, 159)

Only 9 witnesses report the Nibelungenlied and the Klage (A, B, C, D, I, a, b, d, and h), while 2 only the Nibelungenlied (k, n). 4 contain only the Klage (G, P, AA), but they must have contained the Nibelungenlied as well. Furthermore, it must be added T as a fragment of a Middle Dutch witness from the late 13th century, and m, a parchment with the list of âventiuren (Darmstädter Aventiurenverzeichnis).

Of these, the most ancient manuscripts belong to the primary redactions, namely (Bertagnolli 2020):

- **A**²¹ (Munich, *Staatsbibliothek*, **Cgm 34**); written during the last quarter of the 13th century, it contains 2316 strophes separated from 4b. The text is written in two columns, usually fifty lines long. The handwriting appears fast, rather careless. It was found in 1779 in Vorarlberg, Austria, in the library of the Graf von Hohenems. After the *Nibelungenlied* there are some *Sprüche* from the *Buch der Volkommenheit*, composed by pseudo Engelhart von Ebracht.
- **B**²² (St. Gallen, *Stiftsbibliothek*, **cod. 857**): written around the mid-13th century, it contains 2376 strophes, separated from the second column of p. 292 (second page of the *Nibelungenlied*). Compared to A, 63 more strophes were added – but it's missing the first one, present in A and C. The witness is richly decorated and counts seven different hands. It also contains *Parzival* and *Willehalm* by Wolfram von Eschenbach; *Karl der Grosse* by Stricker, some strophes by Friedrich von Sonnenburg, *Kindheit Jesu* by Konrad von Fußenbrunnen, and *Unser vrowen hinwart* by Konrad von Heimesfurt.
- **C**²³ (Karlsruhe, *Landesbibliothek*, **Cod. Donaueschingen 63**): the most ancient of the three, written in the second quarter of the 13th century. It is composed of 2439 non-separated strophes long written in 120 leaves. It was found 25 years earlier than A in the same library. Compared to B, it is 60 strophes longer.

Through comparison, it has been noted that A and B are closer to each other than C, which represents a later redaction. Since both A and B's final line is the same (*da hat daz mære ein ende ||*

²¹ <https://www.handschriftencensus.de/1483>

²² <https://www.handschriftencensus.de/1211>

²³ <https://www.handschriftencensus.de/1482>

*diz ist der Nibelunge nôt*²⁴) and C differs (*hie hat daz maære ein ende: || daz ist der Nibelunge liet*)²⁵, AB are said to be part of the *Nôt-Fassung*, while C is a witness of the *Liet-Fassung*.

Karl Lachmann was the first who ordered the manuscripts and suggested they all were variants of a lost original manuscript, being A the closest, followed by B and lastly by C. This idea has been subject to criticism, as presented by Bertagnolli (2020, 26–27) in a short overview, with Zarncke and Holtzmann presenting C as the closest; Bartsch— supported by Hermann Paul and Braune – favoured B, observing its independent transmission in regard to C. On the other side, Brackert doubted the existence of an original version, supporting the idea of different oral versions that had been gradually transcribed into different written *Fassungen*. The reconstructive approach, however, has been abandoned in favour of the presentation of a single redaction, but the debate is still active with Heinzle (2023) arguing there was an original *Nibelungenbuch*, hypothesis supported by scholars such as Bumke²⁶ (Heinzle 2023, 292-3).

Nôt- and *Liet-Fassung* were written together, one after the other, and their difference in length does not alter the substance. The former is probably a reflection of oral stories which contained imprecisions and contradictions, while the latter is a revision that tries to bring coherence to the story. Both are divided into two nuclei, originally probably two independent stories later fused together: a first part about Sîvrit's adventures and death and a second revolving around Kriemhilt's revenge and the fall of the Burgundians. In the *Liet-Fassung*, however, the Christian environment is stronger and more explicit. An example is in the âventiure 20 where a strophe is added: Rüdiger tries to dissolve the queen's doubts about Etzel's faith by saying that he had already converted but turned away from Christianity. Kriemhilt's duty, therefore, is to take him back into the Christian path ([C 1285, 2-4]: "*Ir mögt ovch lihte erwerben, daz der fürste güt wider ze gote wendet beide sele vnd mvt*"). In the *Nôt-Fassung* Attila is still a heathen, but Rüdiger tries to reassure Kriemhilt by saying that she could convince him to convert ([A 1202, 2], [B:1259, 2]: "*waz ob ir daz verdienet, daz er tovfet sinen lip?*") (Whobrey 2018; Bertagnolli 2020).

Again, when the Burgundians leave Worms to reach Etzelburg, the strophe in A and B simply predicts that many knights will not come back, while in C there's a detail more: it is told how they take a chaplain with them as faith was not strong at the time.

[A 1463]

²⁴ [A 2316, 4] „*hie hat daz mer ein ende: || daz ist der Nybelvnge nôt.*”

²⁵ Quote from the *Nibelungenlied* in Middle High German from (Batts 1971); *Klage* in Middle High German from (Piper 1889).

²⁶ Joachim Bumke, „Die vier Fassungen der ‚Nibelungenklage‘: Untersuchungen zur Überlieferungsgeschichte und Textkritik der höfischen Epik im 13. Jahrhundert“, *Quellen und Forschungen zur Literatur- und Kulturgeschichte* 8, no. 242 (1990): 591. Quoted in (Heinzle 2023, 292-3).

Die Niblvnges heide komen mit in dan
 in tvsent halspergen, die heime heten lan
 manige schone vrowen, die si gesahen nimmer me.
 Sifrides wunde taten Kriemhilde we.

[B 1520 (1523)]

Di Nibelvnges heide chomen mit in dan
 in tvsent halspergen. ce hvs si heten lan
 vii manige schöne vrowen, di gesahen si nimmer me.
 di Sifrides wunden taten Criemhilde we.

[C 1559]

In der selben tzeiten was der gelaube nach chrankch,
 doch frlimentens ainen capplan, der in messe sanch.
 der chome gesunder wider, wan der vii cbaume entran.
 die andern musten alle da zen Heunen bestan.

In *âventiure* 19 in ms. C there are 8 strophes added to recall Ute's will after Dancrat's death, namely a rich funding to the Lorsch Abbey. Kriemhilt as well donates many treasures to ensure salvation for Sîvrit's soul, whose corpse is buried there. This mention is hardly a coincidence and may point at the location where the *Liet-Fassung* was elaborated. The Lorsch abbey, indeed, was a proprietary church (*Eigenkirche*) funded by Graf Cancor and his mother Williswinda in 764 and a decade later would become an imperial abbey (Heinzle 2023).

More than just a focus on the Christian environment, the *Liet-Fassung* tries to bring more coherence in the *Nibelungenlied*, especially between the two nuclei. In the first part of the *Nôt-Fassung*, Kriemhilt and Hagen are respectively portrayed as a victim and as a traitor, whereas in the second part she becomes a cruel murderer and Hagen becomes her victim. On the other side, C tries to bring more coherence by depicting Hagen as a traitor and a murderer, where Kriemhilt is understood as victim of Hagen. Hagen shows in C, in a strophe absent from AB, a greedy side when he hides the treasure hoping he will enjoy it:

[C 1153, 2-4]

er wande in niezen eine, die wil er möhte lebn.
 sit moht ers im selben noch ander nieman gegeben.

On the other side, Kriemhilt's cruelty is mitigated in another added strophe in *âventiure* 30, as she orders that only Hagen is to be killed and any other man has to be left untouched.

[C 1882, 2-4]

„daz ir da slahet niemen wan den einen man,
den vngetriwen Hagenen; die andern svlt ir lebn lan.“

Even the same dynamics that start the final bloodshed is different: the *Nôt* highlights Kriemhilt's responsibility as she brings her and Etzel's son Ortlieb to the table, asking how a woman could act so fiercely for revenge, while in the *Liet* the child is brought by an unknown character, act that dissolves the accusations against Kriemhilt. This point of the *Nôt-Fassung*, argues Bertagnolli, may be taken from a more ancient tradition found in the *Thidrekssaga*, where Kriemhilt brings the child and tells him to hit Hagen on the face.

[B 1909,4]

wi chvnde ein wip dvrch rache immer vreislicher getvn?

[A 1849,4]

wie kvnd ein wip dvrch rache immer vreislicher tvn?

[C 1963]

Do die fvrsten gesezzen warn vber al
vn nv begvnden ezzen, do wart in den sal
getragen zv den fversten daz Ezeln kint;
da von der kunec riche gewan vil starechen iamer sinto.

Concerning the dating of the *Fassungen*, in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* there's a useful reference: a mention about Rumold's advice to Gunther written in [C 1497] to not accept Etzel's invitation in *Parzival* 8th book, which follows a reference in the 7th book about the battle in Erfurt in 1203. This means that by 1205 the *Liet-Fassung*, the most recent of the three redactions, was circulating and Eschenbach knew about it enough to include it in its work. The hypothesis that the *Nibelungenlied* was written between the second half of the 12th century and the early 13th is also supported by similarity in rhythm and style between the *Nibelungenstrophe* and the strophes of Der von Kurenberg. The stanzas are made of four *Langzeile* made of two rhyming couplets. Each line is

divided by a caesura into two hemistichs (*Anvers* and *Abvers*) carrying three stressed syllables, except for the last *Abvers*, which carries an additional foot (Bertagnolli 2020; Heinzle 2023; Whobrey 2018).

The use of stanzas in rhyming couplets, made of four *Langzeile*, each separated in two hemistichs by a caesura, and the occurrence of a common image support the idea of a stylistic influence from the Danube poets, especially if comparing Kriemhilt's dream in the *âventiure* 1 [A 13; B 11; C 12] with the famous *Falkenlied* by der von Kürenberg:

[C 12]

In disen hohen eren trvmte Chriemilde,
wie si zvge einen valchen, || starch schon vñ wilde,
den ir zwene arn erchrvmmen. || daz si daz mvste sehen,
ir enkunde in dirre werlde || leider nimmer geschehen

[Falkenlied, der von Kürenberg]

„Ich zôch mir einen valken mêre danne ein jâr.
dô ich in gezamete als ich in wolte hân
und ich im sîn gevidere mit golde wol bewant,
er huop sich ûf vil hôhe und floug in anderiu lant.
Sît sach ich den valken schône fliegen:
er fuorte an sînem fuoze sîdîne riemen,
und was im sîn gevidere alrôt guldîn.
got sende si zesamene die gerne geliep wellen sîn!“²⁷

As already mentioned, in 9 manuscripts the *Nibelungenlied* is followed by *diu Klage*, also present in 4 fragments, written between the 13th and the 16th century. It consists of 4500 verses of which the two main redactions, B and C, derive from a lost archetype, followed by two secondary redactions: *J, which is a shorter version of *B, and *D, a mixed version of B and C. Since the *Klage* is often written right after the *Nibelungenlied*, sometimes beginning in the same page where the last *âventiure* ends and with the same capital letter, and since in verse 71 it stated that the audience has already been told about the events in Etzelburg, it's been suggested that they were meant to circulate together (Heinzle 2023, 299; Whobrey 2018, xx), although it does not respect the same metrics: instead of the *Nibelungenstrophe*, the *Klage* relies on a more common rhymed-couplet scheme with four stressed syllables per line.

²⁷ Heidelberg, *Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg*, Cod. Pal. Germ. 848 (Codex Manesse), f. 63v. Transcription from Projekt Gutenberg <https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/antholog/g-misc/chap010.html>
<https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.2222>

The intent of the *Klage* was probably to bring an explanation to what otherwise would be an open, chaotic, and unsolved finale. It opens with a summary of the second part of the *Lied*, followed by the mourning of the survivors to the massacre, and it ends with the narration of Schwämmel, who travels from Vienna, through Bechlarn and Passau, to Worms, bringing the tragic news to the relatives of the victims. Bishop Pilgrim, first introduced in the *Nibelungenlied*, appears again, in tears, but his role is also to remind that the events developed that way also due to God's will: the Burgundians should have stayed in their fatherland instead of appropriating Kriemhilt's treasure and Kriemhilt should have sought revenge only in Hagen. Schwemmel promises Pilgrim that he will reach Passau, where the story will be transcribed in Latin by an anonymous *meister Kuonrât* and later translated in German (4316-17 "*getihtet man ez sît hât / dicke in tiuscher zungen*".) The despair, however, seems to be counterbalanced by a joyful news: Gunther and Brünnhilde's child is crowned as the new King with an important celebration. Regarding the mentioned Latin redaction, not a single witness has ever been found and its very existence had been argued, supporting instead the idea that it was meant to give historical value to the text (Bertagnolli 2020, 43).

If in the *Nibelungenlied* the tragedy is seen as inevitable – also demonstrated by Hagen's will to destroy the boats after they crossed the Danube, as he knows they will never see the Rhine again ([A 1521], [B 1578], [C 1617]) – in the *Klage* the focus is shifted in the human responsibility of their own actions: Etzel is agonizing claiming that, had he known all along, the outcome would have been different (1114 "*dö sprach der küene «ez solde wesen; ja waere iz anders mir geseit.*").

The *Liet-Fassung* and *diu Klage* seem to be particularly close, idea supported by the more positive evaluation of Kriemhilt and the negative portrayal of Hagen as well as the mention of Lorsch Abbey where, in *diu Klage*, Ute dies of grief. The question, however, about which text was composed earlier remains unsolved. Certainly, the *Klage* redactor had more material at disposal than the *Liet* redactor: new characters are introduced from the *Thidrekssaga* – Dietrich's wife Isalde and Rüdiger's daughter Dietlind. Moreover, coherently with the *Liet-Fassung*, Etzel believes the massacre had been a divine punishment, a consequence of his actions after he abandoned Christian faith to return the heathen religion – *diu Klage* declares Etzel had been baptised five years before his marriage with Kriemhilde, a claim present also in C (Bertagnolli 2020).

Furthermore, Passau does not seem to be a random mention, but a well-known place to the redactor: in [C 1295] it is declared that by the monastery of Niedernburg (Passau) the Inn flows into the Danube and the majority of the mentioned urban centres are located in the austro-bavarian area (Passau, Pöchlarn, Vienna, Pförring, Eferding, Melk, Mautern, Trausmayer, Tulln, Hainburg, Wieselburg). The other cities are in nowadays Hungary (Óbuda, now a borough of Budapest; Gran, now called Strigonio), a few located along the Rhein (Worms, Xanten), non-existent or uneasy to

identify (Isenstein, Nibelungenland). Moreover, the most ancient witnesses are from the Austro-Bavarian area, leaving the suspect that the commission of the *Nibelungenlied* took place in Passau. On this behalf, it is to mention that Wolfger von Erla, bishop in Passau during the estimated time of composition, was often associated with poets as Walther von der Vogelweide: in his travelling accounts it is noted an expense of 5 five long shillings for a fur cloak (*Walthero cantori de Vogelweide pro pellicio v solidos longos*) (Bertagnolli 2020, 44). The high value shows a benevolent nature of their relationship. That von Erla was a patron of art is also testified by the redaction of *Der Welsche Gast* in 1215, when he was Patriarch of Aquileia (Heinzle 2023).

His role as a patron, his presence in Passau, and the mention of the abbey in the *Nibelungenlied* brought scholars as Heinzle (2023) to support the idea of a *Nibelungen-Werkstatt*, a workshop under the guide of Wolfger von Erla, where a group of poets composed the poem, who mentioned their patron disguised as bishop Pilgrim, an historically attested bishop of Passau between 971 and 991. Pilgrim, states Heinzle, is not relevant to the story but recalls an import figure of the Passauer collective memory, in the same years where it was attempted to establish a cult of Pilgrim.

Whether *A, *B, and *C are gathered into the *Nôt- and Liet-Fassungen*, originating from a single manuscript, or considered independent to one another²⁸, however, they are linked to a more ancient Germanic tradition that originated from historical events and developed two different kinds of material, the German and the Norse. Altogether, they form a heterogenous collection, disagreeing in some points, presenting nonetheless specific and recurrent *Leitmotive*: a hero kills a dragon and takes possession of a huge treasure; he then helps a king to win a wife and marries his sister; the hero later dies because of a betrayal as a result of a quarrel between the two wives; the hero's widow marries Etzel and her brothers are invited to court, where they will find their death. Differences and variants are then built on this common structure.

The exact purpose of the composition is unknown. The poet's²⁹ opinion, nonetheless, sometimes appears as personal comments as in [C689, 2] where the narrating voice admits ignoring why Sîvrit took Brünnhilde's belt:

[C 689]

Dar zv nam er ir gvertel; daz was ein porte gvt.
 ine weiz ob er daz tæte dvrch sinen hohen mvt:
 er gab ez sime wibe. daz wart im sider leit.
 do lagen bi ein ander Gunther vn Prunh' div meit.

²⁸ As in Haferland, mentioned in Heinzle (Heinzle 2008, 306).

²⁹ It will be used the singular form to indicate any entity – individual or group – that holds authorship of the *Nibelungenlied*, not to support a hypothesis of a single-hand author.

Other times it is expressed through the characters' voice as in [C 903], where Kriemhild's expresses her fear regarding Sîvrit's *übermuot*:

[C 903]

„Ich wær alle sorge“, sprach daz edel wip,
 „daz im niemen næme in stvrme sinen lip,
 ob er niht valgen wolde siner übermuot,
 so wær ovch immer sicher der helt chune vnd guot.“

Bockstock (1960) states that in the *Nibelungenlied* there is a general need to modernise the narrative in order make it more appealing to the taste of *diu liute*, the highly – and secular – civilised audience. Generally, the delivered message focuses on happiness as a transitory phenomenon. In Bockstock's words “This pessimistic – or [...] correctly humble and religious – outlook gives a fatalistic appearance to the poem which is intensified by the frequent references to impending disasters”³⁰, as exemplified in [C 16, 2]: “wie liebe mit leide ze iungest lonen chan”.

Clearly, the author disapproves of the characters' actions, therefore it is plausible that the poem had a didactic purpose: the narration revolves around the fall into temptation, the human audacity to follow human's heart and law as they were on the same level as the divine law. Only God can grant salvation or damnation and relying on human virtues means to sin in pride, which ultimately leads to a tragic doom. The characters surely show some religious trait, but it is always subordinated to their own personal interests; Sîvrit, as a matter of fact, does not even hide his *übermuot* and does not seem to have a spiritual life. The same decision to help Gunther is driven by *triuwe*, but also for a personal interest he had in Kriemhild. It is ironic that he helps Gunther twice as a subtle plotter, while his death is caused by an offence he did not commit.

[Kl 33-39]

Si heten ouch âne wân
 eine swester wol getân,
 diu nam sîder einen man,
 dâvon si prüeven began
 vil maneges guoten recken nôt,
 unt daz er selbe den tût
 gewan von sîner übermuot.

³⁰ (Bockstock 1960, 201)

Surprisingly, although Hagen is a grimmer figure than charming and handsome Sîvrit, his loyalty is of higher order: he's a vassal, idealistic and less self-centred, representing the responsible statesman acting according to his Lord's best interest. In manuscript C, nonetheless, his greed is highlighted, probably to bring more coherence to the text.

Differently from the Norse tradition, where the story is scattered into three main versions, the German tradition appears more coherent, with the *Nibelungenlied* as the most ancient text focused on the Nibelungen. Other texts revolving around the same matter are *Rosengarten zu Worms* (13th century), where Kriemhilt possesses a splendid garden of roses, guarded by twelve warriors, among which her brothers, Siegfried, and her father Gibeche; *Biterolf und Dietleib* (13th century) which describes the protagonists, father and son, at the court of Attila and their fight against the Burgundians. Two more works, testifying the transmission and circulation of the *Nibelungenlied* and the related matter in the early modern age, are the *Lied von hürnen Seyfrit* (first half 16th century), about the life of the young Sîvrit, a *Lied* closer to the Norse tradition in which Bertagnolli (2020, 43) sees the evidence that the story was still orally circulating, and Hans Sachs' *Der hörnen Sewfriedt*³¹ (1557) a theatrical piece based mainly on the 16th century *Lied*, but also draws from *Rosengarten zu Worms* (Bertagnolli 2020).

After the early 16th century, when the poem was copied for the last time in the *Ambraser Heldenbuch* (ms. d), the *Nibelungenlied* seemed to almost disappear – although it kept circulating in other works or versions, as in *Der gehörnte Siegfried*³², a prose version of *Lied von hürnen Seyfrit*, published in Hamburg in 1675 (Santoro 2005, 223). When the poem was rediscovered in the second half of the 18th century, along with its content and origins, it was considered by the nationalist environment as a representative of the German past, connected to an even earlier stage of the German history, the Germanic phase, that helped rebuild the process of development of the *Volksgeist* – although its content is purely medieval along with its Christian message of humility and devotion.

4.2.2 Þiðrekssaga af Bern

In the second part of the *Nibelungenlied*, Dietrich is mentioned as an exiled hero and king at Attila's court. This character is the artistic transposition of Theodoric the Great, protagonist hero of the *Þiðreks saga af Bern*³³. The saga itself, despite revolving around his adventures, mentions

³¹Complete title: *Tragedia, mit 17 personen: Der hörnen Sewfriedt, ein son könig Sigmunds im Niderlandt, und hat 7 actus.*

³² Here Siegfried dies by the hands of Hagenwald, hit on his weak spot as he is drinking during a hunt.

³³ Following (Haymes 1988) the *saga* will be referred to as the *Thidrekssaga*.

characters and features of the *Nibelungenlied*, as the three king brothers, Sigurðr the hero (sometimes mentioned in a German form Sigfred), and the battle against Attila's army. The story, originated in northern Germany, reached Norway where it was transcribed in Norse, as stated in the Prologue³⁴. The ancient stories are framed, as in the *Nibelungenlied*, according to the contemporary taste, so to make it more appealing for a modern audience.

That the story is interlaced with other works is shown by the characters: not only the main characters maintain the same names as their counterparts in the *Nibelungenlied*, but there is also mention of Guthormr, introduced in one version as brother of Gunnar, Gernoz, and Gislher, who is also found in the Norse tradition as the actual murderer of Sigurðr.

Although the archetype of the *Thidrekssaga* was lost, 4 witnesses survive (Szöke 2022):

- **Mb**: (Stockholm, *Kungliga biblioteket*, **Perg. Fol. 4**). It is the most important witness, written in the last quarter of the 13th century, probably in Munkalíf (Bergen). It contains 129 leaves. It misses the first and the last part of the poem, plus other gaps, but it was reconstructed through the copies of two other lost witnesses from the 13th century. The analysis states that it was written by 5 scribes.³⁵
- **A**: (Kopenhagen, *Den Arnamagnæanske Samling*, **AM 178 fol.**). Presumably a copy of the *Bræðratungubók*, a vellum codex in quarto destroyed during the Copenhagen fire of 1728. The manuscript was written in Iceland and contains 194 leaves³⁶.
- **B**: Kopenhagen, *Den Arnamagnæanske Samling*, **AM 177 fol.**). It seems to be a copy of *Austfjarðabók*, a parchment manuscript lost in the Copenhagen fire. It contains 109 leaves and was written in Iceland in 1690-91.³⁷

About 1448, Mb reached Sweden where it was translated into the *Didrikskrönikan* (Sv), a useful resource to consult whenever the other variants disagree with each other (Szöke 2022, 38; E. R. Haymes 1988, xxi).

Ruggerini (cited in Szöke 2022) reports Klein's stemma (Klein 1985, 489) stemma, which the scholarship generally agrees upon. From the third scribe of Mb (*Mb3) descends the *AB branch, from which A and B later developed, while the Swedish translation originated from Mb2 and Mb3:

³⁴ Since the German origins, it has been preferred in this research to present the *Thidrekssaga* among the German sources.

³⁵ <https://www.manuscripta.se/ms/101252>

³⁶ Ms. Description from handrit.is (<https://handrit.is/manuscript/view/en/AM02-0178>)

³⁷ Ms. Description from handrit.is (<https://handrit.is/manuscript/view/en/AM02-0177/0>)

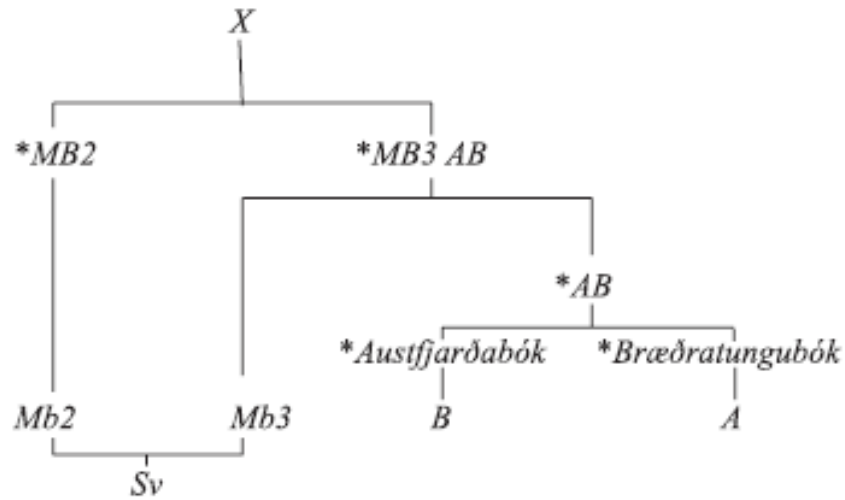


Figure 1 Stemma of the manuscripts of the *Thidrekssaga*. (Klein 1985, 489)

The author remains unknown, probably a cleric, conclusion reached by considering the high tax of illiteracy of the time and the style of argumentation used in the prologue (E. R. Haymes 1988, xix)

His nationality is also a mystery. It has been suggested that he might be Icelandic, since Icelanders were renowned for their poetic art. However, it is also true that Icelanders were well informed about their mythological versions: Haymes argues that “the lapses in the author’s knowledge of Norse versions of the stories suggest that the saga-writer was not an Icelandic.”³⁸

The story is usually dated about 1230-1250, although scholars such as Hempel and Wisniewski argued it was written a few decades earlier (Szöke 2020, 55). This, however, would alter little to nothing concerning the poem’s relation with other compositions. It is agreed that the original core of the *saga* draws from event from the *Völkerwanderung* (Haymes 2020, xxiii), that are then coordinated in the narration, as exemplified in the co-presence of Attila and Thidrek, whereas historically Attila died in 453 CE, one year before Theodoric was even born. The orality at his core is declared in the Prologue, where it states that:

“The Danes and the Swedes can tell many stories of these matters, and they have put some of the into songs they sing to entertain powerful men. Many of the songs that are sung today were composed a long time ago. Norsemen have brought together many parts of the story, and some of them in verse.”³⁹

³⁸ (Haymes 1988, xix)

³⁹ (Haymes 1980, xxi)

The first dating theory, however, is supported by the presence of King Hakon IV the Old on the Norwegian throne, a ruler who supported the cultural encounter with foreign models. At his court, translations of foreign works generated the new literary genre of *Riddarsögur*, the sagas of the knights. Although the *Thidrekssaga* shares some features with the *Riddarsögur*, its content and characters derive from the ancient heroic poetry. Nonetheless, it is still part of the same process of cultural renovation that imported foreign forms.

There is a general agreement that there were two redactors, the latter working on the first part. It seems like one scribe did not finish the work, which was completed by drawing upon earlier sources, however with little attention to repetitions and contradictions, as in the two versions of King Osantrix's death in battle:

Ch. 144: "He [Osantrix] went away and moved back toward his men, but Vildifer grasped his sword [...]. He [Vildifer] cut off his head [Osantrix'], and then sprang to Aventrod and killed him. [...] Thus King Osantrix lost his life along with two of his giants[...]."⁴⁰

Ch. 292: "King Osantrix rode vanguard of his troops and did much damage. Ulfrad, a kinsman of King Thidrek's, rode now against him with his detachment, and they had there a hard battle, and before it ended King Osantrix was killed."⁴¹

The sources, as already mentioned, are German, with references to poems and ballads (*kvæði*, *fornkvæði*), reports (*sagnir*), and tales (*sögur*) of North/Western Germanic area. The Prologue reports prose and verse stories about the same events circulating among the *Danir* (Danes), *Sviar* (Swedes), *Norrænir menn* (Norwegians). Regarding the latter, there are mentions of the heroes, as Sigurðr the dragonslayer, the Niflungar, Velent the smith (also known as Völundr in the Norse tradition), his brother Egill, and king Niðungr. These elements suggest not only a common origin among other poems and composition, but a constant interweaving of the two traditions: if the *Thidrekssaga* draws more upon German sources, it harnesses the similarities to blend in Norse – and probably more

⁴⁰ (E. R. Haymes 1988, 96)

⁴¹ (Haymes 1988, 179)

familiar – elements. Wisniewski analyses the sources of the *Thidrekssaga* and suggests a stemma (Wisniewski 1961, 489) that clarifies the relationship between poems and traditions:

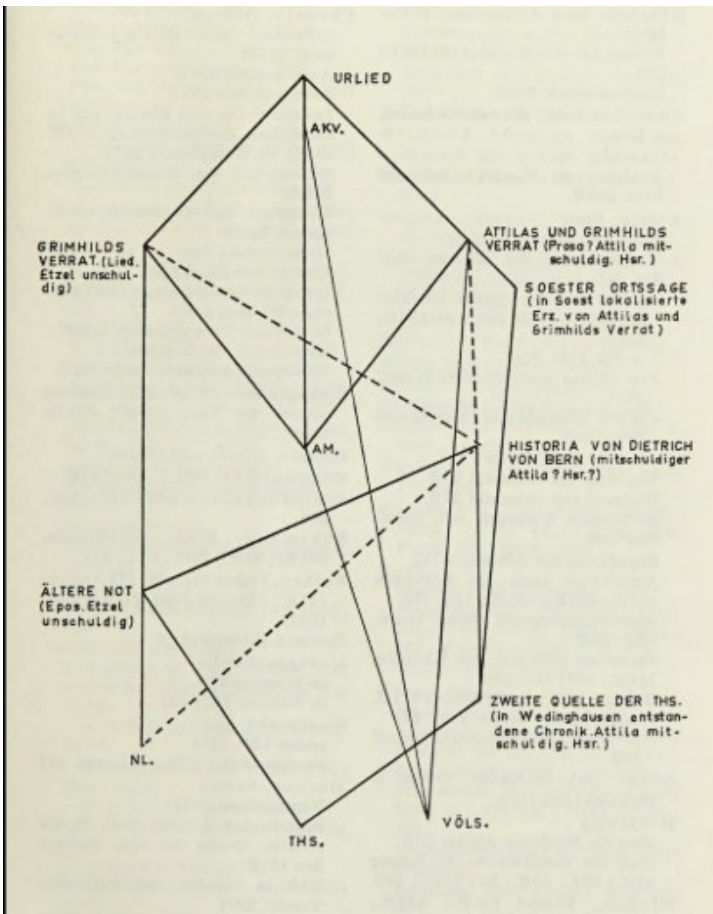


Figure 2 Stemma of the *Thidrekssaga* (Wisniewski 1961, 489).

AKV: *Atlakviða*; AM: *Atlamál*;
 NL: *Nibelungenlied*;
 VÖLS: *Volsunga saga*.

Concerning the *Nibelungen*, besides some varieties as Högni/Hagen being half-brother of the Burgundian brothers, the chapters cover the first part of the story. Sigurðr's origins are closer to the Norse sources (Sigurðr's paternity being revealed to him by Brynhildr, Reginn the dragon being related to Mimir the dwarf), while other scenes are coherent to the German tradition (as in Högni being Sigurðr's murderer or the rape of Brynhild after the marriage).

Despite the several similarities and since their dating is so close, stating that the *saga* draws from the *Nibelungenlied* seems anachronistic. Moreover, the parallels between the *Lied* and the *Niflungar saga* contained in the *Thidrekssaga* suggests a common source, rather than a direct link.

An earlier composition has been suggested as common source, an archetype of the *Thidrekssaga* and of the second part of the *Liet*, called *ältere Not*, dated about 1160. Andersson agrees, extending the sources also to some other lost poems, namely lost *Rabenschlachtlied* and *Brünnhildenlied*, but such theories are hard to verify (Szöke 2020).

As in the *Nibelungenlied*, the intent of the *Thidrekssaga* probably carries a didactic component, as stated in the Prologue: this section, indeed, begins by stating that putting the stories into written words helps to concretise the cultural memory and recall the noble actions of virtuous

men. It then proceeds to explain sources and origins of the *Thidrekssaga* and affirms that, besides the entertainment, these stories may be examples to follow in order to accomplish great exploits and also teach moral discernment:

“The stories of noble men are also useful because they demonstrate noble deeds and famous accomplishments, and interpret bad deeds as the result of sloth, and so they allow the person who wishes to distinguish rightly thus to distinguish good from evil.”⁴²

The same story, therefore, from the same country that, however, differs in content and intent, being the *Nibelungenlied* a Christian warning where its characters are presented as negative models, whereas the *Thidrekssaga* attempt to gather legends and express their heroes as positive role models.

4.3 Norse sources: Poetic Edda, Snorra Edda, Völsunga Saga

4.3.1 Poetic Edda

The *Poetic Edda* – also called *Elder Edda* to distinguish it from the *Snorra Edda* – is a collection of old Norse poems. Its content varies from heroic poems and mythological compositions and it has often been referred to in other important and later literary works, such as the *Völsunga Saga* and *Snorra Edda*.

The meaning of *Edda* is uncertain and has met various explanations: it has been connected with the word *ódr*, “poetry”, which is also used in the work itself with the same meaning, although it is not related with the title. However, Faulkes (2002) observed that *Edda* appears in some Icelandic stories as a proper name for a woman, but in the Middle Ages *Edda* was also the abstract word for “poetics”. Moreover, he also suggests that Snorri might have invented the word himself, since he had some rudimentary knowledge of Latin, deriving it from the Latin *edo*, “I compose”⁴³, on the model of Icelandic *kredda*, “creed, superstition”, which derives from Latin *credo*, “I believe”. In the 17th century, however, it came to be applied to a collection of traditional and anonymous poems, namely the *Poetic Edda*. At first, the collection was mistakenly attributed to Sæmund the Wise and therefore called *Sæmund’s Edda*, but later it appeared clear that the poems were the result of a long oral tradition, hard to reconstitute to a certain authorship (Faulkes 2002, xxi). Gustav Lindblad suggests that the *Poetic Edda* derives from smaller collections dating back to the early 13th century (Andersson 2004, 177).

⁴² (Haymes 1980, 3)

⁴³ Petitt (2023, 17) provides a different translation: “I publish, tell” in note 4.

Not even the exact place of composition is known: it has been surely written in the North, with Petitt suggesting that many poems might have originated in Iceland, but two poems – *Atlakviða in grænlenska* and *Atlamál in grænlensku* – claim to be Greenlandic; *Atlakviða*, however, seems to be more ancient than the first settlement in Greenland. Others could be from Norway, Denmark, or Sweden (Petitt 2023, 2; Andersson 2004, 177). Most probably the poems had been orally transmitted for centuries before being transcribed in the 13th and 14th century manuscripts: the carving found in Scandinavia show the knowledge of these tales long before their transcription, as in the Ramsund Carving, dated 725-1100⁴⁴. The transmission seems to have been characterised by both memorization and recomposition, interpolation and omission, which means that the form under which they are currently known could be sensitively different from their original form. Much is unknown about the identity of the transmitters and of the audience, however they were presumably recited, performed in front of a living public, rather than be read by individuals.

The Eddic poetry is different from the skaldic composition, a style that Snorri supported in his *Edda*, even though the difference is not absolute: *kenningar* are more often used in skaldic poetry, but they appear nonetheless in a simpler form in the Eddic poems as well, and formally they result more conservative than skaldic composition (Fulk 2021, 75). Moreover, the Eddic poetry usually refers to past and distant events, while skaldic poets normally dealt with their contemporary and immediate history.

The *Edda* uses mainly two stanzaic, stress-based, alliterative metres: *fornyrðislag* (old story metre) and *ljóðaháttir* (metre of songs). The former is made of four *Langzeilen*, while the latter is a set of a *Langzeile* followed by a full verse, containing between two and four alliterating syllables. It was mainly used for dialogic parts. An extension of the *ljóðaháttir*, the *galdralag* (metre of incantations), usually associated with verbal magic, features at least one full verse, while speeches are usually expressed through a fourth metric, the *málaháttir* (metre of speeches), written in half lines featuring at least five metrical positions or syllables.

Eddic poems are contained in 5 witnesses:

- **A:** (Copenhagen, *Arnemagnæan Institute*, **AM 748 I 4to**): written about the early 14th century, it had been previously divided into **AM 748 I a 4to** and **AM 748 I b 4to**. Besides six poems of the collection, it is the only witness to transmit *Baldrs draumar*⁴⁵.

⁴⁴ <https://app.raa.se/open/runor/inscription?id=39f559bc-414a-4e38-b902-7feb7ec6dfcc>

⁴⁵ Ms. description : <https://handrit.is/manuscript/view/da/AM04-0748-I-a/0#mode/2up>

- **B:** *Flateyjarbók*, or *Codex Flateyensis* (Reykjavík, *Stofnun Árna Magnússonar*, **GKS 1005 fol.**). It was written in the years 1387-1394 in Iceland and contains the Eddic *Hyndluljóð*⁴⁶.
- **H:** (Reykjavík, *Stofnun Árna Magnússonar*, **AM 544 4to**). This 14th-century manuscript also known as *Hauksbók* contains a second version of the *Völuspá*, the Prophecy of the Seeress, which differs substantially from the version reported in the *Codex Regius*⁴⁷.
- **R:** *Codex Regius* (Reykjavík, *Stofnun Árna Magnússonar*, **GKS 2365 4to**): dated about 1270, it is a copy of a lost manuscript; it was probably written in western or northern Iceland. Although it is missing 16 leaves, it remains the most complete collection. Research about the reconstruction of the lacuna is based on the *Völsunga Saga*, which represents its prose rendition (Finch 1965, ix-x n. (ii); Pettit 2023, 1).
- **W:** *Codex Wormianus* (Copenhagen, *Arnemagnæan Institute*, **AM 242 fol.**). It contains the *Rígsþula*⁴⁸, Ríg's List, and the *Snorra Edda*, where it seems to be missing the initial and last part (Pettit 2023, 782).

In the *Codex Regius*, the poems are organised into two sections: mythological, 11 poems narrating stories and legends about pre-Christian deities, and the heroic section, 19 lays focused on adventures of different heroes – mostly humans.

Dating the poems is no easy task, especially since they were probably composed in different times; however, a hint is given in the *Ragnarsdrapa*, a skaldic composition attributed to the late 9th-century poet Bragi Boddason, where the author shows knowledge of the mythological content of the *Hymiskviða* – where he's attributed the composition of six stanzas and appears as the probably apotheosis of the homonymous God of poetry Bragi – and of the heroic lay *Hamðismál* (Petitt 2023, 260; 726).

The heroic section focuses on the adventures of the Völsungar, descendants of King Völsung, and the obscure Old Norse term (*H*)*niflungar*, maybe part of the ancient Burgundian nobility (Petitt 2023, 6). The lacuna appears between the *Sigrdrífumál* – whose last missing stanzas are reconstructed with the help of 17th and 18th century manuscripts, witnessing the wide circulation of the poems – and the acephalus *Brot af Sigurðarkviðu*. The eight leaves, argues Petitt, presumably contained 260 stanzas and some prose passage. Scholars have also argued for the presence of a now

⁴⁶ Ms. description : <https://handrit.is/manuscript/view/is/GKS02-1005/0#mode/2up>

⁴⁷ Ms. description : <https://handrit.is/manuscript/view/en/AM04-0544/0#mode/2up>

⁴⁸ A poem about Heimdallr, descended on earth under the name of Rígr, and indicated as the origin of social classes.

lost **Sigurðarkviða in meira*⁴⁹, besides suggesting the existence of a “Falcon Lay” and “Dream Lay” as well (Petitt 2023, 8; Murdoch and Read 2004, 177).

Although the story presents some differences with the *Nibelungenlied*, the main characters are present often with similar names (Atli – Etzel, Sîvrit – Sigurðr, Gunnar – Gunther, Hogni – Hagen, Brünnhilde – Brynhildr, with the exception of Kriemhild – Guðrún, whereas Grímhildr is Guðrún’s mother) and the cycle shows the same influence from other cycles as in Þjóðrekr, the German Dietrich belonging to the Theodoric tradition. Although the narrative presents the same patterns, there are some important differences: besides the more consistent feature of pagan gods and magic, something that would disappear from the German sources, the story does not end with Kriemhild’s revenge, despite Etzel’s attempt to prevent the bloodshed; in the Norse tradition, the reason that causes the Gjókungar’s slaughter is Atli’s will to revenge Sigurðr’s death and obtain his hoard. Guðrún, in her turn, tries to warn her brothers and, as she fails, decides to fight alongside with them. When Atli’s army kill the Gjókungar, Guðrún avenges the death of her *Sippe* by slaughtering the children she has had from Atli and serves them to him as dinner. The following events – Guðrún’s attempted suicide and the events involving the children she has from a third marriage – are new to the *Nibelungenstoff*, as they are only found in the *Guðrúnarhvöt* and *Hamðismál*, the last two poems.

Concerning the origin of the poems, Andersson (2004) argues that the story matrix is continental, since its diffusion in German territories, and spread later to Scandinavia and Iceland. Furthermore, the poems are composed in standard alliterative metre, which is known from Old English, Old German, and Old Saxon poetry, organised in stanzas instead of the stichic form typical of other Germanic languages.

Here the Niflungar story does not start, as in the *Nibelungenlied*, with Sigurðr the dragonslayer. The narrative describes the whole genealogy before Sigurðr, highlighting their dangerous adventures, and adds the story of Guðrún, survived to the doom of her *Sippe*.

A set of laments with female protagonists are added to the already mentioned poems (*Guðrúnarkviða* I-III, *Helreið Brynhildar*, *Oddrúnargrátr*). Regarded as elegies, they are considered as a later composition of continental influence and have no correspondence to other Germanic traditions. Genzmer (1941, 24–25) argues that these latter poems, in the forms of *Standortlieder*, were composed around the 12th and 13th century. They revolve around a single scene and pause the narration to focus on a particular element, as in Brynhildr justifying her actions before the accusations of a giant during her journey to the Underworld. They are not, as it was at first suggested, pure Icelandic innovations, but the result of a foreign influence: content, vocabulary, syntax, and metrics point to a Southern origin. Besides the echoes from the Danish *Folkenviser*, Genzmer sees a

⁴⁹ Also called **Sigurðarkviða in meiri*.

stronger tie in the German rhymes of the *Spielleute*, which represented continental models that reached Iceland through Denmark and Norway. This would make them either free, alliterative re-elaboration of German tales or new creations based on German models, of which a few characters are preserved.

4.3.2 Snorra Edda

In the context of the *Nibelungenstoff*, the *Snorra Edda* is the only work whose authorship is certainly known. It was written about 1300 by Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241), an aristocratic Icelandic involved with Norwegian as well as Icelandic politics, where he became lawspeaker in the *Alþing*, for two terms (1215-18 and 1222-31). During his first journey to Norway, he became acquainted with both King Hakon Hakonarson, who ruled from 1217 to 1263, and the King's father-in-law and former regent Skulli.

Snorri, as an intellectual, noticed how the oral poetry that originated during the Viking era (800-1050), or perhaps earlier, was being rapidly substituted with prose works. Poetic composition was the principal means of expression and preservation. During the Viking Age skalds had found a place into courts and composed poems in honour of their kings and earls. By the 11th century, it seems that it was mainly Icelandic composers, who kept their role even during the shift from lyrics to prose. Indeed, the kings now wished to have sagas written about themselves, the first being King Sverrir (1177-1202), whose biography was probably written by Kal Jonsson and Sturmir Karason, prior of the Videy monastery and friend of Snorri Sturluson.

Since Snorri was a traditional aristocrat, it is suggested that he foresaw the disappearing of the skaldic poetry in favour of prose work or lyrics in different metres on new subjects. His *Edda*, therefore, was a didactic treatise aimed at preserving and teaching the old poetic way and encouraging the new generation of poets to continue the use of traditional oral style (Faulkes 2002, introduction to the edition, xiii).

The skaldic poetry, as much as they were quoted and referred to in sagas to nobilitate the work, was a complex and intricate style, with an elevated and often unclear diction. In its complexity, the message was hard to compose and to deliver, making it a practice soon to disappear. The *Snorra Edda*, written in Old Norse Iceland, represents a guide to the skaldic practice, one of the rare medieval European treatises being written in vernacular and about vernacular verse (Faulkes, 2002).

According to Faulkes, it is “the most comprehensive and systematic account of Norse mythology and legend found anywhere in the Middle Ages”⁵⁰.

Snorri Sturluson’s *Edda* – also referred to as *Prose Edda* or *Younger Edda* to distinguish it from the *Poetic Edda* – contains many mythological tales, mainly in the first part, *Gylfaginning* (the tricking of Gylfi), revolving around the creation and end of the world, and the adventures of the Norse gods, following what predicted in the *Völuspá* of the *Poetic Edda*. Since this latter is older in content and since Snorri quoted the poems, it is safe to say that Snorri at least knew the oral tradition that would be later transcribed in the poetic collection of the *Codex Regius*. The *Nibelungenstoff* is presented in the second part, *Skáldskaparmál*, “The Language of Poetry”.

Skáldskaparmál contains stories about human heroes based on early poems. It may have been written after *Háttatal*, “list of verse-forms”, the third part, and begins in a dialogue form, declining in intensity towards the end. The conversation involves Ægir, god of the sea, and Bragi, god of poetry. The first part, where Bragi tells various mythological stories, is followed by the explanation of some *kenningar*, namely periphrastic metaphoric descriptions consisting of two elements⁵¹. Some of these narratives, may have been added later, as this section has been subject to various revisions by different hands. Snorri’s work is important as it also impresses oral compositions of earlier poets, Norwegian and Icelandic, which are known only through Snorri.

In *Háttatal*, Snorri provides a detailed commentary on his poem in the conventional form of a dialogue between the master and pupil. *Háttatal* provides explanation on the formal features of skaldic poetry, namely alliteration and rhyme, and the structure of the different types of used stanzas, adding a brief account on rhetorical style.

Although the matter is purely pagan, Snorri himself was a Christian and wrote in a time when Iceland had been a Christian country for almost two centuries. His interest in the ancient religion does not aim at a revival of the pagan beliefs, but rather it lies in the preservation of the ancient stories in order to understand poetic composition. In his *Skáldskaparmál*, Snorri clarified:

“En eigi skulu kristnir menn trúa á heiðin goð ok eigi á sannynði þessar sagnar annan veg en svá sem hér finnsk í upphafi bókar er sagt er frá atburðum þeim er mannfólkit viltisk frá réttri trú, ok þá næst frá Tyrkjum, hvernig Asiamenn þeir er Æsir eru kallaðir fólksuðu frásagnir þær frá þeim tíðindum er gerðusk í Troju til þess at landfólkit skyldi trúa þá guð vera.”⁵²

⁵⁰ (Faulkes 2002, xi)

⁵¹ An example is *Ymis haus*, “Ymir’s skull”, *kenning* for “sky”. (Snorri 1998, 32/23)

⁵² (Faulkes 1998, 30–35)

“Christian people must not believe in heathen gods, nor in the truth of this account in any other way than that in which it is presented at the beginning of this book, where it is told what happened when mankind went astray from the true faith, and after that about the Turks, how the people of Asia, known as *Æsir*, distorted the accounts of the events that took place in Troy so that the people of the country would believe that they were gods.”⁵³

He explains further that King Priam of Troy migrated in Scandinavia with his people, who were considered as deities by local ignorant people. Pagan religion, therefore, is a mythization of history and Snorri means his treatise to record ancient beliefs without prejudice. Still, to be comprehensible to an audience, his contemporaries should at least have had knowledge of the pagan matter, probably through oral legacy.

His work was certainly copied and adapted during the Middle Ages, but without a strong influence on literature. However, since the 16th and 17th century, as scholars rediscovered historical and mythological sources, the *Prose Edda* has been a pivotal work in the religious and cultural research of Norse cultures in their pre-Christian age.

There are seven witnesses of the *Prose Edda*, six from medieval times and one written about 1600, but none is complete.

The witnesses we currently have are (Faulkes 2002, 2005):

- **R:** *Codex Regius* (Reykjavík, *Stofnun Árna Magnússonar*, **GKS 2367 4to**): Written about 1325, it is usually considered the main manuscript of Snorri's *Edda*. It also contains bishop Bjarni Kolbeinsson's *Jómsvíkingadrápa*, an encomiastic poem about the Vikings of Jomsborg (d. 1222) and, likely of the same author, *Málsháttakvæði*, poem of proverbs, probably written in the Orkney Islands (north of Scotland). It lacks the beginning of the prologue. It is the manuscript with fewest alteration.
- **W:** *Codex Wormianus* (Copenhagen, *Den Arnamagnæanske Samling*, **AM 242 fol.**): probably written about 1350. It contains the three sections preceded by a Prologue, which anchors the work to the context of a Christian Europe. It also contains four *Grammatical Treatises* (12th-14th century)⁵⁴, the only surviving copy of the Eddic poem *Rígsþula*, and a list of *pulur*⁵⁵. In its prologue, there are some passages, supposedly interpolations, absent in the other witnesses, from the bible and from classic tradition. The second half of the *Skáldskaparmál* has been deeply revised in the 14th century and pages have been lost,

⁵³ (Snorri 2002, 63-4)

⁵⁴ The first being an original scientific description of Icelandic phonology from c. 1150. Cfr. https://manuscript.ku.dk/motm/codex_wormianus/

⁵⁵ *pulur* (sing., f., *pula*) is a metrical list of *heiti*, written with mnemonic purposes.

leaving only fragments. The beginning and the end of the *Háttatal* are also lost, but the content of **W**, when it corresponds to **R** and **T**, is more similar to them than to **U**.

- **T**: *Codex Trajectinus* (Utrecht, *Universiteit Utrecht*, **ms. 1374**): written about 1595 but believed to be a copy of a lost Icelandic manuscript from the mid-13th century. It also lacks the beginning of the Prologue and the end of *Háttatal*.
- **U**: *Codex Upsaliensis* (Uppsala, *Uppsala universitetsbibliotek*, **DG 11**): written shortly before the *Codex Regius*, it is the most ancient witness and the only one where the title is explicit. It also contains works connected with Snorri Sturluson: *Skáldatal*, a list of Scandinavian court poets – some of the names are legendary, while others are not mentioned elsewhere; the genealogy of the Sturlung family; a list of Icelandic lawspeakers where the last mention is Snorri's; a version of the *Second Grammatical Treatise*. **U** represents the most distant witness: the strong use of verbal shortening makes the text in various passages hard to decipher, many passages are lacking, *Háttatal* is incomplete, and the material is presented in a different order.

The scholarly debate has unsuccessfully tried to identify the closest witness to the archetype. **U**, as mentioned, is arranged in a less logical and artistic way compared to the others, while the group **RWT** shows more coherence, to the point that they are often held as the closest to the original. Faulkes (Faulkes 2005), on the other side, while recognising **RWT**'s coherence, argues that, if they were to be closer than **U** to the lost original, it would imply an inexplicable question about “what could have prompted a scribe to alter an arrangement that seems satisfactory so as to produce the illogicality of **U**”⁵⁶. A third option, theoretically possible but impossible to prove, defines **U** a derivation of a draft by Snorri, while **R**, **T**, and **W** are witnesses of revised and maybe expanded works, possibly by Snorri himself. However, both versions seem to have been further altered.

Besides – almost – complete witnesses, there are fragments which are worth mentioning, preserved at the *Stofnun Árna Magnússonar* in Reykjavík:

- **AM 748 II 4to**: similar to **R**, it was written about 1400. A second hand has added the genealogy of the Sturluson family.
- **AM 748 I b 4to**: written in the early 14th century, it also contains parts of the third and fifth *Grammatical Treatise*, and the *Íslendingadrápa*. It was formerly bound with **AM 748 I a 4to** (Copenhagen, *Den Arnamagnæanske Samling*), which reports some Eddic poems.

⁵⁶ (Faulkes 2005, xxx)

- **AM 757 a 4to**: about 1400, it contains part of the *Skáldskaparmál*, a collection of *pulur* – both different to what transmitted by the other manuscripts –, a list of *kenningar* that were probably not part of the original *Edda* plan, part of the third *Grammatical Treatise*, and various Christian poems.
- **AM 756 4to**: written in the 15th century, it contains parts of **Gylfaginning** and **Skáldskaparmál** derived from **W**.

It is impossible to say whether these fragments once contained also other sections of the *Prose Edda*, but they testify the transmission of Snorri's work. Many skaldic verses of Snorri were found in other works, such as the *Konungasögur*, *Íslendingasögur*, and the *Grammatical treatises*.

The story of the *Otrgjöld* and the *Gjúkungar* – the Norse version of the Burgundians – belong to the Nibelungen tradition and finds parallels with the *Völsunga Saga* and the *Poetic Edda*, of which the compiler quoted verses from the *Fáfnismál* as well as other prose links that appear from the *Codex Regius*. It has been also suggested that it draws from an earlier version of the *Völsunga Saga*, but, since the *Gjúkungar* do not appear in all manuscripts, it may also be a later interpolation not necessarily older than the saga.

These stories are described in the second part of the *Edda*, namely the *Skáldskaparmál*. The name itself is not present as a heading in any of the early manuscripts (**RWT**), but is in the rubric at the head of the whole text in **U**.

Although it precedes *Háttatal*, it was probably written later. It includes passages concerning the poetical language and, according to Faulkes (Faulkes 1998, x), it seems that Snorri did not plan a separation between the two sections. He probably revised even the content as the work progressed: in the second part of the *Skáldskaparmál* *kenningar* and *heiti* (simplex poetical terms) are not consistently separated, suggesting that at first the two categories were united. As Snorri decided to compile a separated part for the above-mentioned, he left some *kenningar* in the *heiti* list. Since the mixing and the lack of organisation, especially if compared to the other sections, Faulkes suggests that it was still under revision at the time of Snorri's death (Faulkes 2002).

The stories concerning the Nibelungen Norse tradition are contained in chh. 39-42. They are introduced to explain the origin of the kenning *Otrgjöld*, ("What is the reason for gold being called otter-payment?"⁵⁷), it is then followed by Sigurðr's adventures, his relationship with the *Gjúkungar* and their final doom against Atli/Attila, ending with Guðrún's last marriage and the death of her children. As the narratives are "added in a somewhat unsystematic way"⁵⁸ and are not present in all

⁵⁷ (Faulkes 2002, 99); *Sú er sfk til fless at gull er kallat otrgjöld* (Snorri 1998, 45/3)

⁵⁸ (Faulkes 2002, xi)

manuscripts, Faulkes believes it is unlikely that they were part of the original plan, regardless of whether they were deeply revised or interpolated. This short version presents a rapid sequence of events with few details that, however, preserves the two nuclei of the *Nibelungenstoff*, namely Sigurðr's fight against the dragon and the events at Gunnar's court, followed by his betrayal and the consequent marriage between Guðrún and Atli. Unlike the *Nibelungenlied* and closer to the Eddic tradition, the story follows Guðrún's attempted suicide and the story of her children born from her third marriage.

In his *Edda*, Snorri mentions two characters that will be later found also in the *Völsunga Saga*, namely Sigi and Áslaug. In the Prologue, Snorri explains that Óðinn's third son was named Sigi, who had a son named Regir, from whom the Völsungar kin descends; in the final lines of the *Otrgjöld*, Áslaug is presented as the daughter of Sigurðr and Brynhildr, who will be the foremother to glorious kins.

4.3.3 Völsunga Saga

The *Völsunga Saga* represents a genealogy of the Völsungar from Óðinn's son Sigi to Sigurðr. After Sigurðr's death, the story focuses on Guðrún and the events following her marriage with Atli.

The composition of the *Völsunga Saga*, the youngest of the sources here presented, is dated back to the mid-13th century, but its content is much older, since events and characters are almost the same as in the *Eddas*. The author, indeed, draws a lot from them, with details and development close to the *Poetic Edda* and the divine origin of the Völsungar as in the *Snorra Edda* – from which Áslaug was probably drawn as well. Moreover, the prose text includes 12 stanzas and 1 prose passage from the *Poetic Edda* (Grimstad 2005).

Áslaug represents here a crucial point: since in the Saga she is said to marry Ragnarr Loðbrók⁵⁹ and to originate so the kin of the Norwegian royalties and of other aristocratic families, she represents a bridgehead between the unknown and fictitious past and the present status of the *Sippe*. In other words, the myth becomes history and history supports the noble feature of a lineage that survives time and manifests in the present. A cultural continuity that Snorri sought also in the trojan origin of the Icelanders.

The saga revolves around the story of the Völsungar, developed in five generations, from Völsung's grandfather Sigi to his grandson Sigurðr with a single pattern: each generation surpasses the predecessors in adventures expanding each time the narrative.

⁵⁹ In the manuscript, the *Völsunga Saga* is immediately followed by the *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*.

The saga belongs to the *fornaldarsögur*, mythical-heroic sagas⁶⁰, oral stories about a mythical past transcribed in medieval Iceland. Although the protagonists are not of Icelandic or Norse origin, they still refer to common Germanic ancestors and events that took place on the continent: Sigurðr is born in Denmark, where his mother married the son of the king; he is called the Hunnish King and his grandfather King Volsung rules over the Hunland; Gjúki rules the lands south of the Rhine. All these events precede the colonization of Iceland (ca. 870) and the reign of several Norwegian kings and are mixed with mythological elements (Grimstad 2005).

Chapter 23 gives a hint about the vast knowledge of the sagas, claiming:

“And when all the greatest heroes and the most famous leaders are spoken of, he [Sigurðr] is the one who will always be spoken of as foremost of all, and his name is current in all the languages spoken north of the Greek Ocean and so it will be for as long as the world endures.”⁶¹

The Saga is transmitted only in one witness which dates back to 1400, namely the **NKS 1824 b 4to**, preserved at the *Royal Library* of Copenhagen. The saga itself was compiled probably not later than 1260-70s in Iceland, but it is plausible that it was copied from a Norwegian archetype. The chapters 24-31 show no correspondence to what is transmitted by the *Eddas*, which suggests that it may be the prose version of what the lacuna in the *Codex Regius* once contained. Other scholars like Wieselgren, on the other side, suggest that chapters 22 and 24-25 never derived from lays, argument probably valid for chapters 26-28 as well (Finch 1965, xxxvi).

Besides the *Eddas*, Finch highlights similarities in the description of Sigurðr in ch. 23 of the *Völsunga Saga* and the *Thidrekssaga* in ch. 185:

VS ch. 23: “His hair, which fell in long locks, was brown and handsome to look on. His beard was short and thick and of the same colour. He had a high-bridged nose and broad, large-boned features. His eyes were so piercing that few dared look him in the face. His shoulders were so wide that to look at him was like looking at two men. His body was well proportioned as height and breadth and just as it should be.”⁶²

ÞS ch. 185: “Young Sigurðr’s hair was brown and fair and fell in great curls, and his beard was short and thick and of the same colour. He had a high nose, a broad face, large bones and

⁶⁰ Grimstad (2005, 20) reports Mitchell’s definition of mythical-heroic sagas from *Heroic Sagas and Ballads*: “Old Icelandic prose narratives based on traditional heroic themes, whose numerous fabulous episodes and motifs create an atmosphere of unreality.”

⁶¹ (Finch 1965, 41)

⁶² (Finch 1965, 41)

eyes so sharp that few men were bold enough to dare to look under his brows. [...] His shoulders looked so large that it was as if three men were there.”⁶³

Finch also adds also three short passages that seem to be in common between said works but admits that the derivation is doubtful and mentions Wieselgren’s stand on the matter, according to whom both works derive from a now lost **Sigurðar saga* (Finch 1965, xxxvii).

The reception of the *Völsunga Saga* is showed also by the *Völsungsrímur*, six late medieval Icelandic metrical romances written probably shortly before 1400 and may be based on an older and lost version of the *Völsunga Saga*. The oldest witnesses are from the mid-16th century.

According to Finch (1965, xiii), the story is divided into 5 sections:

- 1) The Völsungar genealogy from Sigi, son of Odin, to his father Sigmund.
- 2) Sigurðr’s birth and youthful exploits.
- 3) Sigurðr’s marriage to Guðrún, followed by his death and Brynhildr’s suicide.
- 4) Gunnar and Högni’s death and Guðrún’s vengeance.
- 5) Guðrún, Svanhild, and Jonakr.

There is a break occurring between the adventures of the Völsungar and the Gjókungar, namely between the 3rd and the 4th part, a shift occurring in the *Nibelungenlied* as well which highlights not only the common content but the common form and structure as well. Two stories that, according to Finch, are linked by the Guðrún/Kriemhild and it’s in her different role that the main variation lies.

The content of the *Völsunga Saga*, he states furthermore, is more archaic than the *Nibelungenlied*, since clan solidarity and blood ties are more meaningful than simple marriage. The motif in the *Nibelungenlied* of Kriemhild avenging her husband on her brother “makes for the grater artistic unity of Part I and II, less loosely linked than in VS, it is surely also later in origin”⁶⁴. This does not imply that the German tradition is a continental adaptation of the Norse tradition, but rather that the story originated from two different earlier poems originated from the continent, which were later fused together. This conclusion seems to explain why Eckewart knows Kriemhilt’s secret plan, enough to warn the Burgundians. In this, Finch sees a trace of the original development and Kriemhild’s role, where Eckewart is a messenger on Kriemhild’s behalf, as it happens in the Norse

⁶³ (E. R. Haymes 1988, 116)

⁶⁴ (Finch 1965, xvi)

tradition. On this point, Heusler and Baesecke saw the role switch between Kriemhild and Etzel a later adjustment influenced by the favourable image of Attila that was spread in Bavaria (Finch 1965).

The scholars have long debated about the origin of the *Völsung-Nibelung* cycle and how the Norse and the German tradition are related to each other. The central question regards when the original cycle, if any, was composed and if it reached the Norse environment with a mediator.

Concerning an original cycle, it is plausible that the witnesses report later versions of older, lost archetypes, but their form and content are difficult, if not impossible, to determine; this also implies the impossibility to establish whether the Norse tradition is an extension of the continental nucleus or if it effectively had a successful direct tie with the Burgundian-Gothic culture.

What is certain is that the Burgundian catastrophe was used as a theme for poetic compositions, of which the *Nibelungenstoff* is later adaptation and the *Völsunga Saga* a more faithful version. The Brünnhilde-Sîvrit betrothal in the *Völsunga Saga* seems to have left traces in the *Nibelungenlied*, as Sîvrit knows Brünhild and the splendour of her court, showing also knowledge of the routes leading to Isenstein. These, however, can be argued to be general knowledge, with which heroes were often credited with (Finch 1965, xxi-xxii).

Besides cultural peculiarities, however, each witness of both traditions points to the same web of narrative motifs – a hero slaying a dragon; a rich treasure tied to the hero; a scheme of marriages and deception; a widow and her revenge – that revolves, in different nuances, around the same moral framework – virtues, fights, codes to follow, honour to defend. By the late 18th century such similarities, suggesting the existence of a common cultural stage dated back to centuries, were taken into account more than their differences, manifesting a cultural stage where each Germanic subgroup already existed as independent cultural groups. As for Wagner and others of his time, this meeting point of different traditions was used as a bridgehead to claim co-property on the Nordic sources; such idea found a reinforcement in the belief that the German *Volksgeist* had a universal feature that could enhance foreign cultural elements without degrading. Not an appropriation, therefore, but rather a rediscovery with rejuvenating effects. A monumental manifestation of such attitude is the *Ring des Nibelungen* itself, a claimed myth of a glorious, original past – one that nonetheless merged motifs from traditional ancient cultures and a *Weltanschauung* of post-Romantic influence.

5. Wagner's *Ring des Nibelungen*: a synthesis of aesthetics and politics

5.1 Twenty-six years of “thought in progress”

The *Ring des Nibelungen*⁶⁵ is not the rapid result of an immediate inspiration. With a few interruptions, it took Wagner twenty-six years (1848-1874) to complete both the music and the librettos of a four-part, fifteen-hours long Opera cycle. In this quarter of a century, Wagner conceptualised his experience as composer and writer as well as revolutionary. In fact, during the uprising in Dresden in May 1848, he had been on the first line, side by side with intellectuals such as Bakunin. As the revolution failed, the Meister decided to escape an arrest that would have probably led to his death sentence and repaired in Zurich in self-exile. In this safe environment, Wagner wrote the essays now known all-together as the *Zurich Essays*⁶⁶, for a total of almost a thousand pages (Zoppelli 2025; R. Wagner and Voss 2022; Berry 2004).

These essays, fundamental for a correct interpretation of the *Ring*, present a firm criticism of contemporary art and society; they appeal the necessity of a political and aesthetic Revolution and illustrate the role and function of art, the development and articulation of each different artistic expression; moreover, they describe music drama, criticizing the previous theatre production and presenting what Wagner defines as *das Kunstwerk der Zukunft*, the artwork of the future (Zoppelli 2025). Not only does the *Ring*-project come after an intense experience as artist as well as revolutionary, but it is planned after a theoretical program based on aesthetic and philosophical ideas that Wagner constantly refined until his death.

Nonetheless, the *Ring* is not a mere scenic concretization of what was theorized in Zurich: Wagner's thought is in ever-lasting development rather than being statically monolithic. Therefore, the final form of the *Ring*, the one presented at the 1876 première in Bayreuth, is quite different from what was initially planned in 1848, when the working title was just *Siegfrieds Tod*. In other words, the *Ring* is not a stable perspective, but rather the history of a mutating perspective (Wagner and Voss 2022; Berry 2004). On this behalf, Berry reported a double problem when it comes to the academic critique: on one side, the tendency led by the *Bayreuth Idealists*, which would later join the ranks of Nationalsocialism, who, right after Wagner's death, tried to present the Meister's teachings as

⁶⁵ Text from Wagner, Richard and Egon Voss (ed.). *Der Ring des Nibelungen: ein Bühnenfestspiel für drei Tage und einen Vorabend: Textbuch mit Varianten der Partitur*. (Reclam, 2022).

⁶⁶ These essays include *Die Kunst und die Revolution* (Art and Revolution, 1849), *Die Revolution* (Revolution, 1849), *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (Artwork of the Future, 1849), *Kunst und Klima* (Art and Climate, 1850), and *Das Judentum in der Musik* (Jewishness in Music, 1850), *Oper und Drama* (Opera and Drama, 1851) (Berry and Vazsonyi 2020, 5).

“a timeless, pessimistic Schopenhauerian philosophy, upon which one often finds grafted a peculiar brand of neo-Romantic German nationalism. The political activism, born of the Young Hegelian movement, [...] was at best considered to have been superseded, and was often simply ignored.”⁶⁷

On the other side, the scholarly approach often underestimated the importance of the *Zurich Essays*, often allowing the scholar’s perspective to overcome Wagner’s – as in Robert Donington’s Jungian interpretation⁶⁸; regarding the latter interpretation Berry wonders whether it is actually congruent with Wagner’s vision (Berry 2004, 664).

At Wagner’s core there is the comparison between classic antiquity – portrayed with the mythical colours of a lost golden age, where peace and harmony were granted by unified arts and society – and modernity – where the original totality collapsed into its minimal unities, leading to greedy individualism and social injustice. This parallel cohesion between aesthetics and politics, namely arts and philosophy, was a *topos* for the German idealists, who believed poetics, religion, philosophy, politics, and arts were inextricably intertwined (Berry 2004). In Wagner, this intersection manifests in the idea that only the synthesis of all arts – music, poetry, and dance, namely sound, word, movement – in a single art, the so-called *Gesamtkunstwerk*, would guide each separated element of modern society to a renewed unity, a synthesis in prosperity and harmony.

Wagner’s solution to present decadence appeals to the Greek model, but it could be fully realised only after the social Revolution led by Love itself. Far from being a vague theory, although Wagner’s metaphorical language is often an obstacle to its interpretation, Wagner illustrates his project of a future *Kunstwerk der Zukunft*, in form and substance. More than a mere glorification of art for art’s sake, the future *Kunstwerk* is a political metaphor, a philosophical project for a lost humanity destined to rise again to glory (Zoppelli 2025).

5.1.1. After the end: modernity as antithesis of the antiquity.

Unsurprisingly, since the huge influence played by the Young Hegelians, Wagner’s conception of the relationship between individual and collectivity is close to Hegel’s postulates. According to the philosopher, in modern era power is based on the consent of rational selves, implying a certain degree of choice; in classic antiquity, a world where there was no true separation between the private and the social sphere, individuals respected and followed the laws of the *polis* simply because they were laws of the *polis*. On this behalf, Rousseau had already highlighted the struggle of

⁶⁷ (Berry 2004, 664).

⁶⁸ R. Donington. *Wagner’s ‘Ring’ and its symbols: the music and the myth*. 3rd edition. (Faber and Faber, 1974), p. 32.

individuals who tried to fulfil both public duty and private desire without fully succeeding and therefore left with an eternal sense of inadequacy for both roles. Wagner's observation proceeded further and claimed that, unlike classic society where freedom knew no superlatives, in modern time only through dehumanisation, the superlative of freedom's negation and the extreme, consequential need for it, humanity can come to knowledge of what freedom is (Berry 2004, 666–67).

As already mentioned, the Greek world was characterised by harmonic unity, where every element of art and society was connected to the others through Love, the prime mover and source of stability. Since aesthetic and politics are interlaced, as soon as art fragmented into singular units – text, music, dance – society followed and the prosperous collectivity turned into a hierarchical conglomerate of separated individuals. A loveless world that divides more than it connects, where each soul is led by greed and selfishness and artistic performances are empty shells; a world made drearier through the limitation of art to the private sphere. Wagner called not only for a new synthesis of all arts, but for a fusion of reason and sentiment. If humanity is willing to unify in solidarity, it must address its faithfulness and loyalty not to kings or to laws, but to love and aesthetic – two concepts strongly tied in Wagner's programme. This will be welcomed back as the universal guide, binding the world's minimal units back together, the energy that will synthesise public and private, form and substance, must and will, aesthetic and politics (Berry 2004; Zoppelli 2025; Newman 2013). In his words:

“Now as Man is not free except through Love, neither is anything that proceeds, or is derived, from him. Freedom is the satisfaction of an imperative Need, and the highest freedom is the satisfaction of the highest need: but the highest human need is Love.”⁶⁹

Surely universality of art is a strong component in Wagner's philosophy and in general for the German idealists, but they meant it with a slight nuance of nationalism. As it was for Stenzel and the Hegelians, Wagner's conception of *universell* coincided with *deutsch*. On this regard, the words of Moses Hess, an intellectual whose nationalism was far from being comparable with the Romantics' or the *völkisch*, in his *European Triarchy* declared:

“We Germans are the most universal, the most *European* people in Europe.”⁷⁰

⁶⁹ (R. Wagner 1993, 97).

⁷⁰ M. Hess, 'Die europäische Triarchie', in A. Cornu and W. Mönkke, eds, *Philosophische und sozialistische Schriften 1837-1850* (Berlin 1961), p.28. Quoted in (Berry 2004).

Wagner was close to that nationalist Hegelian school that claimed the very core strength of the German culture was its ability to absorb, synthetise, and bring to its right completion every phenomenological development of other nations (Berry 2004).

Since the strong influence of the Young Hegelians, it seems quite natural to note a full materialistic view in Wagner's work (Zoppelli 2025). Moreover, he agrees with Feuerbach in breaking with the traditional, transcendental philosophy, focusing rather on the real, sensuous object; philosophy should lead towards it, making the invisible visible to the eyes, not turning away from it after abstracting it into an idea. In order to do so, with an anti-metaphysical approach, art must be placed back to the public scene (Berry 2004).

Wagner's temporal tension does not only guide him to an ideal past that serves as a model; it also leads him to the future, where the arts will be unified in a great "total work of art", the *Gesamtkunstwerk* – an occurring concept in the Wagnerian criticism, although the Meister used it only a few times in relationship to his work (Berry and Vazsonyi 2020). This unification, however, since art is inextricably tied to the social dimension, will manifest only after a radical change in society, when social classes will be abolished, capitalism and industrialism disempowered, greed of power and lust for riches neutralised; in the future society, a horizontal society, men and women will be both free in a collectivity kept together by Love in its widest meaning – from social solidarity to erotic passion (Berry 2004; Zoppelli 2025).

This aspiration also clarifies why the *Bayreuth Idealists* – followed by the Nationalsocialists – tried to underestimate the socialist and democratic component in Wagner's work. Not only did he stand on the revolutionary side with Bakunin, one of the founding fathers of anarchism, close to the Marxist environment; a deep and impartial analysis would – and has – acknowledge his proximity to utopian socialist thinkers such as Proudhon, Fourier, and the Saint-Simonian movement, especially for his anticapitalistic intolerance, his antipathy for the raging industrialism, and the solution found in social organisations with a communitarian feature. On the other side, it is harder to establish whether Wagner knew Marx's work and to what extent, since many common points in their programs were shared in other European socialist environments; moreover, the term *communism* itself, quoted in the *Zurich Essays*, was not exclusively used in the Marxist field (Zoppelli 2025). This influence is already clear before the Dresden revolution, as exemplified by Wagner's article *Die Revolution*, anonymously published on April 8th, 1849 in August Röckel's *Volksblätter*:

"They all, the hundred-thousands, millions, are camped upon the hills and gaze into the distance, where thickening clouds proclaim the advent of emancipating Revolution; [...] I am the e'er-rejuvenating, ever-fashioning Life; where *I* am not, is Death! I am the dream, the balm, the hope of sufferers! I bring to nothing what exists, and whither I turn there wells fresh

life from the dead rock. I come to you, to break all fetters that oppress you, to redeem you from the arms of Death and pour young Life through all your veins. *Whatever stands, must fall*⁷¹: such is the everlasting law of Nature, such the condition of Life; and I, the eternal destroyer, fulfil the law and fashion ever-youthful life. From its root up will I destroy the order of things in which ye live, for it is sprung from sin, its flower is misery and its fruit is crime; [...] I will destroy the dominion of one over many, of the dead o'er the living, of matter over spirit; I will break the power of the mighty, of law, of property. Be *his own* will the lord of man, his *own* desire his only law, his strength his whole possession, *for the only Holiness is the free man, and naught higher there is than he*. Annulled be the fancy that gives One power over millions, makes millions subject to the will of one, the doctrine that One has power to bless all others. Like may not rule over like; like has no higher potence than its equal: *and as ye all are equal, I will destroy all rulership of one over other*. [...] Life is law unto itself. And since the Law is for the living, [...] ye yourselves are the law, your own free will the sole and highest law, and I will destroy all dominion of Death over Life.”⁷²

In other terms, Wagner's upcoming Revolution is a clash of systems, a Titanomachy between old and new cultural codes, including gender roles in the realm of primordality. The debate in modern society about polarisation and naturalisation of gender roles in Germany came under the strong influence of Rousseau's *Émile ou De l'éducation* (1762). In Karen Hausen words:

“Den als Kontrastprogramm konzipierten psychischen ‚Geschlechtseigenthümlichkeiten‘ zu Folge ist der Mann für den öffentlichen, die Frau für den häuslichen Bereich von der Natur prädestiniert. Bestimmung und zugleich Fähigkeiten des Mannes verweisen auf die gesellschaftliche Produktion, die der Frau auf die private Reproduktion. Als immer wiederkehrende zentrale Merkmale werden beim Manne die Aktivität und Rationalität, bei der Frau die Passivität und Emotionalität hervorgehoben[.]”⁷³

Nattiez, in his 1990 work *Wagner Androgyne: A Study in Interpretation*, observed how Wagner tried to merge genders with the same unifying dynamics that develop in arts and society. It is noticeable nonetheless that Wagner's emancipating exaltation of women, described with a more positive attitude than men, is still framed in traditional clusters: surely men, as representatives of

⁷¹ Cf. Erda in *Rheingold*: “Alles, was ist, endet.” (Italic mine) scene 4, v. 1683.

⁷² (Wagner 1899, 8:235-6)

⁷³ (My translation) “According to the psychic ‘gender characteristics’, conceived as a contrasting program, man is predestined by Nature for the public sphere, whilst woman for the domestic environment. Man's destiny and capabilities point to social production, while the woman's to private reproduction. As an ever-recurring central feature, activity and rationality are exalted in men, passivity and emotionality in women”. Hausen, K. „Die Polarisierung der ‚Geschlechtscharaktere‘“, in *Sozialgeschichte der Familie in der Neuzeit Europas*, Werner Conze (ed.). (Stuttgart: Klett, 1976, pp. 363–93), p. 367.

rationality, are closer to the apathetic thinking, the cold *logos*, the law and the structure, the form, Odin enchained in his own pacts and rules; women, on the other side, are the embodiment of Love, the prime motor that holds everything together, passionate and naturally spontaneous, it's Brünnhilde finding in Love a higher authority than Fricka's law. However, there are two important aspects that should be highlighted: firstly, as emancipated as she may seem, woman is still framed in a stereotyped portrayal that wants her more instinctually intuitive and emotional, rather than objective and rational, more inclined to compassion. Secondly, the unification of all aspects is far from being a collectivity of diversity: unity is based on Love, namely on a shared feeling and interpretation of such feeling, to obtain through the same spontaneous language. Not a heterogeneous cosmopolitanism, but rather a homogeneous totality. As Zoppelli notices (2025, 41), this witness of the romantic influence, is a dangerous preparatory ground for purifying programs: the sacred cultural ground, in Eisenstadt and Giessen's words (1995), must remain untouched and protected, while deviant seeds must be eliminated – physically, intellectually or both.

This is surely not enough evidence to claim that Wagner dreamt of a ghettoisation of the foreign – let alone their doom; nonetheless it can already be grasped on which points the *völkisch* environment held on in their antisemitic campaign of Wagner, especially in relation to Wagner's *Judentum in der Musik*. In this essay, dominated by the *topos* of the greedy, capital-holder Jew, Wagner delivers a fierce attack against wealthy Jewish composers such as Mendelssohn and Meyerbeer – even though the artistic criticism is extended to the whole Opera production of his time. Specifically, Meyerbeer is accused of being an effect without cause, to persist – as a Jewish feature – on the superficial ground of the surrounding culture, unable to blend in. An eternal foreigner, forever an outsider and a cultural parasite:

“The speech of the Jew is however of even greater importance; considered, that is, in relation to its effect upon us — an effect which constitutes the essential feature to dwell upon in referring to Jewish influence upon Music. The Jew converses in the tongue of the people amongst whom he dwells from age to age, but he does this invariably after the manner of a foreigner.”⁷⁴

Zoppelli notices that Wagner's artistic opinions on Meyerbeer are positive and the same as expressed years earlier. He still admires Meyerbeer cosmopolitan and universal traits, but in the *Judentum* he accuses him to have no mother tongue and no roots. This makes his art, as well as the

⁷⁴ (Wagner 1910, 11)

contemporary art in general, an empty shell without meaning, a representation where arts co-occur, but do not co-operate, an attack that can also be found in *Opera und Drama*:

“[...] For Meyerbeer was no idealistic dreamer, but, with a keen practical eye to the modern opera-public, he saw that by harmonious concord he would have gained no one to his side, whereas by a rambling hotch-potch he must certainly catch the moods of all [...] So the utmost triumph of Music was reached: the Composer had razed the Poet to the Ground, and upon the ruins of operatic-poetry the *Musician* was crowned the only *authentic poet*! – The secret of Meyerbeer’s operatic music is *Effect*. [...] we do not as a rule employ the more homely word “*Wirkung*” [lit. “a working”]. Our natural feeling can only conceive “*Wirkung*” as bound up with an antecedent *cause*: but here we are instinctively in doubt [...] such correlation subsists, [...] e.g., the music-pieces of Meyerbeer; and so we fall upon a foreign word, not directly appealing to our natural feeling, such as [...] “Effect”. If, then, we wish to define what we understand by this word, we may translate “Effect” by “a Working, without a cause” (“*Wirkung ohne Ursache*”).”⁷⁵

As already mentioned, this fierce accusation of Meyerbeer can be extended to the whole operatic productions, especially those dominated by French and Italian models – a resentment probably rooted in the unsuccessful and economically unstable Parisian experience (Zoppelli 2025) – and it was already a circulating idea in 19th century Europe, at least since the late 18th century. Mercier had already presented the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* in his 1771 *The Year 2440: A Dream If Ever There Was One*, where a time traveller tells how in the future music and drama are synthesised together, but two publications from 1836 perfectly exemplified how the need for a complete art and for a new place circulated with decision. Mazzini, in his *Filosofia della musica*, sadly observed an empty art, put on the scene of a cold theatre, which transmits nothing and nothing can be transmitted, since the audience attends the theatre for entertainment on one side and group identity confirmation on the other. Therefore, his call for the building of a new, popular theatre, which would transmit principles and educate the people. Modena, using stronger words, urged to burn the theatre to the ground, as it was nothing but a brothel – a metaphor that, also called “prostitute” or *coquette*, is central in Wagner’s *Opera und Drama* (Zoppelli 2025; R. Wagner and Voss 2022);

“French opera-music passes rightly for a coquette. The coquette adores to be admired, nay even loved: but her peculiar joy at being admired and loved she can only taste, providing she herself be snared by neither love nor admiration for the object she inspires with each.”⁷⁶

⁷⁵ (R. Wagner 1900, 94–95)

⁷⁶ (R. Wagner 1900, 112)

Wagner's theoretical conclusions were not just a contemplative attempt to compare antiquity and modernity; they were the ground upon which he developed and built his idea of artistic production, including form, substance, relationship between text and music, the aim of the representation, but also the space that would have hosted his *Musikdrama*, what would have later become the *Festspielhaus*.

5.1.2. After the Revolution: synthesis in the *Musikdrama*.

“– A *performance* is something I can conceive of only *after the Revolution*; only the Revolution can offer me the artists and listeners I need. The coming Revolution must necessarily put an end to this whole *theatrical business* of ours: they must all perish, and will certainly do so, it is inevitable. Out of the ruins I shall then summon together what I need: I shall *then* find what I require. I shall then run up a theatre on the Rhine and send out invitations to a great dramatic festival: after a year's preparations I shall then perform my entire work within a space of *four days*: *with it* I shall then make clear to the men of the Revolution the *meaning* of the Revolution, in its noblest sense. *This audience* will understand me: present-day audiences cannot. – “⁷⁷

The role played by the Revolution has the same temporal tension as Wagner: on one side, it will eradicate the old order; on the other side, it will create a fertile ground for the future reunion. Wagner himself feels the same tension: he plans not to offer a mere restoration of the Greek model, but rather a *renovation*. Berry (2004, 666) argues that the same comment Goethe made about Shakespeare's work⁷⁸ can be applied to Wagner's: his characters merge together old and new features, especially concerning the balance between *must* (Greek fate) and *will* (modern subjectivity). As a matter of fact, the future Artwork would have merged the elements of the tradition – theatre structure, unity, represented matter – but with the means of modern-day era, namely the orchestra; this would have substituted the Greek chorus, commenting the action.

Wagner believed that the structure of Greek theatre reflected the social homogeneity by eliminating differences between spectators, unifying them into one single audience. Art – as it is *one* – would have performed in a harmonic and total stream of different expression: music, lyrics, dance – pantomime or dance would then play a minor role in Wagner's dramas. Each expression cooperating

⁷⁷ Letter to Theodor Uhlig, November 12th 1851 (R. Wagner 1988a, 234).

⁷⁸ Goethe, J. W., “Shakespeare und kein Ende!“, in Borchmeyer, D. et al., *Sämtliche Werke, Tagebücher und Gespräche*, (39 vols, Frankfurt 1985-89), XIX, pp. 641-5 (Berry 2004, 666)

in the performance, not of a mirrored reality, but rather of the myth, the soul of the audience itself. In a context closer to the idea of a collective festival, a *Festspiel*, the audience would therefore see itself and its own cultural heritage on the stage, eradicating even the barrier between performer and audience (Berry 2004; Zoppelli 2025).

Not an Opera, then, too fragmented in its inner divisions, too focused on formality; in a debate that tried to establish which carried more importance, text or music, Wagner opted for a third way: not the expression in itself, but the *expressed*, the theatre itself, the manifestation that rises from the performance: a *Musikdrama* (R. Wagner and Voss 2022). The difference lies in the use and the aim of the arts: if the representation is solely and entirely entertainment-oriented, the nature of the representation, the Drama, is not able to manifest itself. As stated in *Opera und Drama*:

“[...] the *error* in the Operatic art-genre consisted in that a Means of expression (Music) has been made the end, while the End of expression (the Drama) has been made a means.”⁷⁹

Music, asserts Wagner, is not an empty performance: it is a vehicle of concepts and integrates the lyrics with deeper meaning. In his *Ring*, music never stops⁸⁰: the orchestra or the singers are always playing, manifesting the myth in its true nature. Through *Leitmotive*, nuances of meaning otherwise inexplicable are delivered to the audience. By these means, it is possible for a character to lie on stage, with the audience understanding the lie as well as the true intent, as in Mime's attempt to deceive Siegfried (Newman 2013; Zoppelli 2025). Therefore, no more simultaneous vocal performances, no chorus or polysymphonic ensemble pieces, nothing that is assimilated to simple and meaningless performative virtuosity; as a substitute for the Greek chorus, the orchestra must now comment the action and manifest what is only invisible thought, impalpable intention (Berry and Vazsonyi 2020).

The criticism, however, more than to Opera itself, is directed against the circumstances in which Opera is composed: Wagner admits that even his *Musikdrama*, if performed in his era, would not be exempt from those weaknesses. This is the reason why the *Musikdrama* can rise only after the Revolution, since only the right circumstances can give birth to the future Artwork.

Another rupture with tradition lies in the myth as subject of the representation, as seen in the French and Italian tendency to focus on history. The focus is now on the cultural heritage, the relationship between the *Volk* and its myth, the group and its codes. Years later, Wagner would write

⁷⁹ (R. Wagner 1900, 17).

⁸⁰ There are actually two moments with no music nor singing in the *Rheingold*, but they still carry a symbolic meaning.

an essay about the music of the future in the form of a letter to a friend, *Zukunftsmusik*⁸¹, highlighting the ideal dominance of the myth when it comes to artistic representations:

“I therefore believed I must term the ‘mythos’ the poet’s ideal Stuff – that native, nameless poem of the Folk, which throughout the ages we ever meet new-handled by the great poets of periods of consummate culture ; for in it there almost vanishes the conventional form of man’s relations, merely explicable to abstract reason, to shew instead the eternally intelligible, the purely human, but in just that inimitable concrete form which lends to every sterling myth an individual shape so swiftly cognisable.”⁸²

The difference between Greek drama and future Artwork lies in the difference between the two societies: Greek society was based on slavery, which makes its doom inevitable (Berry 2004). Myth, more than history itself, can embrace the true essence of History, better than history itself: objects, ideas, relationships among characters are less problematic in the representation. It is the myth itself, as Wagner states in *Eine Mitteilung an meine Freunde*, which can grasp the pure nature of the phenomenon, because in its historical context it would appear multicoloured, superficial, only to obtain its form under the eye of the *Volk*, who can correctly understand it (Berry 2004).

Not every myth, as for the Christian myth, is guilty to have distorted and negated an anthropomorphic feature to the German myth – an adjective here standing also for Germanic, in agreement with the universal character attributed to the German culture. The myth therefore shattered in a series of minimal units, only to receive another mortal blow by the Enlightened conception of myth as barbaric. Only later intellectuals such as Vico and Herder will operate for its reconstruction.

This also implies a choice on a linguistic level: Wagner opted for his native tongue, knowing that he would have to face the enormous success and tradition of librettos in Italian and French. It seems that the focus on the German language was caused also by his miserable experience in Paris; on this behalf, it has been suggested that the *Ring* may contain a hidden critique to Paris as the international capital of arts and culture (Wagner and Voss 2022). This choice represented a challenge as well as a statement: composers of the times tended to treat the German librettos as a French or Italian libretto, as there was no difference among the languages. The use of the German language represented a sign of cultural emancipation, of self-affirmation as a culture, distancing from the foreign models and focusing on his own personal cultural *Geist*. It is a statement that traces a line between us and them, *deutsch* and *undeutsch* (Wagner and Voss 2022).

⁸¹ ‘*Zukunftsmusik*,: *An einen französischen Freund (Fr. Villot) als Vorwort zu einer Prosa-Übersetzung meiner Operndichtungen* (Weber 1861)

⁸² (R. Wagner 1907, 312)

5.2 Birth of a Kunstwerk: genesis of the Ring des Nibelungen.

5.2.1 Besides Wagner: other artistic approaches to the *Nibelungenstoff*.

From the perspective of the German culture, the program of a myth revival found its solution in the *Nibelungenstoff*. Regarding the link between *Volksdichtung*, popular poetic expression, and the *Volksgeist*, a wide influence was exercised by Herder's four main theses on the matter. These theses highlighted firstly that the differences between *Völker* were developed initially as a result of environmental interactions – namely, adaptation to natural conditions – and would later be intensified by the historical development, which is reflected in the *Volksgeist*. Such entity would survive over time only by remaining true to itself, exalting the idea of a single *Volk* for a single *Volksgeist*, while looking unfavourably to multi-ethnic States, *Vielvölkerstaaten*, as Russia: the presence of multiple and different identities interferes with the organic and natural development of the *Geist*. Regarding the *Volksgeist*, its clearest and most immediate expression is the language, specifically the popular literary production, namely the *Volksdichtung*. Besides the aesthetic importance, the *Volksdichtung* not only manifests the Spirit of the Nation in its phases, but it also works as an archive to the people's identity (Niedling 2011, 214–15).

When it comes to a concrete manifestation of such ideas, the *Nibelungenlied* offers on one side aesthetic-lyrical refinements, on the other the reception of the nature of remote events, in such way that Bodmer defined it a sort of Ilias (Niedling 2011, 224–25).

The idea of adapting the *Nibelungenstoff* to an Opera was not new to the 1840s and 1850s and most artworks and artists were known to Wagner. Felix and Fanny Mendelssohn, in their correspondence, were planning a musical work based on the *Nibelungenlied* – it also seems that Mendelssohn owned a copy of Raupach's dramatic work *Der Nibelungen-Hort: Tragödie in fünf Aufzügen, mit einem Vorspiel* (Hamburg 1834), as Wagner did:

“The hunt with Siegfried's death provides a splendid finale to the 2nd act. The third act must begin with Chriemhild and her women as she steps out of her door and finds the dead Siegfried there. You can fashion a polonaise with chorus from that. Incidentally, should you be uneasy over the success of the opera, I would suggest that you let a double chorus of Huns and Nibelungs, as a *captatio benevolentiae*, sing “sie sollen ihn nicht haben” to the melody of *Ei du Lieber Augustin*.”⁸³

⁸³ Letter from Fanny Mendelssohn to Felix Mendelssohn. Berlin, December 9th, 1840. (Hensel and Mendelssohn Bartholdy 1987, 299).

Schumann as well opted for the German poem as subject for his op. 51 n. 4, with a focus on the Nibelungen hoard. He composed the music on Karl Immermann's lyrics:

“Auf deinem Grunde haben
 Sie an verborgnem Ort
 Den goldnen Schatz begraben,
 Der Nibelungen Hort.
 [...]”⁸⁴

Moreover, during his exile in Zurich, Wagner met Vischer, who, in 1844, had published an article supporting the idea of the *Nibelungenlied* as theatre subject, followed by some suggestions about the representation. Louise Otto answered in 1845 with a series of articles, *Die Nibelungen als Oper*, to which followed in 1852 the complete libretto *Die Nibelungen: Text zu einer großen heroischen Oper in 5 Acten*. While she was still writing it, the Danish composer Niels W. Gade – at the time conductor at the Gewandhaus in Leipzig and therefore in touch with Wagner – started composing the music to Otto's text, of which only a fragment was completed.

Around the same time, Gerber and Dorn, Wagner's acquaintances since his youth in Leipzig, worked on what would be later titled *Die Nibelungen. Große Oper in fünf Akten* (1854). These publications, therefore, demonstrate that Wagner's opera cycle was not an outstanding idea of a single artist, but rather a project embedded in a broader cultural tendency that sought to retrieve the ancient past and transpose it into a modern work of art.

5.2.2 From the end: early perspective, drafts, the final tetralogy.

As Wagner began to write his libretto, his idea was to elaborate a single Opera focused on Siegfried/Sivrit, called *Siegfrieds Tod: Eine Heldenoper*, whose subtitle seems to be in immediate correlation with Otto and Vischer's ideas. Wagner, however, turned soon to the Norse versions of the saga, believing they carried a deeper meaning if compared to the German sources, changing the religious dimension from Christian to pre-Christian Norse belief. It is not, therefore, surprising if only the *Götterdämmerung*, developed from the initial *Siegfrieds Tod*, is related to the *Nibelungenlied*.

Wagner viewed the mythical dimension as based on historical facts. The *Nibelungenlied* – and more in general the *Nibelungenstoff* – narrated the past and the origin of the German *Volk*. In his 1848 essay *Die Wibelungen: Weltgeschichte aus der Sage*, Wagner manifested at his finest his conception of history, describing it as a repetition of mythic prototypes, appealing at the classical sense of cyclical

⁸⁴ (Schumann 1930, 146).

time rather than linear (Berry and Vazsonyi 2020). Once more, the dichotomy of myth as a popular interpretation of the historical event, of which the *Nibelungenlied* and the other sources are an example. Wagner claimed historical authenticity of the Nibelungen, whose *Urheim* was located on the Hindu Kush between Afghanistan and Pakistan:

“[...] the so-called Indian Caucasus: upon this island, i.e. these mountains, we have to seek the cradle of the present Asiatic peoples, as also of those who wandered forth to Europe. Here is the ancestral seat of all religions, of every tongue, of all nations’ Kingdom.”⁸⁵

The universal claim is unsurprisingly in the following pages narrowed to the Germanic/German environment. Those people who migrated to Europe, so his claim, were at the origins of Frankish royal lineage, which ruled under the name of *Wibelingen* or *Gibelingen*. The Saga of the Nibelungen represents “the birth right of Frankish stem”⁸⁶ and Siegfried is the God of Light, winner of the Nibelung’s Hoard:

“[...] This hoard, and the might in it residing, becomes immovable centre round which all further shaping of the saga now revolves: the whole strife and struggle is aimed at this Hoard of the Nibelungen, as the epitome of earthly power, and he who owns it, who governs by it, either is or becomes a Nibelung. [...] Now the Franks [...] have a royal race in which appears the name ‘Nibelung’.”⁸⁷

It seems almost obvious, since Wagner’s interest in philology, that Lachmann often appears in Wagner’s work, although the Meister’s aim through this discipline was to reconstruct the myth in its purest form, purified from later influences. It must be said that, as much as he looked at the Norse tradition as purer, his representation is far from being faithful to the original (Wagner and Voss 2022). Björnsson (2003, 7–8) states that textual comparison highlighted 80% correspondence of motifs between the *Ring des Nibelungen* and the Norse sources, while only 5% is derived from German literature and about 15% are common to both traditions. Seen as a distribution, motifs from *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre* and *Siegfried* are almost entirely drawn from Norse sources. However, whatever the tradition, the *Ring* focuses solely on the first nucleus of the story, without any mention of Atli/Etzel and with Guttrune – the Wagnerian Kriemhild, closer in form to the Norse Guðrún – playing no significant role whatsoever.

⁸⁵ (R. Wagner [1898] 1966, 260)

⁸⁶ (Wagner [1898] 1966, 262–63)

⁸⁷ (Wagner [1898] 1966, 263)

As Franz Müller, a government official in Weimar, asked for the sources to his *Ring*, Wagner proceeded to schematic list of the consulted books, with no indication of the influence that each had and often without an indication of edition. The list was as follows – brackets from the original manuscript: (Björnsson 2003, 111):

1. 'Der Nibelunge Noth u. die Klage.' Ed. Lachmann.
2. 'Zu den Nibelungen etc.' by Lachmann.
3. 'Grimm's Mythologie.'
4. 'Edda.'
5. 'Volsunga-saga' (translated by Hagen – Breslau).
6. 'Wilkina- und Niflunga saga' (ditto).
7. 'Das deutsche Heldenbuch.' Old edition, also revised by Hagen. Edited by Simrock in 6 volumes.
8. 'Die deutsche Heldensage' by Wilh. Grimm.
9. 'Untersuchungen zur deutschen Heldensage' by Mone (very important).
10. 'Heimskringla' translated by Mohnike (I think!) (not by Wachter — bad).

The list appears to have been written in a hurry and the absence of any additional details makes it hard, for instance, to establish which edition of the *Edda* Wagner read; it is clear, nonetheless, that Wagner turned not only to the literary productions, but to their critics and analysis as well. The material adopted from the myths were later manipulated, fused together, in order to express not their nature or the reason that brought to their composition, but rather what Wagner believed was the myth and the nature of the myth (Berry 2004), making his philological approach less philologically disciplinary and more artistically creative. The title appeals to the German poem, but the dynamics and the plot are closer to the Norse version – up to Sigurðr's death, the *Ring* excludes what happens in the second part of the story.

The nature of the Nibelungen, nonetheless, is not human as in the *Nibelungenlied* and in the Norse sources, but dwarves, an idea that Wagner probably adopted from *Das Lied vom Hürnen Seyfried*. The Rheingold seems to be inspired by the hoard that Hagen hides in the Rhine, but there is no mention of a magic power. In the *Nibelungenlied*, Albrich is at first at King Nibelung's service and then at Sîvrit's, not a greedy, love-wounded dwarf – whose name resembles Álfrekr, the dwarf from the *Thidrekssaga* renowned for his skill in thievery. Albrich guards the treasure, which includes the *Tarnkappe* and the *Wiunschelrute*⁸⁸. The former is simply included in the hoard, while the

⁸⁸[B 1124, 1-3] [= C 1137; A 1064]

Tarnhelm in the *Ring* is produced by Mime, forced by Alberich by means of the Ring; the latter is said to give power over the world and seems interlaced with *Andvarautr* and its curse to give birth to the Wagnerian Ring, but the sources never mention as a requisite to forswear love. The German Albrich is replaced by the Rheintöchter, probably incorporated from the *merweip*⁸⁹, the water nymphs of the Danube from âventiure 25 of the *Nibelungenlied*. The protected gold, moreover, recalls the episode of the *Otrgjöld* which seems to have inspired the scene of Freia hidden by the hoard as well as the fratricide between Fasolt and Fafner – although only Fáfnir is present in the Norse sources with his two brothers and father. They are not giants and Fáfnir is guilty of patricide, not fratricide; this will be Mimir’s guilt, as he plots Fáfnir’s death by hands of Sigurðr’s. (Björnsson 2003).

The *Thidrekssaga* offers the name of Fasolt, but not his character, now turned into a giant, and Hagen/Högni’s hybrid origin, being the son of Oda (Ute, Gunther and Kriemhild’s mother) and an elf. Another source is the Greek mythology itself, from which the weaving features of the Norns which is closer to the Greek Moirai or the Latin Parcae – in the *Völuspá*, they are said to come from Yggdrasill and to carve humans’ destiny in the form of runes into the woods. In the draft, they were depicted delivering the *Völuspá*, the Eddic prophecy of the seeress, while in the final version of the *Ring* they appear only in the Prelude of *Götterdämmerung*, anticipating future events and recalling past actions; their prophetic function, on the other side, is assigned to Erda, their mother, in scene 4 of the *Rheingold*. (Newman 2013; R. Wagner and Voss 2022; Björnsson 2003).

Therefore, Wagner, coherently with his idea of better preservation of the Norse sources, treated the German sources as a formal source – names, dynamics, constellations – while the Norse literature delivered the substance, the nature of the myth (Wagner and Voss 2022).

Wagner’s – debatable – approach to philology was less academic and more creative, more artistically interpretative and less scientifically methodical, in a way that recalls his preference to the myth rather than to objective history. As he stated in a letter to Nietzsche in 1872:

“Well, the first thing to strike me, was that everyone among us who claim to the Muses’ favour, our whole artistic and poetic world in fact, jogs on without the faintest recourse to philology. At any rate that through sense of Speech, which should result from making philology the basis of all our classical studies, does not appear to have extended its functions to the treatment of our German mother-tongue. [...] However, though things look black on the field of belles lettres, one might say that Philology has nothing to do with that, as she has

“The wish-rod lay among them, of gold a little wand.
Whosoe’er its powers full might understand
The same might make him master o’er all the race of men.”
(Needler 1904, 166)

⁸⁹ Orthography from ms. C (Batts 1971, 466).

pledged her service rather to the scientific than the artistic Muses. [...]. – Philology gives us nothing but philologists, of use to no one but themselves.”⁹⁰

Der Ring des Nibelungen is, among Wagner’s works, the Opera that took the longest to complete. A first mention appears on the 1st of April 1848, when a 35-year-old Wagner met his colleague of Dresden Eduard Devrient:

„Um 5 Uhr holte mich Wagner ab, wir gingen durch den Großen Garten. Er erzählte mir einen neuen Opernplan aus der Siegfriedsage.”⁹¹

After multiple interruptions, the work would be completed with the score of the *Götterdämmerung* only on November 21st, 1872.

Voss (2022, 433) holds the view that the idea was new, as Wagner’s temper did not refrain from keeping the idea private for a long time. Furthermore, supposing that Wagner had thought of it in the previous years might be plausible, given his deep interest in old and medieval literature during the Dresden years, but it cannot be verified. Also holding on 1848 as the beginning of the *Ring* as a tetralogy is to some extent debatable: the “project based on the Saga of Siegfried” at the time was manifest in the *Nibelungen-Mythus. Als Entwurf zu einem Drama* and in *Siegfrieds Tod*. It is true that the former, despite some important differences, sketches the whole plot of the future *Ring* and the latter represents the kernel of the later *Götterdämmerung*. Nonetheless, the project at the time still was planned a single-Opera representation and not as four-part *Musikdrama – das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* would be published only in November 1849. The first mention of work in chapters comes from a letter to Uhlig in 1851. In the letter, he clearly illustrates how he gradually extends one Opera to three as he realised that neither a diptych would have been enough:

“But I knew that ‘Siegfried’s Death’ was for the moment impossible; I realized that I should first have to prepare the way for it with another drama, and so I took up a plan I had already been cherishing for some time, and began by making ‘*Young Siegfried*’ the subject of an opera poem; [...] The poem was soon sketched and completed. [...] I felt unable to send it to you as it stood without further ado; it was as if I had to explain to you much more – infinitely more – about it [...]. Even this ‘*Young Siegfried*’ is only a fragment and [...] it can only make its rightful and indubitable impression when it assumes its necessary place within the *completed*

⁹⁰ Letter from Richard Wagner to Friedrich Nietzsche, Bayreuth, June 12th, 1872. (R. Wagner [1896] 1966, 293–96)

⁹¹ (My translation) “At 5 p.m. Wagner picked me up, we walked through the Großer Garten. He told me about a new Opera project based on the Saga of Siegfried.”
Devrient, Eduard. *Aus seinen Tagebüchern, Berlin-Dresden 1836-1852*, ed. Rolf Kabel (Weimar 1964), 427. Quoted in (R. Wagner and Voss 2022, 433)

whole. [...]. The plan will now comprise three dramas: 1st, *The Valkyrie*. 2nd, *Young Siegfried*. 3rd *Siegfried's Death*. In order to present everything complete, these three dramas must additionally be preceded by a great prelude: *The Rape of the Rhinegold*.⁹²

Therefore, strictly speaking, the *Ring*-project as a tetralogy began in 1851, which still results in more than two decades of work (Wagner and Voss 2022). However, what was written before this date still contains the seeds of that would later become a tetralogy. In the five years between the mention of a *Siegfriedsoper* and the beginning of the music draft of *Das Rheingold* in 1853, Wagner's production is multifaceted and can be divided into three categories, all of which actually intersected in the final form of the *Ring*: a first category includes all the preparatory material for the tetralogy in itself – *Der Nibelungen-Mythus*, *Siegfrieds Tod*, *Die Wibelungen*, the four-parts *Ring* poem published in 1853; then, an exploration of other dramatic topics as *Friedrich I*, *Jesus von Nazareth*, and *Wieland der Schmied*; lastly, theoretical writing as the Zurich Essays (Whittall 2020, 89).

The making of the *Ring* proceeded in a five-step procedure that covered both music and lyrics: Wagner always started from the libretto, reaching the final form in verses after a prose draft and a prose text. The librettos, as explained in his letter to Liszt, were written in reversed order from 1848 to 1852. The completion of the music followed the narration: first a draft – compositional and orchestral – and then the final score (Wagner and Voss 2022; Zoppelli 2025). Wagner began the musical composition on November 1st, 1853, with the music of *Das Rheingold*. Six months later, in May 1854, the full score was ready and Wagner began immediately to work on *Die Walküre*, completed in two years in March 1856. As he was working in 1857 on the orchestral draft for the second act of *Siegfried*, the *Ring* was put aside, only to be taken back up in 1869, making it a 12-years long interruption. By the time he returned to this work, Wagner's experience and musical style were enriched by the completion of *Tristan und Isolde* (1857-59) and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (1867) (Berry and Vazsonyi 2020). According to Voss (2022, 440), the long interruption was due mainly to Wagner's financial struggle; he therefore decided to compose an easier work, *Tristan und Isolde*, in order to earn the needed money. However, judged an unplayable Opera, the success was far from what Wagner had hoped. *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* represents a second attempt, but still unsuccessful, as he needed more time than he expected, time that he had to spend conducting concerts in order to gain some money. The turning point manifested as a call from Ludwig II, king of Bavaria, great admirer of Wagner and ready to support him – also financially. With the king's support – especially financial – Wagner managed to perform the premiere of *Tristan und Isolde* (1865), the completion and premiere of *Die Meistersinger* (1868) and of the *Ring*. Ludwig's help

⁹² Letter to Franz Liszt. November 20th, 1851 (Wagner 1988, 236-8)

arrived just as Wagner was ready to give up to his work. In a letter to Franz Liszt on June 28th, 1857, he claims that:

“I shall not have any more trouble with Härtels, since I have finally decided to abandon my obstinate attempts to complete my Nibelungen. I have led my young Siegfried into the beautiful forest solitude; there I have left him beneath a linden tree and have said farewell to him with tears of heartfelt sorrow: – he is better there than anywhere else. – If I am to take up this work again, it must either be made easier for me, or else I myself must in the meantime make it possible to bestow this work on the world in the fullest sense of the word.”⁹³

The draft of the *Nibelungen-Mythus* represents in its first third the framework for *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*. There are, however, a few important differences: besides small modifications, as Mime being named Regin, the story revolves around the concept of race – giants, Gods, humans, Nibelungen – while later the single characters will be embodiments of their category – as the giants in the draft being reduced solely to Fasolt and Fafner in the Ring or the gods being mainly represented through Wotan. Moreover, Freia is not mentioned as payment for the Walhalla, nor are her golden apples, and Wotan hears the prophecy about the troubles caused by the Rings from the Norns, not Erda. The major events, however, are already planned. The main additions are the role of the *Rheintöchter*, the struggle over Freia, and Erda’s prophecy in *Das Rheingold*; Fricka’s intervention and influence on Wotan’s will in the *Walküre*; Wotan’s encounter with Mime in the dwarf’s cave and Wotan’s attempt to hinder Siegfried’s journey to Brünnhilde in *Siegfried*. Furthermore, in *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*, Alberich is finally developed as Wotan’s main adversary (Björnsson 2003).

Concerning the finale in the *Götterdämmerung*, in the original intentions *Siegfrieds Tod* did not include the destruction of the gods. The destruction and purgation caused by Siegfried’s death, under a certain light of Christian sacrifice, pushes Wotan to redeem himself and the other gods of their sins, so that Wotan may keep ruling free from Alberich’s curse, but the revolutionary experiences convince Wagner that the old order cannot be reformed – let alone preserved in any aspect!; the only option left is to destroy it (Grey 2020, 89).

⁹³ (R. Wagner 1988a, 370)

Table 1 Chronology of the Ring development. (Björnsson 2003, 127).

<i>Name</i>	<i>Avg. Length</i>	<i>Draft</i>	<i>Prose Text</i>	<i>Verse Text</i>	<i>Draft of Music</i>	<i>Final Music</i>
Das Rheingold	2' 30''	Nov 1851	March 1852	Sept.-Nov. 1852	Nov. 1853- Jan. 1854	Feb.-May 1854
Die Walküre	3' 50''	Nov 1851	May 1852	June 1852	June-Dec. 1854	Jan. 1855- Mar. 1856
Siegfried	4' 00''	May 1851	May 1851	June 1851	Sept. 1856- Aug. 1869	Oct. 1856- Feb. 1871
Götterdämmerung	4' 30''	Oct. 1848	Nov. 1848	Nov. 1848- Dec. 1852	Oct. 1869- Apr. 1872	May 1873- Nov. 1874

5.3A matter of continuity: form and structure of the *Ring*.

5.3.1 The poetic-music period and the web of motifs.

Wagner's intentions were complex and involved coordination among different layers: the Zurich Essays present the – initial – ideology, an artistic and philosophical program born from aesthetic and political considerations. The theoretical core was ready and had already been presented in the above-mentioned works, it was only a matter of an aesthetic manifestation. The first phase was to lyrically delineate the myth, namely writing the text.

When it came to language, Wagner proved himself a strong critic. Language, he observed in *Oper und Drama*, had been fixed into sterile conventions, which consequently drained it of its poetry and limited it to the production of *Literatur*, a term used negatively, but surely not *Art*, not in the circumstances under which it was performed (R. Wagner and Voss 2022).

“These people [the aestheticians, orig. ed. “State-aestheticians”], however, see in Drama nothing but *a branch of literature*, a species of poesy such as the romance or didactic poem.”⁹⁴

Language had to be treated differently if one wanted to perform art. To produce art, text and music must unify, not as a primacy of one above the other, but rather as a perfect symbiotic harmony. About their unity, he stated:

“[...] the living Verse, un-belonging to literature, we have in nowise to understand as without its rhythmic-musical Melody.”⁹⁵

The traditional means of expression, however, were of no use; Wagner had to find a way, if he wanted to complete a *Musikdrama*. In a constant break with tradition, he undertook the task of writing his own lyrics; by doing so, he made sure music score and lyrics were harmonised, proceeding in the same direction and grasping coherently to the same concept (Wagner and Voss 2022; Harper-Scott 2020). If music without poetry was an “effect without cause”, poetry without music was literature, a dead organism:

“Science has laid bare to us the organism of speech; but what she shewed us was a *defunct* organism, which only the Poet's utmost Want can bring to life again: and that by healing up

⁹⁴ (R. Wagner 1900, 121).

⁹⁵ (R. Wagner 1900, 260).

the wounds with which the anatomic scalpel has gashed the body of Speech, and by breathing into it the breath that may ensoul it into living motion. But this breath is – Music – “⁹⁶

A new way of writing that reflects a new way to conceive art; therefore, not a simple libretto submitted to the orchestra and commissioned to other hands, but rather a *Dichtung*, a poem, with its own right to exist and circulate (Wagner and Voss 2022). It is specifically the circulation of the text without music that demonstrates its self-existence. Were the *Dichtung* submitted to music, it would be impossible for it to be delivered. On one side, it is true that Wagner did focus every dimension of his program on the concept of unity, seen as the necessary mean to transmit an entire concept minimising the risk of misinterpretation; on the other side, in 1853, when the *Dichtungen* were completed but the score consisted in a few sketch lines for his *Siegfrieds Tod*, Wagner himself publicly read his poem at the Hotel Baur au Lac in Zurich (Harper-Scott 2020). Moreover, in February of the same year, Wagner had the *Ring* printed in fifty copies to distribute to his friends, when still the music composition counted a few sketches for *Siegfrieds Tod*, dating back to August 1850. Therefore, it can be argued that *Dichtungen* exist both as a poem and as lyrics for the score (R. Wagner and Voss 2022, 465).

The stylistic means he employed for his text came from the recognition that the traditional means were unsuitable for the German language. Regarding the use of rhymed verses – however much Wagner appreciated the effect – their *abab* schemes implied a musical correspondence, without nonetheless satisfying the linguistic form.

Yet he did show a certain creative ability in *Der fliegende Holländer* (1841), *Tannhäuser* (1843-5), and *Lohengrin* (1846-8). Here he employed blank verses as well as rhymed iambs, according to whether the passage was a recitative or an aria. The change between arsis and thesis (*Hebung* and *Senkung*), however, introduces a prosodic *aut aut* between verse metre and language metre. Wagner was resolute to prioritise language, as he believed the specific characteristics of the German language required a system, a form that suited it. Italian librettos were different, as their language allowed a certain prosodic freedom, which made it tolerable to privilege the verse metre. German stress, on the other side, has a wider prosodic importance and is less likely to be successfully submitted to the verse metre (Wagner and Voss 2022)

The problem was maintaining the effect produced by a rhyme, without the form of the rhyme. The solution Wagner found lay in the Germanic *Stabreim*, the alliterative verse, whose stress patterns were meant to regulate and lead the music stress patterns. Alliteration can not only pair verses but could freely appear inside the verse: the alliterating words and syllables can be anywhere, at any

⁹⁶ (R. Wagner 1900, 265).

distance, and together they build the main emphasis. It has to be said that Wagner's use of alliteration was at times so dense that the effect sounded verbose, if not forced (Zoppelli 2025; Harper-Scott 2020; Wagner and Voss 2022):

SIEGFRIED:

Gastlich ruht' ich bei Guten,
Gaben gönnten mir viele.⁹⁷

ALBERICH:

Zögert ihr noch
Zaudert wohl gar?
Zittre und zage,
 gezähmtes Heer:
 rasch gehorcht
 des Ringes Herrn!⁹⁸

The choice did not fall on the *Stabreim* as an answer to a mere matter of aesthetic; the *Stabreim* was considered to be immediately linked with the ancient Germanic poetry, the primordial myth, drawing from the ancient, pure essence of the *Volksggeist*. By reaching his primordial core, the peak of sacrality, art was believed to dissolve the alienation of contemporary society and to create a new human space projected in the future (Harper-Scott 2020; Zoppelli 2025).

Once again, Wagner adapted the *Stabreim* to his needs: the Early Germanic *Stabreim* involved a regular number of strong accents in each line of poetry, a pattern often modified in the *Ring*. The *Dichtungen* are based on two types of verses: *Langzeile* and *Kurzzeile*. The former, widely used, contains 3 to 4 arses; the latter – with few exceptions – can be even 2 syllables long and usually contains 2 arses. Their alternation is noticeably irregular, although there seems to prevail an occurrence of two *Kurzzeile* and one *Langzeile*. Also, there is a great variability in numbers of thesis and arsis, both between verses and inside the same verse (Wagner and Voss 2022).

Metre and rhythm change often, with the intention to escape the narrowness of the traditional libretto, which Wagner felt as a form too tight for his lyrics (Wagner and Voss 2022).

⁹⁷ *Siegfried*, act I, vv. 458-9.

⁹⁸ *Das Rheingold*, scene 3, vv. 1114-21. In this example, the alliteration is presented through a chiasmus.

SIEGFRIED:

“Die dort auf dem Rhein mir sangen
erschlagen würd’ ich noch heut’.”⁹⁹

Music, as mentioned, had to follow the myth, interact with the *Dichtung*, always completing the meaning behind the words. The already mentioned episode of Mime’s lie is a perfect example of presenting reality under two perspectives – Mime’s deception and Siegfried’s perception; another ability is to complete with comments the dialogues:

SIEGMUND:

Doch ward ich vom Vater versprengt;
seine Spur verlor ich,
je länger ich forschte;
eines Wolfes Fell
nur traf ich im Forst:
leer lag das vor mir,
den Vater fand ich nicht. –¹⁰⁰

As he is telling his story to Hunding and Sieglinde, Siegmund reveals that he had lost his father, Wälse/Wolfe, namely Wotan. His real identity, however, is still unknown: the audience was left at the end of the *Rheingold* with Wotan’s great idea to restore harmony in a world threatened by the Ring, but it has not been revealed that the great idea is giving life to a human lineage – Siegmund and Sieglinde – who will undertake the task on his behalf. If the lyrics has not revealed yet all the details, an anticipation is given by the music itself: as Siegmund sings *den Vater fand ich nicht*, the orchestra plays what will be later called the *Walhall-motif*, a musical figure that links *Vater* to *Wotan* (Newman 2013).

The form emerges from the exigencies of the content. The poetic structure should dictate the structure of the music and so create the “poetic-music period”, namely the dramatic needs call for a certain form, which establishes a connection with the traditions of the chosen sources (Harper-Scott 2020). The most evident feature in musical break with the tradition is the formal absence of numbers dividing the work: the work is surely divided in acts, a division that Wagner could not avoid, but their boundaries are blurred and answers to dramaturgical needs, not to a musical one; each act is a concept that reaches its dramaturgical end when its essence has been fully presented on the stage. The

⁹⁹ *Götterdämmerung*, act III, vv 1660-1.

¹⁰⁰ *Die Walküre*, act I, vv. 174-80.

subdivision into scenes, moreover, is indicated solely in the score, but not in the *Dichtungen* (Zoppelli 2025; Wagner and Voss 2022).

Had Wagner used the *Stabreim* in a more canonical way, it would have resembled the phrase-structure of Classical style in music. A musical period is formed by an antecedent and a consequent: the former, ending in an imperfect cadence, delivers an incomplete version of a basic musical idea, which is completed by a following consequent, ending in a perfect cadence and thus giving the complete version of the same idea (Harper-Scott 2020).

As a reflection of his irregularity in poetic rhythms, Wagner's production is irregular in this musical-phrase construction. Waltraute's narration in *Götterdämmerung*¹⁰¹ presents a rhythm oscillating between two and four stresses and each musical line varies between half a bar and two bars – what Dahlhaus called *musical prose*¹⁰². Harper-Scott argues that an aesthetic of symmetry and balance, as in Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*, would be incongruent, for instance, in Waltraute's mouth, who reflects, as the other characters do, the fragmented psychological modernity (Harper-Scott 2020).

Wagner, while planning what was later called the “endless melody”, tried to abolish cadences at the end of phrases when they were meant as full stops. By doing so, his sentences point towards a certain direction, but its conclusion – the cadence – is denied. Instead, a motif finale can be attached to another one's beginning, but there is not a closure, coherently with his intention to erase opera fragmentation and reach total unity. The yearned conclusion becomes the incipit of the following phrase, making the audience desire for a dramatic continuation (Harper-Scott 2020).

The extension of the structure is far superior to the classic duration, which lasts roughly eight bars; in fact, Wagner's poetic-musical period could last hundreds of bars. His aim was to offer enough cadences to punctuate the scene, without stopping it or breaking it into smaller units. The totality is preserved, as exemplified in Mime's *Zwangvolle Plage* (S I.1, 1-44): the first statement of the melody expresses a particular mood (here Mime's frustration); the middle section describes the context (Mime's concern about the dragon); the last one is a return of the opening melodic idea, but it does not lead to a closure and the flow is not arrested. Instead, it accompanies the audience into period 2, namely Siegfried's prank with the bear. The continuity of the poetic-musical period allows the audience to grasp each individual dramatic moment (Harper-Scott 2020). Thanks to the use of these forms, even time is handled differently: opposed to the traditional Opera, here time flows following the essence represented in the scene; action is not stopped to perform an aria or a chorus, only to move forward through a recitative – there are actually a few arias, as Siegmund's spring song¹⁰³ or

¹⁰¹ *Götterdämmerung*, act I, vv. 625-45.

¹⁰² Dahlhaus, C., Whittall, M. (trans.). *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas*, (Cambridge University Press 1977), 104-107. Quoted in (Harper-Scott 2020, 104).

¹⁰³ *Die Walküre*, act I, vv. 421-61.

Wotan's farewell to Brünnhilde¹⁰⁴, but they are not meant to be "closed numbers": although they slow the *Tempo* down, they do not arrest it and rather exploit the temporal manipulation to emphasise key moments of the action (Zoppelli 2025).

A notorious aspect of Wagner's music is the extended and dense use of so-called *Leitmotive*, music units delivering thematic material. Their function is structural as well as referential, since each motif is associated with certain dramatic elements and it can summon them up in a later moment. The technique was not unknown at the time, but its use is not comparable to Wagner's use, alone or attached one to the other. *Leitmotiv*, anyway, was not a word invented by Wagner, who barely used the word *Motiv* and preferred to define his music concepts as *Hauptmotive*, main motifs, or better *Grundthemen*, main themes, as he described them in a later essay from 1879, *Über die Anwendung der Musik auf das Drama* (R. Wagner and Voss 2022):

"Nevertheless, to be an artwork again qua music, the new form of dramatic music must have the unity of the symphonic movement; and this it attains by spreading itself over the whole drama, in the most intimate cohesion therewith, not merely over single smaller, arbitrarily selected parts. So that this Unity consists in a tissue of root-themes [*Grundthemen*] pervading all the drama, themes which contrast, complete, re-shape, divorce and intertwine with one another as in the symphonic movement."¹⁰⁵

Their substantial uniqueness makes them recognisable and it enables them to fully express their content (Wagner and Voss 2022). A substantial bulk of scholarly work has been made since the *Ring*, where scholars attempted to determine and categorise each *Leitmotiv*, publishing long guides from which Wagner took a distance – ironically, the Bayreuth circle would later adore the dismemberment of Wagner's music into units, erasing the totality Wagner yearned so much (Zoppelli 2025).

The labelling of each *Leitmotiv* underestimates its conceptual extension¹⁰⁶: the above-mentioned *Walhalla-Motif*, for instance, appears firstly in the transition from scene 1 to scene 2 in *Das Rheingold*, namely when the action moves from the earthly realm to the divine one. The orchestra plays the motif as Wotan is murmuring in his sleep (Zoppelli 2025):

WOTAN:

Der Wonne seeligen Saal,

bewachen mir Tür und Tor:

¹⁰⁴ *Die Walküre*, act III, vv. 2223-72

¹⁰⁵ (R. Wagner 1897, 183)

¹⁰⁶ Another reason to be careful with such analytical list is the divergence from Wagner's considerations of these musical themes: what is now known as the *Ring-motif* was actually noted in Wagner's sketches as *Welterbe*, with a stress on the effect of the object, rather than the object itself (Zoppelli 2025, 88).

Mannes Ehre,
 ewige Macht,
 ragen zu endlosem Ruhm!¹⁰⁷

Stating that the referent is the object of the speech – namely Walhalla, the *blessed hall of delight* (v. 321) – may be plausible in this context, but it would not explain the association between this so-called *Walhalla-motif*¹⁰⁸ and Siegmund’s father in act I of the *Valkyrie*. As Siegmund tells how he lost his father Wälse on the notes of the *Walhalla-motif*, the association is not locative (Walhalla) but rather individual (Wotan). It would be reductive to make a binary association “one *Leitmotiv*, one concept”, as their role is wider: they are interlaced with lyrics and scenic actions, at the beginning reinforcing what expressed on the scene, in a phase where associations are still being built; later, they are used to integrate the scene, clarifying or emphasising actions and recalling past events. Such scenic action constitutes a complex entity comprising staging, characters, and dramatic crux; such interplay of elements gives rise to an important polysemantic potential, which allows music to explain the action beyond its stage representation (Zoppelli 2025; Wagner and Voss 2022).

The *Vertrags-motif*¹⁰⁹, for instance, is initially associated with Wotan’s spear, a symbol of his power as God of Oaths; based on the situation, it establishes a connection now with the spear, now with what the spear represents (oaths, deeds), now with its owner (Wotan), all with a minimal variation that better adapt the music to the situation, as exemplified in three different moments. Wotan is the referent of the resemblance that Hunding notices between Siegmund and Sieglinde¹¹⁰; when Brünnhilde accepts her punishment, the motif plays on the *Stabreim* referring to the spear¹¹¹; lastly, as Siegfried and Gunther seal a blood-oath, the music emphasises the concept of oath¹¹² (Zoppelli 2025).

The analytical work on *Leitmotive* does not consider the entirety of the *Grundthemen*. The experience obtained through unity of text, music, and pantomime – scenic action, facial expressions – is not to be contained in a formal definition. The dynamics of music as means of expression can be summarised in Adorno’s words, as he stated:

“Objects do not go in their concepts without leaving a remainder.”¹¹³

namely when a musical detail (object) fits into a formal or analytical account (concepts), something is left and cannot be fully analysed (remainder). The leftist school of thought sees in the

¹⁰⁷ *Das Rheingold*, scene 3, vv. 321-5.

¹⁰⁸ The labels of the motifs are from (Wagner [1913] 2013).

¹⁰⁹ Zoppelli refers to it as the *Speer-motif*.

¹¹⁰ *Die Walküre*, act I, vv. 86-88

¹¹¹ *Die Walküre*, act III, vv. 2205-12

¹¹² *Götterdämmerung*, act I, vv. 493-510.

¹¹³ Adorno, T. W., *Negative Dialectics* (Routledge 1973). Quoted in (Harper-Scott 2020, 102).

remainder a truth-content pointing to a utopian, emancipatory possibility; the more conservative school conceives the remainder as part of the narrative in music (Harper-Scott 2020).

Besides the debate about the right interpretation of the remainder, it is clear that the definition of *leading motif* was not enough. Regarding the editions annotating his *Dichtungen* with *Leitmotive*, in 1881 Cosima Wagner recorded in her diary:

“Monday, August 1. [...] Unfortunately, in this edition [a piano arrangement of *Götterdämmerung*] there are a lot of marking such as ‘wanderlust motive,’ ‘disaster motive,’ etc. R. [Richard Wagner] says ‘And perhaps people will think all this nonsense is done at my request!’”¹¹⁴

What really mattered was the unity of arts as means of artistic expression of the *Volksgeist*, a concept that would influence even the structure of the drama itself.

5.3.2 The dramatic structure.

The *Ring des Nibelungen* comprises four *Musikdramen*: one prologue (*Vorabend*, namely *das Rheingold*) and three days, which manifests analogy with the practice of ancient Greek theatres to present a trilogy followed by a Satyr play. Therefore, it would be more precise to define it as a trilogy with a prologue, but it is nowadays common to refer to it as a tetralogy (Zoppelli 2025).

Each part of the *Ring* draws on a literary model: the *Rheingold*, the shortest and the only one-act play, describes a myth, the golden age; *Die Walküre*, a tragedy according to the antiquity model, where Wotan finds himself more and more trapped in his own web intrigues with no way out; *Siegfried*, modelled on the fable of a young hero who has to face challenges and difficulties; lastly, *Götterdämmerung*, the romantic Opera, which may resemble the tragedy, but with a clearer definition of good and evil characters and with the hero dying by the hands of the antagonist – something that Aristotle recommended not to represent (Zoppelli 2025).

The structure as well is a rejection of the Classical sense of Aristotelian units of time, place, and action. Time is already loosened, as it extends, according to the title, for one pre-eve and three days. More precisely, *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre* are the only parts that respect a temporal unit of one day – night to evening for the former, evening to night for the latter. *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*, on the other side, stretch the action respectively for roughly two days and even three days. Moreover, time seems to flow on a continuity level – still with an irregular *Tempo* – only when it comes to *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*: between *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre* the time

¹¹⁴ (C. Wagner 1980, 697). Brackets mine.

frame is wide enough to let Wotan generate his human lineage and for Siegmund to reach adulthood; in the same way, *Die Walküre* ends with a pregnant Sieglinde looking for shelter in the forest, while in *Siegfried* the hero, her son, is already in his golden years (Wagner and Voss 2022).

If the unit of time is not homogenous, the action is even more fragmented – or better: the whole plot is a web of action and subplots, where Alberich's and the Gods' storylines proceed autonomously. They do cross each other and influence each other's destiny, but they still have their own existence, which potentially lasts even after the Twilight of the Gods – there is no hint about Alberich's death; he manifests, invisible, at last in *Siegfried* (act III) as an evil laugh once Mime is slaughtered by Siegfried. *Die Walküre* introduces then another plot and another action, which represents the direct consequences of the above-mentioned (Wagner and Voss 2022).

Consequence of this multifaced plot is a multitude of places where the action takes place: mostly in uncontaminated nature – the Rhine, the forest, the Valkyries' rock – where, even if there are some artificial elements as the Gods' Walhalla or Mime's forge, the wild nature is a dominant feature, free from the destroying tendency of human will. Not solely naturalistic environment, however, but the element as well that incorporate such essence, as the water from the Rhine and the fire around Brünnhilde's rock. Even Hunding's house cannot be described as a complete manifestation of human civilisation: the ash tree in the middle of the room echoes a feral, undomesticated nature where human life adapted to live in harmony. The first all-human milieu on stage is the court of the *Gibichungen*, where, besides the main characters, the rest is indicated as *Männer und Frauen*, secondary characters that lose their individual identity and exist just as a collective, anonymous entity (Wagner and Voss 2022).

An important feature in the *Ring* action is the storytelling, not only of events that happened beyond the represented scene – we *learn* that Siegmund lost his family – but also of already staged actions. The storytelling helps the audience recalling specific dramatic cruxes, but, thanks to the web of *Grundthemen*, it presents the same events as well as they happened and as they were perceived by the speaker. As the audience listens to Loge's complaint¹¹⁵, it is clear that what happened and what is told are two different stories: Loge knew what he was doing as he advised Wotan about agreement with the giants, limiting his responsibility with the promise *to think* of a solution:

LOGE:

Mit höchster Sorge
Drauf zu sinnem,
wie es zu lösen,

¹¹⁵ *Rheingold*, scene 2, vv. 648-703.

das hab' ich gelobt.

Doch, dass ich fände,

was nie sich fügt,

was nie gelingt, –

wie liess sich das wohl geloben?¹¹⁶

Now, pressed by the other angry Gods, he must honour his promise. Once again, the storytelling helps him find a substitute for Freia and it works: the tale of Alberich and his gold convinces the giants – especially Fafner. As a result, the form of the story changes according on the speaker's perspective:

LOGE:

Nur einen sah ich,

der sagte der Liebe ab:

um rotes Gold

entriet er des Weibes Gunst.¹¹⁷

[...]

FAFNER:

Du da, Loge!

Sag' ohne Lug:

was Großes gilt denn das Gold,

dass es dem Niblung genügt?¹¹⁸

According to Zoppelli, the tetralogy is presented in two phases representing the universal-historical development, both including two dramas. The first part (*Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*) focuses on Wotan, his ambitions and mistakes, and his futile attempt to restore harmony; the second part (*Siegfried*, *Götterdämmerung*) focuses on Siegfried's life, with Brünnhilde being a conjunction.

There is a dramatic difference between the two heroes: Wotan is the God of oaths, a political figure, whose power is based on a web of deals and pacts. By dint of it, he ends up being locked in the consequences of his own actions, so much that he laments:

¹¹⁶ *Rheingold*, scene 2, vv. 621-28.

¹¹⁷ *Rheingold*, scene 2, vv. 677-680.

¹¹⁸ *Rheingold*, scene 2, vv. 715-718

WOTAN:

(läßt den Arm machtlos sinken und den Kopf in Nacken fallen.

In eigner Fessel

Fing ich mich:–

Ich unfreister aller!¹¹⁹

So much that he must sacrifice what he loves the most: his human son, Siegmund, and his divine daughter Brünnhilde.

Siegfried, on the other side, is the closest hero to the natural state, designed to redeem the world's corruption – but he will eventually fall into Hagen's and Gunther's trap, paying the price of an unwilling betrayal with his own life.

Zoppelli (2025, 69–70) argues that the two phases proceed with the same pattern:

1. Both *Rheingold* and *Siegfried* open on an image of an unspoiled nature – almost pristine: The Rhine and the forest.
2. The original innocence is ruined by ruthless power struggles (scenes 2-4 in *Rheingold*, acts I-II in *Siegfried*).
3. The tension is interrupted by an ecstatic intermezzo, a utopia of love between Sieglinde and Siegmund and between Brünnhilde and Siegfried.
4. Their utopia, nonetheless, is crushed under the weight of reality with a tragic outcome, namely the death of Siegmund and Siegfried.
5. In the last phase, Brünnhilde represents a last glance of hope: her refusal to obey Wotan's order saves the future Siegfried (*Die Walküre*, act III). As she appears in the last scene of *Götterdämmerung*, her suicide on the pyre will purify the Ring, destroy the old world, and establish a new balance by giving the gold back to the Rheintöchter. These two moments are joint in the parallelism of her own death: she sacrifices first her divine nature, then her human life.

The represented myth allows Wagner to express his criticism towards a society built on differences and injustice, which destroys both humanity and nature. It is true that the *Ring* originates from the thousand-pages Zurich Essays, but the debate about the ultimate message is still active: on one side, the critics have seen a warning against the power of money and the destruction of social relationships; on the other, it has been described as an existential, timeless consideration about lust for power as a feature of human nature. The obstacle in the interpretation lies also in the *re-*

¹¹⁹ *Die Walküre*, act II, vv. 879-81

interpretation that the work underwent as Wagner passed from a Proudhonian view to a Schopenhauerian perspective. On this behalf, in a letter to Röckel in 1856, he confessed:

“I believed I could express this idea even more clearly by presenting the whole of the Nibelung myth, and by showing how a whole world of injustice arises from the first injustice, a world which is destroyed in order to teach us to recognize injustice, root it out and establish a just world in its place. Well, I scarcely noticed how [...] instead of a single phase in the world’s evolution, what I had glimpsed was the essence of the world itself in all its conceivable phases, and that I had thereby recognized its nothingness, with the result, of course [...], what emerged was something totally different from what I had originally intended.”¹²⁰

Nonetheless, the *Ring* did not reject the initial optimistic ending, which appears somehow open, but the Bayreuth Idealists opted for the existentialist interpretation. Such a version became prominent already during the late 19th century until the late 20th, when Wagner’s social criticism and revolutionary activity was rediscovered and put on stage (Zoppelli).

5.4 *Der Ring des Nibelungen: Ein Bühnenfestspiel in drei Tagen und ein Vorabend.*

5.4.1 *Das Rheingold: prelude to a myth.*

As any myth, *Das Rheingold* answers to two primordial needs of humanity: on one side understanding the origins of the present, namely the cultural root that distinguished the first development of the *Geist*, the us-identity; on the other side, explaining flaws and contradictions of the cosmic order, explaining why the world is far from being perfect (Zoppelli 2025). Exactly like cultural identity, the myth has a temporal tension, which links the present identity to its past projection; in other words, a myth is the reconstruction of the past identity based only on those cultural aspects which have been preserved.

Das Rheingold narrates the mythicised origin of a prosperous society, perfectly regulated by the laws of nature; as human law, moved by greed, entered the scene, society shattered to into chaos. In four scenes, the *Vorabend* answers both questions, in music and words: the prolonged E flat, for a total of 136 bars, represents the birth of the world, from which the first motifs originate and, eventually, the Rheintöchter appear. Portrayed as innocent teenagers, playfully swimming in an idyllic environment, their presence always matches a *Grundthema* of natural connotation as *Welle*,

¹²⁰ (Wagner 1988b, 357–58).

Natur, Rheintöchter. The degradation of the natural state is announced by the gloomy motifs of the *Nibelungen, Entsagung, Nibelungenhass, Angst* (Grey 2020; Zoppelli 2025). The theft of the gold is a metaphor of the renounce to Love which Wagner pointed as the guarantor of cosmic unity, a fracture manifested in two moments in Nibelheim (scene 3). Such world is the metaphor of industrial, artless world born from greed: for eight bars, the only audible sound is the empty and mechanic clinging of hammers on 18 anvils, a gradual rupture in the concept of endless melody. The second and last break follows soon after, as the Nibelungen will flee in fear of their master: not a melodic voice as in the Valkyries, but a desperate scream of a terror that erase aesthetic (R. Wagner and Voss 2022; Zoppelli 2025).

Another striking feature of *Das Rheingold* in the use of recitative and the almost over-abundant presence of *Leitmotive*. The former seems to break down the totality of the work of art into the traditional division of numbers and recitative, denying the nature of the *Rheingold* – and therefore of the Ring – as a *Musikdrama* as well as much theorised in the Zurich Essays (Zoppelli 2025). Yet, this exception reflects the nature of *Das Rheingold* as a prologue, showing that Wagner's ability to redefine forms according to his needs. The aim of the *Vorabend* is not to explain the action, which will compete to the *drei Tage*; as a myth, it illustrates the origins of the environmental conditions that surround the action. Therefore, the recitative is a natural answer to the explanatory need of the myth, reflected in the score: the intensive, almost insisting, use of motifs, is a sign that the web of *Grundthemen* is still in progress. The audience is new to both the *Musikdrama* and the myth – at least as Wagner intended it; thus, it needs to be educated to correctly associate the various inputs one another and, following this intricate conceptual web, reach the core of the myth (Zoppelli 2025).

At such core lies a struggle for power over the world, namely *Das Rheingold*, which does not represent wealth, but rather the ability to produce it. Its theft, therefore, is the violation of the laws of nature. In its fluvial context, guarded by the *Rheintöchter*, the gold has aesthetic meaning of beauty and splendour; Alberich, on the other side, decides for a utilitarian approach: to him, the gold is a source of wealth and power against a world that scarred and humiliated him (Arblaster 2020). The effect of such violation already manifests in the world as the scene gets darker before shifting in the divine world.

As the scene shifts higher to the divine realm, we assist at the first parallelism between Wotan and Alberich. To obtain his Walhalla, Wotan promised Freia, his sister-in-law, to the giants. As Alberich rejected love to obtain the gold, Wotan seems to reject personal affection to obtain the Walhalla, both related to world domination, and once he understands the power of the ring, namely to create wealth, he does not hesitate to resort to violence to get it from Alberich, showing no remorse in kidnapping and robbing the dwarf. Such violence, involving the god of oaths, shakes both the

character and his real referent of the Gods, namely the aristocrats, the old dominant class now threatened in status, power, and wealth by Alberich and the Nibelungen, namely the arising capitalist bourgeoisie (Arblaster 2020).

The darkness dominating Nibelheim, the underground world of the Nibelungen, reflects the factory-dominated world, a world that Wagner despised. The metaphor between Nibelheim and the industrialised city would later come from the composer himself: Cosima recorded, during a trip they made in London in 1877, a comment her husband made as they were having a trip on the Thames (Arblaster 2020):

“Friday, May 25 [...] Afterwards rendezvous with R. at Charing Cross and fish dinner in Greenwich. Return home by steamer, very successful, mild, gray weather, tremendous impression, R. says, ‘This is Alberich’s dream come true – Nibelheim, world dominion, activity, work, everywhere the oppressive feeling of steam and fog.’”¹²¹

This bitter consideration of modern world originated in a warning during his revolutionary years. Already in 1849, in his *Die Kunst und Die Revolution*:

“But if he [the worker] bargains away the product of his toil, all that remains to him is its mere money-worth; and thus his energy can never rise above the character of the busy strokes of a machine; in his eyes it is but weariness, and bitter, sorrowful toil. The latter is the lot of the Slave of Industry; and our modern factories afford us the sad picture of the deepest degradation of man,—constant labour, killing both body and soul, without joy or love, often almost without aim.”¹²²

The workers’ condition finds manifestation in Mime’s lament to Loge and Wotan, as he recalls the past joy of work, when satisfaction made the Nibelungen insensitive to fatigue, now replaced by a dictatorial regime of work abuse, oriented to their master’s solely favour (Arblaster 2020). Musically, the lament is dominated in the first part by the motif associated with the Nibelungen, while the description of Alberich’s tyranny is enhanced by the so called *Wehe-motif*.

MIME:

Sorglose Schmiede,
schufen wir sonst wohl

¹²¹ (C. Wagner 1978, 965).

¹²² (R. Wagner 1895, 48–49).

Schmuck unsren Weibern,
 wonnig Geschmeid,
 niedlichen Niblungentand:
 wir lachten lustig der Müh‘.
 Nun zwingt uns der Schlimme
 In Klüfte zu schlüpfen,
 für ihn allein
 uns immer zu mühn.¹²³

A dynamics that is destined to spread, like a disease, to the whole cosmos until its destruction: greed, the root of all evil, already manifested in Alberich’s plan to replace the gods; the latter, on their behalf, showed immediate interest for the ring and its powers or its material, as respectively in Wotan and Fricka; it is evident that neither the gods are immune from the ring’s power. In Wagner’s own words:

„But it is not the fact that Alberich was repulsed by the Rhine-daughters which is the definitive source of all evil – for it was entirely natural for them to repulse him; no, Alberich and his ring could not have armed the gods unless the latter had already been susceptible to evil.”¹²⁴

Moreover, if Alberich’s curse was not enough, Erda, primordial goddess of the Earth, prophesies the *Götterdämmerung*:

ALBERICH:
 Tod dem – der ihn trägt!
 Kein Froher soll
 seiner sich freun;
 keinem Glücklichen lache
 sein lichter Glanz;
 wer ihn besitzt,
 den sehre Sorge,

¹²³ *Das Rheingold*, scene 3, vv. 1014-23.

¹²⁴ Letter of January 25th/26th 1854 to Röckel (R. Wagner 1988b, 307).

und wer ihn nicht hat,
nache der Neid!¹²⁵

ERDA:

Alles was ist, endet.

Ein dürster Tag

Dämmert dein Göttern:

Dir rat' ich, meide den Ring!¹²⁶

It must be said that Wagner's philological approach is strongly arbitrary and debatable. The substance of his *Musikdrama* is changed on several occasions and several levels to serve Wagner's idea of German myth, something that would help the revolutionary cause as well: structure, actions, and characters, however, do not reflect the ancient sources but rather relate to them by imitating their forms.

Structurally and functionally, on one side *Das Rheingold* is closer to the Greek conception of mythical origin: the portrayed harmony and unity with nature resembles the traditional pastoral genre dear to the romantic intellectuals such as Herder (Zoppelli 2025); on the other side, it recalls the *Völuspá*, from the Eddic poems, but here the gold is brought to the Gods by three giantesses:

‘They played at tables in the meadow, were merry,
there was for them no whit of a want of gold;
until three maidens of giants came,
immensely mighty, from Jötunheimar.’¹²⁷

The introduction of gold seems to create a new, unknown lust that leads to the creation of dwarves, high-skilled smiths (Pettit 2023, 58: n. 35)

‘Then all the great powers, the most holy gods,
went to their doom-seats and deliberated about it:
who should devise the lord of dwarves

¹²⁵ *Das Rheingold*, scene 4, vv. 1486-94.

¹²⁶ *Das Rheingold*, scene 4, vv. 1683-6.

¹²⁷ (Pettit 2023, 39:8)

from Brimir's blood and from blue limbs'¹²⁸

Nonetheless, the gold mentioned in the *Völuspá* is not the same gold of the Volsungar/Nibelungen tradition: in the German sources it is described merely as Sîvrit's source of vast wealth, obtained through the slay of Nibelung and Schilbung and the submission of their servant Alberich:

[C 97]

Dar zv die richen kunige die sluger beide tot.
er chom von Albriche sit in groze not.
der wande sine herren rechen da zehant,
vnz er die grozen sterche sit an Sifride vant.¹²⁹

In the Norse sources, Loki forces Andvari to give up his gold, which the god intends to use as a reparation for killing Hreidmar's son, Qtr. After stealing the gold, Loki's role is fulfilled and will not appear anymore. This episode, which represents the origin of the kenning *Otrgjöld*¹³⁰ (otter's ransom), is later adapted in the third scene, when Loge deceives Alberich and forces him to give up the gold and the ring, which Alberich curses. More than just that, Loge acts as a detached motor by simply influencing the scene with his advice to the other characters: he convinces Wotan to accept the deal with the giants, suggests Alberich's hoard as a substitute for Freia, and helps stealing it. On this perspective, Loge shares the feature of the trickster with Loki, but merges Loge, the personification of fire, as well. After scene 4, Loge will not appear on scene anymore, but the consequences of his actions will echo through the whole *Ring*, along with his motif, until the very end.

Concerning the curse in the sources, there is no agreement whether the ring was already cursed or if it is Andvari's work, but the motif of the renounce to Love as requirement to obtain the gold and as primary cause of corruption is completely absent from the Nordic sources (Björnsson 2003):

Völsunga Saga: „That evening they [Odin, Loki, Hœnir] came to Hreidmar's house and showed him what they had caught. [...] by way of compensation and ransom we stipulated that they should fill the skin with gold, and cover it up on the outside with red gold. [...] [Loki] went to Ran, got her net, and then went to the Andvari Falls, cast the net in front of the pike, and it ran into the net. [...] Loki saw the gold that was Andvari's. And when he proffered

¹²⁸ (Pettit 2023, 41:9)

¹²⁹ (Batts 1971, 30:97)

¹³⁰ <https://skaldic.org/m.php?p=verse&i=3968&x=0&v=i>

the gold, he kept back one ring, but Loki took it from him. The dwarf went into the rock and said that to possess the ring, or any of the gold, meant death.”¹³¹

Reginsmál: The same evening they sought lodging at Hreiðmarr’s and showed their kill. Then we seized them and imposed on them as ransom the requirement that the otter-skin be filled with gold, and also to cover the outside with red gold. Then they sent Loki to procure the gold. He came to Rán and got her net and went then to Andvaraforss and cast the net before the pike, and it leapt into the net. [...] Loki saw all the gold, that which Andvari owned. And when he had brought forth the gold, then he kept back one ring, and Loki took that from him. The dwarf went into the stone and said:

‘That gold, which Gustr owned,
shall be the death of two brothers
and for eight noblemen a source of strife
no one will profit from my possessions!’¹³²

Snorra Edda: “The Æsir [...] showed the farmer their catch. [...] Now the family went up to the Æsir. [...] The Æsir offered a ransom for their lives, as much wealth as Hreidmar himself wished to decide, and these terms were agreed between them and confirmed with oaths. [...] Hreidmar took the otter-skin and announced to them that they were to fill the skin with red gold and then cover it entirely, [...]. [Loki] came across a dwarf called Andvari. He was a fish in a lake, and Loki captured him and imposed on him as a ransom all the gold he had in his cave. [...] Then the dwarf slipped under his arm one small gold ring. But Loki saw and told him to hand over the ring [...] and the dwarf pronounced that this ring should be the deadly destruction of whoever possessed it. Now it has been told why gold is called otter-payment or the Æsir’s forced payment or strife-metal.¹³³

Besides structure and dynamics, even the characters are manipulated: the Rheintöchter are mainly Wagner’s invention, inspired by the *merweip* of the Danube from the Nibelungen and the *sjókonur* from the *Thidrekssaga* (see chapter 5.2.2). However, the above-mentioned appear to Hagen/Högni and only as the story is about to end with the doom of the Nibelungen, but they are certainly not guardians of a treasure (Björnsson 2003).

Concerning Alberich, he is a composite figure: his name is taken from Albrîch of the *Nibelungenlied*. Not a dwarf emerging from the underground, but rather a mere servant and real

¹³¹ (Finch 1965, 26)

¹³² The two brothers are Reginn and Fáfnir, while the eight noblemen are probably Sigurðr, Guthormr, Gunnarr, Högni, Atli, Erpr, Sqrli and Hamðir (Pettit 2023, 483).

¹³³ (Faulkes 2002, 100)

guardian of the hoard; on the other side, Wagner merges Albrîch with Andvari as first owner of the hoard and the Ring – but not of the Tarnhelm, an instrument deriving from Sîvrit's Tarnkappe and Hreidmar's helm of terror. Unlike Wagner's *Ring*, the sources do not identify Adnvari/Albrîch as the embodiment of capitalist greed and the two figures do not have siblings: Mime, indeed, derives from Reginn, the cunning smith who raises Sigurðr, but he is portrayed as clumsy and spineless. Yet, his intellectual menace is reduced to pitiable servitude, a common worker that aims to his master's position and is not interested in breaking the cycle (Zoppelli 2025).

Not even the gods are exempt from the manipulation: Odin is a self-sufficient deity whose decisions on human life are inscrutable, as in his decision to break Sigmundr's sword condemning him to death. In *Das Rheingold* he is portrayed as a deity of oaths with his power depending on his role. Soon he finds himself trapped in a web of contracts and moral contradictions that reflect the crisis of the ruling class – a metaphor not included in the ancient sources (Zoppelli 2025).

Finally, Erda is loosely inspired by the *Völva* of the *Völuspá*. Where the Norse seeress is summoned to recite a cosmogonic poem with no direct involvement in the action, Erda intervenes dramatically to warn Wotan against the ring, becoming a moral agent within the drama rather than a detached prophetic voice. In each case, the medieval model provides the name and a narrative outline, while the ideological substance is entirely Wagner's (Zoppelli 2025; Björnsson 2003).

Das Rheingold already reveals the core of the entire *Ring*: not a representation in modern form of an accurate reconstruction of ancient myth, but rather a patchwork of different influences – German, Nordic, Hellenic. Carefully assembled, this work served to present Wagner's idea of myth as both explanation and celebration of the German *Geist*'s grandeur.

5.4.2 *Die Walküre*: a tragedy of love and duty.

Die Walküre is the first of the three days of action. It originates from the genre of tragedy, not meant as a mere injustice nor a simple fight among heroes and antagonists; tragic is a situation where morality is at stake, in which characters are tortured by an ethical dilemma, each alternative is neither convincing nor completely repelling, and consequently hindering sympathy (Zoppelli 2025).

In this part the audience assists to the concretisation of Wotan's idea, already preannounced by the *Notung-Motif* in the previous part: the first act begins with the introduction of Siegmund, still unknown to the public, who seeks for shelter in a house. It is the only act in the entire cycle to present only human characters, but the tension from the divine is constantly reminded by music: the *Gewitter-motif*, played as Siegmund enters the scene, is reminiscent of the *Donner-motif*, implying that the

storm raging after Siegmund is of divine nature, namely it is Wotan that pushes Siegmund into Hunding's house, where he meets Sieglinde (Zoppelli 2025).

Hunding represents the strongly regulated, patriarchal, and loveless society that Wagner aimed to eradicate with the Revolution. Yet, the image of a house somehow fused together with a tree describes a phase of society where human law has not yet imposed onto nature (Zoppelli 2025). The relationship with the environment might still be balanced, but the distinction *us-them* remains connotated by a violent animosity towards the outsiders, often ending in a bloodshed – as revealed by the *Hunding-motif* as Siegmund tells his misadventures. Even insiders are not exempt from abuse of power: the institution of marriage prescribes a hierarchical distribution of power between man and women:

SIEGLINDE:

Dies Haus und dies Weib

sind Hundings Eigen:

gastlich gönn' er dir Rast:

harre bis heim er kehrt!¹³⁴

His manifest hostility towards Siegmund, however, is held in check by the laws of hospitality and Hunding, loyal to his group, welcomes him in his house. There is no exception to this code, not even as Hunding recognises Siegmund as his enemy and feels entitled to a blood vengeance.

HUNDING:

Mein Haus hütet,

Wölfling, dich heut;

für die Nacht nahm ich dich auf:

mit starker Waffe

doch wehre dich morgen;

zum Kämpfe kies' ich den Tag:

für Tote zahlst du mir Zoll.¹³⁵

¹³⁴ *Die Walküre*, act I, vv. 28-31

¹³⁵ *Die Walküre*, act I, vv 256-62.

The web of *Leitmotive*, once again, extends the story beyond the scene, in this case revealing on the one side the real connection between Sieglinde and Siegmund and on the other Wotan's influence on the action. Wotan is the referent of two motifs, namely the *Vertrag-motif* as Hunding notices the strong resemblance between Siegmund and Sieglinde and the *Walhalla-motif* playing as Siegmund mentions his father and as Sieglinde explains how the sword ended in Hunding's household. Working together, music and lyrics clarify that the two are Wotan's children and Siegmund grew with him in the woods until he disappeared, only to appear back at Sieglinde's wedding and thrust the sword into the tree. His last trace was the storm that brought Siegmund and Sieglinde to meet and fall in love (Newman 2013; Zoppelli 2025).

The nature of their love, incestuous and adulterous, is here portrayed as the highest and purest form of the unifying Love described by Wagner:

“But the full reality of love is possible only between the sexes: only as *man* and *woman* can we *human beings* really love, whereas all other forms of love are mere derivations of it. [...]. It is wrong to regard this love as only *one* manifestation of love in general, and to assume that other and higher forms must therefore exist *alongside it*.”¹³⁶

This scene is dense in meaning: their innocent and spontaneous love has already erupted before they recognise each other as siblings. Such passion on the one side cannot be tamed by any social rules, on the other, according to Wagner, it does not break any rule of nature as their offspring will be strong and healthy (Berry and Vazsonyi 2020; Zoppelli 2025). It is in contrast with the socially accepted institution of marriage defended by Fricka, here represented by the sterile, loveless, and hierarchical relationship between Hunding and Sieglinde.

The contrast of the two unions reflects the clash between new and old order, played in act II by Fricka and Wotan: Wotan's role imposed him to honour the deal with the giant and hinders him from interfering again. Therefore, his plan was to give life to a new kind of human, free from laws and tradition, social structures and codes that could retrieve and purify the ring. Fricka, here embodiment of laws and tradition, points out that Siegmund has been created and crafted by Wotan's will, his freedom is an illusion: Wotan raised Siegmund in the woods, pushed him with a divine storm into Sieglinde's house, where he finds Wotan's sword Notung, the *neidlicher Stahl*¹³⁷ that the god himself put in the tree; moreover, she argues that Siegmund and Sieglind broke two sacred laws at once, committing an unprecedented act of incestuous adultery:

¹³⁶ Letter to Röckel, January 25th/26th 1854 (R. Wagner 1988b, 303).

¹³⁷ *Die Walküre*, act I, v. 577.

FRICKA:

es schwindet mein Hirn:
bräutlich umfing
die Schwester der Bruder!

Wann – ward es erlebt,
daß leiblich Geschwister sich liebten?

WOTAN:

Heut – hast du's erlebt:
Erfahre so
was von selbst sich fügt,
sei zuvor auch nie geschehn.¹³⁸

She does not appear to notice how she is defending a regulated formalism wrapped around a loveless, tyrannic marriage and attacks the freest Love. About Fricka and marriage, Wagner's view was clear:

“Where, then, is the germ of this evil to be found? Look at the first scene between Wotan and Fricka – which leads ultimately to the scene in the 2nd act of the *Valkyrie*. The firm bond which binds them both, sprung from the involuntary error of a love that seeks to prolong itself beyond the stage of necessary change and to obtain mutual guarantees in contravention of what is eternally new and subject to change in the phenomenal world – this bond constrains them both to the mutual torment of a loveless union.”¹³⁹

The influence of Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* emerges here, as he emphasises the sensuous character of human life once it is freed from the rigid and harsh dictates of conventional religion (Arblaster 2020). Conventionality, however, lies at the heart of Wotan's power: forced by his role, Wotan has now to pay the price for his web of intrigues and has no other choice but to sentence Siegmund to death. Brünnhilde, born as all Valkyries as an extension of Wotan's will,

¹³⁸ *Die Walküre*, act II, vv. 687-95

¹³⁹ Letter to Röckel, January 25th/26th 1854 (Wagner 1988, 307).

accepts reluctantly her task but will eventually attempt to save Siegmund and protect him from Hunding's sword. Even though she fails in her attempt, Brünnhilde's decision allows the story to proceed further: had she not saved Sieglinde and collected the fragments of Notung, Siegfried would not be born and so the chance to stop the power of the ring. She does not merely disobey her father in a clash of wills, but she simply realises that Wotan's true desire resides in his heart and not in his words – which are, after all, nothing but Fricka's demand (Zoppelli 2025; Newman 2013). As she listens to Siegmund preferring his and Sieglinde's death, Brünnhilde understands that the order to follow is led by a Love that unifies, not a heartless tradition that divides:

SIEGMUND:

dies Schwert –

das feig vor dem Feind mich verrät: -

frommt es nicht gegen den Feind,

so fromm' es denn wider den Freund! -

Das Schwert auf SIEGLINDE zückend.

Zwei Leben

Lachen dir hier: -

Nimm sie, Notung,

neidischer Stahl.

Nimm sie mit einem Streich!¹⁴⁰

BRÜNNHILDE:

Sieglinde lebe -

Und Siegmund lebe mit ihr!

Beschlossen ist's;

das Schachtlos wend' ich:

dir, Siegmund,

schaff' ich Segen und Sieg.¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ *Die Walküre*, act II, vv. 1447-55.

¹⁴¹ *Die Walküre*, act II, vv. 1458-63.

By doing so, Brünnhilde manifests the first conscious step towards the love-oriented revolution, something that even Wotan yearns for. However, the god of oaths is still trapped in his *ancient regime* and marks her actions as disloyalty. Zoppelli (2025) sees here a sort of paradox in Wotan's logic: Siegmund was meant to represent a hero whose actions are neither led nor influenced by an old conventionality, but, since he is shaped by Wotan to be so, he is far from representing such hero, as Fricka points out; Brünnhilde, on the other side, was created as an extension of Wotan's will and nonetheless decided to stand for what *she* believed was the right side. By comparing the two, it appears that Brünnhilde is closer to the hero needed by Wotan rather than her *brother* Siegmund, and yet Wotan disproves her actions, implying a preference to compliance and submission.

Only as Brünnhilde accepts the consequence to her actions, Wotan relents and softens her punishment: she will not be destined to submit to the first man who will find her, but only he who is brave enough to not fear Wotan's spear. The last verses are accompanied by a motif previously introduced as Brünnhilde prophesied to Sieglinde her future child's name, Siegfried. Now, as Wotan announces the requirement to pass through Loge's fire, the musical comment reveals the identity of this future hero:

WOTAN:

Wer meines Speeres

Spitze fürchtet,

durchschreite das Feuer nie!¹⁴²

The recurrent theme of Love finds no place in the ancient sources, where affection is expressed through respect and loyalty to the *Sippe* – an aspect paradoxically closer to Hunding's cultural identity and *Weltanschauung*. In the *Völsunga Saga*, Sigmund and his twin sister Signý, King Völsung's children and descendent of Odin, conceive an incestuous child in order to get revenge on Signý's husband Siggeir for the slaying of their father and siblings. The *Völsunga Saga* is the only source that mentions such episode, especially the Völsungar's divine origin:

Ch. I: The tale begins here and tells of a man called Sigi who was said to be the son of Odin.¹⁴³

¹⁴² *Die Walküre*, act III, vv. 2284-86

¹⁴³ (Finch 1965, [2])

It is unlikely that such element existed before the *Saga*: neither the Eddic poems nor the *Snorra Edda* mention it and the *Völsunga Saga* itself seems to prove it as a later insertion, in terms of both text and context. In the manuscript NKS 1824 b 4to, the *Saga* is followed by the *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, with which is interlaced through Aslaug, Brünnhilde and Sigurðr's daughter. With Ragnar, she will give birth to the lineage that will reach the Norwegian royals. On these grounds, Odin as ancestor of Völsung can be considered a later intervention aimed at exalting the Norwegian royal family.

On the other side, the incestuous relationship is narrated in the Eddic poems, but where they assume a deeply different meaning: the act is pragmatic and determined by both survival and loyalty to the *Sippe*: the acknowledgement that Sigmund's life is in danger as long as Siggeir lives, the need to avenge their father, and the sad finding that Signý and Siggeir's children are unfit for this role convince Signý that only a hero twice descending from Völsung will succeed (Arblaster 2020). Nonetheless, if Sieglinde and Sigmund do not perceive this boundary, Signý seems to show a different attitude: she is motivated by vengeance, namely *Sippe* loyalty, the incest follows two failed attempts at training her children, and she reaches his brother after secretly having exchanged shapes with a sorceress – Signý will eventually tell him the truth after Siggeir's death. Unlike Sieglinde, she seems to recognise and respect the law.

Ch. 8: “‘You’ll know now whether or not I have remembered King Siggeir’s killing of King Völsung against him!’ she answered, ‘and I had our children killed when they seemed to me all to tardy in avenging our father, and in the shape of some sorceress I came to you in the forest, and Sinfjotli is your son, and mine. His immense vigour comes from being King Völsung’s grandson on his father’s as well as his mother’s side.’”¹⁴⁴

The hero born from the union of two Völsungar is not Sigurðr, but his older stepbrother Sinfjötli, who will die with no descent. Signý, once vengeance is accomplished, will not follow her brother, but will rather choose to die on Siggeir's funeral pyre. Sigmund, on his side, will die in battle against Hunding's sons – in the *Völsunga Saga*, Sigmund's death is Odin's will, who will appear on the battlefield and shatter his sword. It is not described as a punishment nor is it a consequence of a Valkyrie's failed attempt to protect him, but rather a divine decision of the supreme arbiter of men's fate (Finch p 20 n. 1):

¹⁴⁴ (Finch 1965, 13–14)

Ch. 11: “The man [Odin] advanced towards King Sigmund, raising the spear to bar his way, and when King Sigmund struck fiercely, his sword hit against the spear and snapped in two. After this the balance of the casualties shifted: King Sigmund’s good luck had turned and his losses were heavy [...]”

Ch. 12: “Many have recovered when there was little hope,” he [Sigmund] answered, “but my good luck has turned and so I do not wish to be made well. Odin does not want me to draw sword, for now it lies broken. I have fought battles while it was his pleasure.”¹⁴⁵

In turn, the *Poetic Edda* does not even mention Odin and describes the scene as a result of human action on the battlefield:

Frá dauða Sinfjötla: “Then he married Hjördis, daughter of King Eylimi. Their son was Sigurðr. King Sigmundr fell in battle before Hundingr’s sons.”¹⁴⁶

Brynhildr plays no role – either defensive or offensive – in Sigmund’s death; as a matter of fact, she does not even meet Sigmund. The Wagnerian counterpart is a product of a rearrangement of elements present in the *Poetic Edda* and in the *Völsunga Saga*, which carries a new and modern interpretation: Brünnhilde, as mentioned, disobeys Wotan’s order for she values Love more precious and, as punishment, Wotan strips her of her divine nature and condemns her to a deep slumber, destined to wed whoever will awakens her. On the other side, Odin’s punishment does force Brynhildr – or Sigdrífa in the Eddic poem *Sigrdrífumál* – to fall asleep and marry, she is forbidden to join the battle ever again, and it is consequence of disobeying Odin; however, the reason behind her action is unclear and even the correspondence Sigdrífa/Brynhildr is still a matter of debate (Petitt 2022, 517):

Sigrdrífumál: “She named herself Sigdrífa, and she was a valkyrie. She said that two kings had fought each other. One was called Hjálmgunnarr. He was by then old and the greatest warrior, and Óðinn had promised him victory. And the other was called Agnarr, Hauða’s brother, whom no one wanted to receive. Sigdrífa felled Hjálmgunnarr in the battle. But Óðinn pierced her with a sleep-thorn in revenge for this and told her that she would never win victory in battle thereafter and said that she would marry. ‘But I said to him that I had sworn an oath to the contrary, to marry no man who could be afraid.’”¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ (Finch 1965, 20–21)

¹⁴⁶ (Petitt 2023, 461)

¹⁴⁷ (Petitt 2023, 523)

If Sigrdrífa/Brynhildr's oath is at the core of Siegfried's personality – he who knows no fear – at the same time it deliberately opposes Odin's order; the Wagnerian scene, on the other side, presents a maiden submitted to his father's will who understands her fault, meekly accepts her punishment, and merely ventures the wish to marry the worthiest hero.

The wall of fire, moreover, is an element that is present only in the Norse sources and represents a test to select Brynhildr's husband, parallel to the three trials in the *Nibelungenlied*; not, therefore, a protective concession from an anguished father as in *Die Walküre*:

WOTAN:

muß ich verlieren

dich, die ich liebte,

du lachende Lust meines Auges:

ein bräutliches Feuer

soll dir nun brennen,

wie nie einer Braut es gebrannt!

Flammende Glut

umglühe den Fels;

mit zehrenden Schrecken

scheuch' es den Zagen;

der Feige fliehe

Brünnhildes Fels! –

Denn Einer nur freie die Braut,

der freier als ich, der Gott!¹⁴⁸

Broadly speaking, *Die Walküre* corresponds – in its own way – to the first section of the *Völsunga Saga* – the Völsungar's genealogy from Odin to Sigmund – which in turn partially draws from the Eddic poems – concerning Sigmund's death and fatherhood of Sigurðr. Although Brünnhilde emerges as the leading force of this second part, her actions are not described in the ancient sources;

¹⁴⁸ *Die Walküre*, act 3, vv. 2235-47

conversely, Brynhildr/Sigrdrifa/Brünnhilde's actions are staged in the *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*, where she appears as a secondary – yet fundamental – character.

Besides actions and characters, the most significant difference lies in the dominant themes: an overview of *Leitmotive* reveals a focus on the tragicness (*Unmut*-, *Unruhe-Motive*), Love (*Geschwisterliebe*, *Liebe*, *Wälsungenliebe*, *Lenzlied-Liebe*), and individuality (*Siegfried*-, *Sieglinde*, *Siegmund-Motive*; *Geschwisterliebe*¹⁴⁹, *Schwert*). The ancient sources, on the other side, never highlighted such values: the focus of the *Völsungar/ Niflúngar saga* – in fact the only sources for *Die Walküre* – is on collectivity and honour, where individuals exist only as part of a *Sippe*, regulated by codes that each member needs to learn, respect, and follow.

Not the individual love, therefore, but group loyalty; not a personal avant-garde, but the wisdom of the tradition; not love, but prestige and honour.

5.4.3 *Siegfried*: the fable of a man who knew no fear.

The second day of the cycle is structured on the genre of the fable: a young man, unaware of his origins, desires to discover fear, for he has never experienced it. Unlike the myth, it does not involve a dimension of cultural sacredness, but rather a certain level of comedic entertainment; furthermore, far from any claim of factuality, it admits a certain degree supernatural, without raising questions about its plausibility: after Sieglinde's death in the forest, newborn Siegfried is raised by Mime as part of his plan to obtain the ring and the treasure; the Wälsung grows up to be strong, fearless, and handsome. As any fable, *Siegfried* features the canonical initiatory journey with its adventures, which he will successfully accomplish (Zoppelli 2025).

Siegfried, as was the case for the previous parts, is dominated by natural law: the power of the Ring has corrupted certain souls – Fafner, Mime, and Alberich in this part – but the environment still preserves its harmony, expressed in the natural setting, namely the forest and Brünnhilde's rock. Furthermore, the triumph belongs not to gods, evil dwarves, or dragons, but to a sort of *enfant sauvage*. Siegfried, indeed, represents the realisation of Wotan's idea: he is pure living force, devoid of any social skills, raised in the wild by a dwarf and therefore free from any cultural code. He is the embodiment of Wagner's revolution, free from the past and living in a constant present. Having never been shaped by human nor divine social structures, his character is the *Neuanfang*. This fresh start of human society is visible in the opera itself: *Siegfried* is the third part of the cycle and yet the first to feature human action with little to no influence of the divine realm – Wotan appears a secondary

¹⁴⁹ *Geschwisterliebe* has been listed twice for it revolves around two *Grundthemen*: on one side is a form of love, on the other it represents the individual choosing themselves before a pre-existing order shared by the vast majority.

character who has to step back before Siegfried. His very arrogance is symbolic of the complete absence of *savoir-faire*, namely of social codes, as he is closer to an impulsive state of nature, free of any social regulation (Zoppelli 2025).

“But what is “freedom”? is it – as our politicians believe – “licence”? – of course not! Freedom is: integrity. He who is true to himself, i. e. who acts in accord with his own being, and in perfect harmony with his own nature, is free.”¹⁵⁰

Mime, on the other side, is certainly the main antagonist in this story, but he is far from being skilled and dangerous as his brother Alberich: evil and ambitious and yet coward and grotesque, an inept who tries to be smart but systematically fails. Even the orchestra ridicules him, as his *Mime-motif* would have evoked in the 19th century bourgeois audience the French minuet, the aristocratic music of the *ancien Régime* with all its empty, ritualistic formalities. Indeed, the audience typically responds to Mime with a mixture of pity and amusement (Zoppelli 2025).

However unaware of his past and his origins, Siegfried develops a form of self-identity arising from the observation of the animal, where similarity seems to be the at the core of association among individuals: as he notices animals of the same species gathering together and realises how dissimilar he is from Mime, he begins to wonder about his origins and to feel disgust before Mime – this sentiment, almost natural in the play, has also been interpreted as a program of racial and ethnic purity:

SIEGFRIED:

Vieles lehrtest du, Mime,
und manches lernt‘ ich von dir;
doch was du am liebsten mich lehrtest,
zu lernen gelang mir nie: –
wie dich leiden könnt‘.

Trägst du mir Speise

Und Trank herbei –

Der Ekel speist mich allein;

[...]

MIME:

¹⁵⁰ Letter to Röckel, January 25th/26th 1854 (R. Wagner 1988b, 301)

Ich bin dir Vater
und Mutter zugleich.

SIEGFRIED:

Das lügst du, garstiger Gauch! –
Wie die Jungen den Alten gleichen,
das hab' ich mir glücklich ersehnen.
[...]

So glich wohl der Kröte
Ein glänzender Fisch
doch kroch nie ein Fisch aus der Kröte.¹⁵¹

Siegfried's nature is emblematised by his sword: Mime's expertise on smithcraft is now of no use, as he already knows, since Wotan had already announced it: during the three-riddles game Wotan appeared as a wanderer with the same role of a *deus ex machina*. Their dialogue, a reinforcement of the folkloristic structure of the *Siegfried*, on the one side summarises the mythical and historical antecedents, on the other it prepares the scene for the upcoming events (Zoppelli 2025). Before leaving, he tells Mime:

WANDERER [WOTAN]:

Hör', verfallener Zwerg: -
nur wer das Fürchten
nie erfuhr,
schmiedet Notung neu.
Dein weises Haupt
Wahre von heut':
Verfallen – lass' ich's dem,
der das Fürchten nicht gelernt.¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ *Siegfried*, act I, vv. 163-70; 263-267; 278-80.

¹⁵² *Siegfried*, act I, vv. 709-16.

As already hinted by the *Siegfried-motif* in the last act of *Die Walküre*, Siegfried is the only one who can forge Notung's fragments back together. Nonetheless, the scene is another manifestation of the Revolution and its requirements: Mime, the experienced smith, follows a technique passed down and refined across generations, here a metaphor for those cultural codes received and accepted as given and blindly followed; Siegfried, a complete novice, does not know nor care for this multigenerational knowledge: instead, he follows his instincts and succeeds where the weight of authoritative tradition fails. Another metaphor for the requirements of the new world: nothing is to be fully inherited, but everything shall reborn anew (Zoppelli 2025):

MIME:

Hättest du fleißig
die Kunst gepflegt,
jetzt käm' dir's wahrlich zu gut;
doch lässig warst du
stets in der Lehre:
was willst du nun rechtes rüsten?

SIEGFRIED:

Was der Meister nicht kann,
vermöcht' es der Knabe,
hätt' er ihm immer gehorcht? -

[...]

MIME:

Zu Schanden kam ein Schmied,
den Lehrer sein Knabe lehrt;
mit der Kunst ist's beim Alten aus,
als Koch dient er dem Kinde:
brennt er das Eisen zu Brei,
aus Eiern brau

der Alte ihm Sud.¹⁵³

Not just fearlessness but also Love itself: the main difference between Nibelungen and Wälsungen, namely between present-day industrialism and future free humanity, lies in the tension towards unity, that is Love. Siegfried feels a tie with the sword as it represents the only material witness of his origins: his mother, as she handed it down to Mime, and his father, as he died brandishing it. Only by experiencing this tie does he understand the joys and sorrows of its former owner, something that Mime, foreign to Siegfried's *Sippe*, cannot grasp. As a matter of fact, he regards the sword as a weapon suited to Siegfried – he shattered each other sword forged by Mime – for his quest against Fafner (Zoppelli 2025). With this sword, as Wotan predicted, Siegfried slays Fafner and Mime and becomes the legitimate owner of the hoard. Siegfried, however, does not show a great interest – let alone greed – for the treasure; following the advice of the *Vögelein*, whom Siegfried now understands because of direct contact with Fafner's blood, he retrieves the Tarnhelm and the Ring, although he does not know what to do with it:

SIEGFRIED ist, mit Tarnhelm und Ring, während des Letzten langsam und sinnend aus der Höhle vorgeschritten: er betrachtet gedankenvoll seine Beute und hält, nahe dem Baume, auf der Höhe nieder an. - Große Stille.

SIEGFRIED:

Was ihr mir nützt

weiß ich nicht:

doch nahm ich euch

aus des Hortes gehäuftem Gold,

weil guter Rat mir es riet.¹⁵⁴

Not only does Siegfried prove immune to the hoard and its power, but he also seems to neutralise it, exactly what Wotan expected from his hero. This latter point emerges by the *Rheingold*- and *Rheintöchter*-Motive playing as he sings the above-quoted verses, manifesting the idea that Siegfried's innocence erases the curse on the Ring and restores it to its original nature, when it belonged to the Rheintöchter (Zoppelli 2025).

Saying that Siegfried represents a new order is probably reductive, as he is the death of the old order. In act III the dialogue between Wotan and Erda, namely the All-Father and the cosmic

¹⁵³ *Siegfried*, act I, vv. 872-880; 1011-17

¹⁵⁴ *Siegfried*, act II, vv. 1727-36.

knowledge, he asks Erda “how to stop a rolling wheel”¹⁵⁵ only to realise that her ancient wisdom is no longer useful. In a nihilistic fervour, he declares he does not fear the prophesied end anymore and entrusts everything to Siegfried, who cannot be touched by the curse. The rise of a new order that overthrows the old one coincides, symbolically, also with the appearance of Siegfried and Erda’s return to the depths – notably Erda vanishes for the last time precisely in the part of the *Ring* dedicated to *Siegfried*.

Siegfried’s encounter with Wotan is dense with meaning for both characters, the true male protagonists of the *Ring des Nibelungen*: to Siegfried, living the fable, Wotan’s spear is part of an initiatory journey, a step that will lead him to his destination – in *Siegfried* is Brünnhilde’s rock; in the *Ring* cycle it is his murder – and which he faces with characteristic arrogance; Wotan, protagonist of a tragedy, needs to test the man who wants to reach Brünnhilde. If it is true that Wotan does not fear the end but yearns for it, he still struggles to accept the end of his power, as the *rollendes Rad* is unstoppable, his role has come to an end, and he is about to definitely lose his daughter:

WOTAN:

Verschlossen hält

meine Macht die schlafende Maid:

wer sie erweckte,

wer sie gewänne,

machtlos macht' er mich ewig! -

[...]

Fürchtest das Feuer du nicht,

so sperre mein Speer dir den Weg!

 Noch hält meine Hand

der Herrschaft Haft;

das Schwert, das du schwingst,

zerschlug einst dieser Schaft:

noch einmal denn

zerspring' es am ewigen Speer!¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵ *Siegfried*, act III, v. 2040

¹⁵⁶ *Siegfried*, act III, vv. 2297-2301; 2324-31.

The awakening of Brünnhilde in the last scene is the last initiation of Siegfried, namely the discovery of fear, as he understands that underneath the armour there is a woman sleeping. If in the previous episodes Love was family-oriented and involved especially Sieglinde – the only woman he has ever known, although exclusively as a mental image – now Love is an erotic tension towards Brünnhilde, the first woman he meets in person, and this generates fear (Zoppelli 2025).

Finally awakened, Brünnhilde at first recalls her past divine life as a Valkyrie with nostalgia, but then gladly rejects divinity and embraces love – and Siegfried:

BRÜNNHILDE:

Zerfall‘ in Staub

Deine stolze Burg! [Walhalla]

[...]

Zerreit, ihr Nornen,

das Runenseil!

Götter-Dämm’rung,

dunkle herauf!

[...]

Mir strahlt zur Stunde

Siegfrieds Stern;

Er ist mir ewig,

er ist mir immer,

Erb‘ und Eigen,

ein‘ und all‘:

leuchtende Liebe,

lachender Tod!¹⁵⁷

The *Grundthema* of Love expanded through the acts: in act I and II, it was manifest towards familiar bounds; then, at the end of act III, in these last lines sung together with Siegfried, it is

¹⁵⁷ *Siegfried*, III.3, vv. 2730-31, 2736-39, 2742-49.

expressed in its highest form, namely the erotic unifying passion between man and woman, musically highlighted by the motifs related to this *Grundthema* – *Liebesbund*, *Siegfriedliebe*, *Entzückung*, *Jubel*.

Another *Grundthema* – introduced, like Love, in the previous parts and reaching here its apex – revolves around the concept of Self-Affirmation: completed by motifs of *Jugendkraft*, *Siegfried*, and *Schwert*, the theme presents the individual's desire to detach from any oppressive boundaries – Wotan's order for Brünnhilde in *Die Walküre*, now Mime's household and tie for Siegfried – in order to affirm their will into the world. It could be argued that Wotan, Alberich, and Mime as well try to impose their will, but, strictly speaking, they try to impose it *onto* the world, not *into*, in a *Weltanschauung* that implies a hierarchy of power where they rule from the top.

Siegfried is the story of a break with the bounds of tradition, the unstoppable *Neuanfang* which can either be joyfully accepted – as in Brünnhilde – or opposed with tragic consequences – Wotan, Fafner, Mime, exactly like Wagner imagined the Revolution:

“So up, ye peoples of the earth! [...] Up, in miscellany follow my steps; for no distinction can I make ‘twixt those who follow me. *Two* peoples, only, are there from henceforth: the one, that follows me, the other, that withstands me. The one I lead to happiness; over the other grinds my path: for I am *Revolution*.”¹⁵⁸

Certainly, a highly detailed programme, nonetheless distant from the sources. First, Sigurðr and Sîvrit are both well aware of their past, their *Sippe*, and their status. In the second âventiure of the *Nibelungenlied*, Sîvrit is described as a strong, proud, and rich prince of *Niderlanden*, whose parents, Sigemunt and Sigelint, are still alive and well-disposed towards their son. He is described as strong and noble, implying he received a certain type of education, focused on both the courtly values and the warrior ethos (Whobrey 2018, 190). This is the only source where Sigemunt survives his son, while there is no mention of foster-father:

[C 1082]

Chriemh' unversunnen in vnochreften lac
den tac un den abent vnz an den andern tac.
swaz iemen sprechen chvnde, daz was ir gar vnochunt.
in den selben noeten lage ovch der kunich Sigemunt.

His Norse counterpart is fatherless, but not motherless: Sigmundr's last wife, Hjördís, married Álfir, son of Hjalprekr – identified in chapter 12 of the *Volsunga Saga* as King of Denmark, and

¹⁵⁸ (Wagner 1899, 238)

Sigurðr grows up at his court. Reginn appears as his foster-father, in some sources as an educator, but the relationship between the two is not as spiteful as it is in *Siegfried*. Moreover, Reginn is not a clumsy dwarf, but rather a skilled artisan with a cunning and strategic mind:

Volsunga Saga, Ch. 13: “Regin was the name of Sigurðr’s foster-father and he was Hreidmar’s son. He taught him various accomplishments, chequers, runes, and also how to speak many languages, as was then customary for princes, and much else besides.”¹⁵⁹

Poetic Edda, *Reginismál*: “Then Reginn, son of Hreiðmarr, had come to Hjálprekr’s. He was more skilful than any man, and a dwarf in stature. He was wise, grim and skilled in magic. Reginn offered Sigurðr fosterage and instruction and loved him greatly.”¹⁶⁰

According to the sources, differences aside, both Sigurðr and Sîvrit are well educated nobles, aware of their origins and their status; Sîvrit’s awareness about his and others’ status manifests as he pretends before Brünnhilde to be Gunther’s vassall, while Sigurðr admits that he cannot slaughter Fafnir before avenging his father’s death, as stated in the *Poetic Edda*:

Reginismál : “After that Reginn incited Sigurðr to slay Fáfñir. He said:

‘Hundingr’s sons will laugh loudly,
they who denied Eylimi his old age,
if the prince’s wishes are more to seek
red rings than revenge for his father!’”¹⁶¹

The *Snorra Edda* does not mention this specific detail, but it is not surprising, since it was meant as a poetic treatise and not as a preservation of the Volsungar/Niflungar myth. However, it finds agreement in the *Volsunga Saga*:

ch. 16: “[Reginn] ‘Kill Fafnir as you promised.’ And Sigurðr answered: ‘I’ll do so, but first there’s something else – vengeance for King Sigmund and the other kinsmen who fell in that battle.’”¹⁶²

Eventually, he will kill the dragon, but the dynamics are different from Wagner’s reinterpretation: in the *Nibelungenlied*, Sîvrit bathes in the dragon’s blood and acquires

¹⁵⁹ (Finch 1965, 23)

¹⁶⁰ (Pettit 2023, 483)

¹⁶¹ (Pettit 2023, 487)

¹⁶² (Finch 1965, 28)

invulnerability. The scene is not central to the plot – the dragon does not even have a name – and is told by Hagen in âventiure 3, as Sîvrit arrives at the gates of Worms:

[C 100]

Noch weiz ich an im mere daz mir ist bekannt.
einen lintrachen sluch des heledes hant.
do badet er in dem blute; des ist der helt gemeit
von also vester hute, daz in nie wafen sit versneit.

The Norse sources describe directly the scene:

Volsunga Saga, ch. 18: “Sigurðr dug a pit, and while he was about this an old man with a long beard [Odin] came up to him and asked what he was doing there. He told him. ‘That’s ill-advised,’ the old man then replied. ‘Dig other pits and let the blood run into them – you are to sit in one and stab the dragon to the heart.’ [...] And when the dragon crawled across the pit, Sigurðr thrust in the sword under the left shoulder, and it sunk in up to the hilt.”¹⁶³

Poetic Edda, Fáfnismál: “There Sigurðr made a great pit in the way, and Sigurðr went in there. [...] And when Fáfnir slithered from the gold, he blew poison, and it fell from above on Sigurðr’s head.”¹⁶⁴

Snorra Edda: “Then Sigurðr dug a trench in Fafnir’s path and got into it, and when Fafnir crawled down to the water and he passed over the trench, Sigurðr thrust the sword through him, and this killed him.”¹⁶⁵

The very Notung in Wagner’s *Ring*, a symbol of Siegfried’s juvenile force free from any form of conditioning, has a different story in the medieval sources: the sword, Gramr, is said to be made by Reginn and only the *Saga* specifies that it was obtained by reforging together fragments from Sigmund’s sword, which were guarded by Hjördís. The *Nibelungenlied* does not mention a detailed origin for the sword, called Balmung, but it is said that Sîvrit takes it from the Nibelungen hoard and it belonged to Schilbunc’ and Nibelung’s father:

[C 94]

Den Schatz er vngeteilet beliben mvse lan.

¹⁶³ (Finch 1965, 30–31)

¹⁶⁴ (Pettit 2023, 503)

¹⁶⁵ (Sturluson 2002, 40)

do begunden mit im striten der zweier kunige man.
 Mit ir vater swerte, daz Palmvncn was genant,
 ez streit ab in der chune den hort vñ Nibelung lant.

A further aspect that distinguishes Siegfried from his counterparts is his attitude towards gold: called as a reconciling judge, Sîvrit eventually kills the men and takes possess of the treasure; in the Norse sources, the gold is guarded by Fafnir and Sigurðr takes it after slaying the dragon. Contrarily to Siegfried, Sigurðr/Sîvrit does not leave the treasure aside but seems to recognise the value of such a hoard and does not think twice before taking possession of it.

The innocence of the *enfant sauvage* described by Wagner finds no place in the ancient texts and nor does the strongly highlighted theme of Love: the ancient sources show a sense of taught loyalty towards the *Sippe*, not a sentiment individually developed of affection. The individual is aware of their role and how to play it in the system they live in, it is certainly not a matter of unconditioned and spontaneous behaviour. Concerning Brünnhilde, the Wagnerian scene is directly inspired, as mentioned, by the Nordic sources, as Sîvrit meets Brünnhilde in Isenstein only as a quest with Gunther. Sigdrifa's oath to marry only a fearless man has a correspondent in Wagner's Siegfried, but the intensity of Siegfried and Brünnhilde's love finds no trace elsewhere.

Siegfried stands alongside the two parts analysed so far: the themes here presented as the essence of the myth prove, in fact, to be crafted by Wagner — not self-affirmed individuals united in love, but *Sippen* whose interactions are governed by cultural codes passed down through generations.

5.4.4 *Götterdämmerung*: ‘Alles was ist, endet.’

“We must learn to die, and to die in the fullest sense of the word; fear of the end is the source of all lovelessness, and this fear is generated only when love itself is already beginning to wane.”¹⁶⁶

As Wagner completed the orchestral draft for act II of *Siegfried* in early August 1857, multiple factors forced the *Ring* into a twelve-year interruption. The fading of his revolutionary spirit and, most importantly, pressing economic difficulties left Wagner with no other choice but to focus on projects simpler to stage, namely *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (R. Wagner and Voss 2022; Zoppelli 2025) (see chapter 5.2.2). What is notable about the compositions of this period – including the *Götterdämmerung* – is the marked influence of Schopenhauer's *Die Welt als*

¹⁶⁶ Letter to Rockel, January 25th/26th 1854 (Wagner 1988, 306).

Wille und Vorstellung (1819), which, due to the general resigned disenchantment in intellectual milieu, found a great reception in the years after the failed revolution. Recommended to Wagner by one of his revolutionary companions Georg Herwegh in 1855, Schopenhauer's work describes the *Wille* as:

“[...] the thing-in-itself, the inner content, the essence of the world, but life, the visible world, the phenomenon, is only the mirror of the will, this world will accompany the will as inseparably as a body is accompanied by its shadow; and if will exists, then life, the world will exist.”¹⁶⁷

A sort of primordial force originally united, which, embodied in the different elements of reality, gives the illusion of a fracture between subject and object; as separated as they are and forgetful of their original unity, objects tend towards mutual destruction. Abnegation, argues Schopenhauer, is the only solution, the ascetic renounce to the *Wille zum Leben*, achievable through the acknowledgement of the original unity and the renounce to the particular, individual being (Zoppelli 2025). Such renounce to life finds a common ground with the *Dichtung* of *Die Walküre* (June 1852), specifically in Wotan's yearned end:

WOTAN:

Auf geb' ich mein Werk;

Eines nur will ich noch:

Das Ende – –

Das Ende – – ¹⁶⁸

Reprised in *Siegfried* as well:

WOTAN:

Um der Götter Ende

grämt mich die Angst nicht,

¹⁶⁷ (Schopenhauer 1969, 275).

¹⁶⁸ *Die Walküre*, act II, vv. 1098-1101.

seit mein Wunsch es – will!¹⁶⁹

Love, however, proved a far thornier point to reconcile: Wagner's revolutionary perspective described Love as a life-affirming force, while Schopenhauer meant it as the worst expression of will, since it leads to the birth of new individualities. Coherently with his totalitarian perspective, his philosophical resolution found a body in his artistic work, namely *Tristan und Isolde* (1857-59). Although the work was originally meant to describe Schopenhauer's conception of Love as an insatiable, painful experience, it became a compromise between the two positions, exalting Love as the leading force to the indefinite, in an indistinct fusion of representations stretching from the original core. Wagner, with his characteristic approach to the sources, thought to have perfected Schopenhauer's system (Zoppelli 2025):

„Of late I have slowly been reading friend Schopenhauer's chief work straight through again, and this time it has extraordinarily incited me to expansion and even — on some points — amendment of his system. [...] For it is a matter of demonstrating a path of salvation recognised by none of the philosophers, particularly not by Sch[openhauer], — the pathway to complete pacification of the Will through love, and that no abstract love of mankind, but the love which actually blossoms from the soil of sexual love, i.e. from the affection between man and woman.. [...]. I then arrive with greatest certainty at proving in Love a possibility of attaining to that exaltation above the instinct of the individual will[.] the result cannot but be very significant, and entirely and satisfactory fill the gaps in Schopenhauer's system.”¹⁷⁰

On the other side, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (1862-67) was meant as the comedic and bourgeois counterpart of the *Tannhäuser* (1842-45), creating a diptych based on the same subject: a song contest where the prize is the marriage to a maiden. The *Meistersinger* are an association of artisans who write poetry for music in accordance with a strict system of formal rules coded into a timeless tradition, a rigidity that suffocates the immediate, spontaneous creative spark (Zoppelli 2025). If *Tristan und Isolde* holds Love as the central core of life, *Die Meistersinger* confirms Wagner's view on aesthetics, while suggesting that artist and society cannot live apart from each other: society needs art, while the artist needs a place in society – an unsurprising compromise formulated in a time when Wagner needed support, especially financial (Zoppelli 2025, 169–75).

The influence of Schopenhauer affected Wagner's conception of music as well: in his Zurich Essays, Wagner rejected the so-called *absolute music*, a concept that defines music as independent

¹⁶⁹ *Siegfried*, act III, vv. 2123-25.

¹⁷⁰ Letter to Mathilde Wesendonck. Venice, December 8th, 1858 (R. Wagner and Wesendonck 1905, 75–76)

from poetry. Music, indeed, operates on its highest level only if associated with a poetic idea and interlaced with the other arts: drama, as mentioned, was meant to be the purpose of the expression while music the means. Schopenhauer, on the other hand, claimed music was the highest form of art: where other arts were representative of the sensitive world – *Vorstellung* – music, due to its limited ability to imitate reality, reaches the essence of the world, its *Wille*. The reading of *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* brought Wagner to reconsider the role he attributed to music and its interaction with the drama: in his essay *Über die Benennung der Musikdrama* (1872), he defined his *Dramen* as visible actions of music, implying the theatre as the sensitive representation of essential concepts present in music (Zoppelli 2025):

„And certainly the greatest difficulty is to place ‘music’ in a proper position toward ‘drama’, since it can be brought into no equality therewith, [...] and must rank as either much more or much less than ‘drama’. The reason lies in the fact that the word ‘music’ denotes an *art*, originally the whole assemblage of the arts, whilst ‘drama’ strictly denotes a *deed* of art.”¹⁷¹

Therefore, these deeds of art, namely deeds of music, are far from being mere abstract forms, but rather ideas regarding collective human experiences, where represented objects are exterior embodiments. According to Zoppelli, Wagner’s dialectic changed according to the evolution of society: as already mentioned, up to the 1850s it was common to advocate for unity of arts, but twenty years later the idea that music was interlaced with the dramatic core was spread across Europe. The association between instrumental music and metaphysics was a sort of status symbol of the intellectual élite, once again stepping away from opera as a social and institutional concept. As for Wagner, this change in perspective did not mean a complete rejection of his earlier perspective, but rather a new organisation of musical ideas in a denser and more sustained manner which still holds onto human experience as the referent.

In the composition of the *Götterdämmerung*, such new organisation did not abandon the web of motifs and *Grundthemen*, but it included, for the first time in the cycle, a certain use of traditional means of expression, proper to that *grand Opéra* which Wagner despised. The most striking example is the use of the chorus: in *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre* the ensembles were meant only for creatures meant to be a manifestation of the same body, namely Valkyries and Rheintöchter, a sort of hive-mind; however, *Mannen und Frauen* on the stage of *Götterdämmerung* are real operatic chorus. Another infraction of Wagner’s rejection of simultaneous singing is the use of the polyphonic

¹⁷¹ (Wagner [1896] 1966, 301)

ensemble at the end of act II, as Brünnhilde, Hagen, and Gunther plot together against Siegfried, singing simultaneously different lines.

Far from being a correction of his Zurich ideas, these elements were meant to embody structurally the same substance manifested in action, word, and music: the burden of collectivity upon individual action, the hierarchic oppression of an élite over a fragmented society, of which the Parisian genre was the most representative artistic reflection. Coherently, the last chapter of the cycle is the last *Tag* of a world which will be consumed by its own greed: the obsession with the ring, indeed, will be Siegfried's death, the only one who did not feel attachment to it. This will be the necessary ignition that will bring the world to its end.

Notably, the *Dichtung* of the *Götterdämmerung* was conceived at a time when the project consisted only of a three-act opera named *Siegfrieds Tod*, while the music would be composed twenty years later in a stage of rejection of tradition. *Dichtung* and music, however, do not fall into contradiction, as Wagner opted for a dialectic conciliation between traditional structures and modern music of expression, as exemplified by Hagen's monologue in act I: on one side, each textual strophe is separated by long interludes and returns each time to a refrain, recalling the demonic ballad of the romantic opera; on the other side, the music lacks strophic forms and it is adapted to the *Leitmotive* that weave through the text – in square brackets the *Leitmotiv* annotation (Zoppelli 2025):

HAGEN:

Nach längerem Stillschweigen.	[Nibelungenhass; Hagen]
Hier sitz' ich zur Wacht,	[Horn]
wahre den Hof,	
wehre die Halle dem Feind: -	[Goldherrschaft+Wehe]
Gibichs Sohne	
wehet der Wind;	
auf Werben fährt er dahin.	[Hagen; Horn]
Ihm führt das Steuer	[Siegfried]
ein starker Held,	[Siegfried]
Gefahr ihm will er bestehn:	[Goldherrschaft+Wehe]
die eig'ne Braut	[Walküre]
ihm bringt er zum Rhein;	[Walküre]
mir aber bringt er - den Ring. -	[Entsagung+Hagen]

Ihr freien Söhne,	[Rheingold]
frohe Gesellen,	
segelt nur lustig dahin!	[Entsagung]
Dünkt er euch niedrig,	
ihr dient ihm doch -	
des Niblungen Sohn. ¹⁷²	[Walhall+Rheingold]

The text is noticeably regular alternating two *Kurzzeile* and one *Langzeile* with a recurrent long pause after each *Langzeile* that divides the text in six tercets; music, on the other side, is continuous and the *Leitmotive* work exactly as they did in the rest of the cycle, commenting the verses and linking them to a *Grundthema* (*Horn-motif* : Wacht; *Walküre-motif* : eig'ne Braut, namely Brünnhilde, and so on).

Such traditional operatic elements are apparent since the very beginning: the first characters the audience meet are the Norns, daughters of Erda and Wotan. They seem to share the same cosmic knowledge of their mother, which is musically manifest through the same tonality in E flat. As it was common in the traditional opera to sing the antecedents, in the *Vorspiel* the three Norns – daughters of Wotan and Erda – sing about three episodes built with same pattern of refrains, endings, and exhortation to continue the narrative scheme of questions and answers (Arblaster 2020; Zoppelli 2025):

DIE ERSTE NORN:

Singe, Schwester, –

– dir schwing ich's zu –

weißt du wie das ward?¹⁷³

DIE ZWEITE NORN:

Singe, Schwester,

– dir schwing ich's zu –

weißt du wie das ward? ¹⁷⁴

DIE DRITTE NORN:

¹⁷² *Götterdämmerung*, act I, vv. 536-53.

¹⁷³ *Götterdämmerung*, Vorspiel, vv. 41-43.

¹⁷⁴ *Götterdämmerung*, Vorspiel, vv. 62-64.

Von Norden wieder

Werf' ich's dir nach:

Spinne, Schwester, und singe!¹⁷⁵

As their mother, they carry the cosmic knowledge and here, besides summarising the events of the last three parts, they inform the audience of events older than the myth, current and future: we learn that another act of violence occurred as Wotan obtained the *Weltesche* by breaking one of its branches, draining both the tree and its wisdom; now Wotan awaits in his Hall of Hero, which he yearned so much as symbol of his power and authority, the inevitable end that, say the Norn, will come through Loge spreading his fire in the Walhalla. As soon as they recall the theft of the gold, the rope breaks and the Norns declare they are unable to see more: as the gold entered the world story, it started process of corrosion that will destroy the cosmic order as it was established. Beyond that, the unknown (Zoppelli 2025).

Götterdämmerung is the final and most evident manifestation of such corruption of the natural world, already evident in the setting: for the first time, the action is set in a human environment and the action revolves mainly around humans – exceptions are made for the Rheintöchter and Waltraute, who, nonetheless, make a short appearance and are not decisive for the plot. The Hall of the Gibichungen is the symbol of the contemporary society where greed and deception rule on everything. The depiction of the characters in the first scene is already emblematic of the represented society: Gunther, a weak-willed king, wishes to live up to his lineage, but is well aware of his limitations; Gutrune is silent and accepts mildly any decision concerning her, as the planned wedding with Siegfried. Hagen, on the other side, is the real authority: Alberich's son, born from a rape against the Queen mother, he commands the army, controls the information, holds a strong influence on the king, and is Siegfried's counterpart. The latter is born from love, descendent of Wotan (*Licht-Alberich*), and acts spontaneously, almost naïf, and is led by love; the former, on the other side, was born from a loveless union and is *Schwarz-Alberich*¹⁷⁶'s son, a careful schemer, and hates any form of life and joy:

HAGEN:

Gab die Mutter mir Mut,

nicht doch mag ich ihr danken,

daß deiner List sie erlag:

¹⁷⁵ *Götterdämmerung*, Vorspiel, vv. 83-85.

¹⁷⁶ The terms *Schwarz-Alberich* and *Licht-Alberich* Wotan himself. Cf. resp. *Siegfried*, act I, vv. 513-25 and 554-579.

frühalt, fahl und bleich,
 hass' ich die Frohen,
 freue mich nie!¹⁷⁷

Hagen pretends to be a loyal subject to his king and elder brother but is perfectly aware of his power and influence as he suggests Gunther and Gutrune should marry. The scene presents the concept of Love inflected in human society: the suggested marriages are to bring value and honour to the House of the Gibichungen, a plan shared by Gunther. This union is the complete opposite of Brünnhilde and Siegfried's or Sieglinde and Siegmund's: their union had no form, namely they were not impressed in the recognised institution of marriage; on the other side, the unions planned by the Gibichungen are empty in substance and can exist only in their social form. This emptiness finds a parallel in the divine presence in this part: the gods are not authorities anymore, entities that can influence the fate of the world; now they are reduced to hollow idols, brought forth only during the wedding ceremony where the *Freia-motif* sounds like a melancholic memory of a faded past. The impending and inevitable end has already erased the gods from this world, relegated in their Walhalla.

The Gibichungen's plan to drug Siegfried into marrying Gutrune and use him to bring Brünnhilde to Gunther shows a ruthless court that uses morality only as a means to an end: Hagen convinces Gunther that Siegfried will feel somehow forced to help Gunther by virtue of their *Blutbruderschaft*, namely his marriage with Gutrune. Siegfried is therefore dragged into a cultural code completely new to him which will eventually be his doom:

GUNTHER:

Was zwänge den frohen Mann,
 für mich die Maid zu frein?

HAGEN:

Ihn zwänge bald deine Bitte,
 bänd' ihn Gutrun' zuvor.

[...]

HAGEN zu Gutrune:

Gedenk' des Trankes im Schrein;
 vertrau' mir, der ihn gewann:

¹⁷⁷ *Götterdämmerung*, act II, vv. 842-47.

den Helden, dess' du verlangst,
bindet er liebend an dich.¹⁷⁸

If Love in the natural environment was pure and often produced harmonic unions – Siegfried and Sieglinde, Siegfried and Brünnhilde, Wotan's fatherly love towards his children – the social environment – i. e. the contemporary society – creates loveless unions: Siegfried and the magic filter, Brünnhilde's deception, Hagen's birth solely as part of Alberich's plan to obtain the Ring. Lovelessness is a result of the imposition of the human codes onto the natural law, which breaks the ties with the world described in the first scene of the *Rheingold*. An example of this is given by Siegfried himself, who admits that he no longer hears the birds singing since he arrived at the Gibichungen's Hall:

SIEGFRIED:

Seit lange acht' ich
des Lallens nicht mehr.¹⁷⁹

If Siegfried lives as a hero until his treacherous murder, Brünnhilde's life is marked by a succession of undeserved punishments and humiliations as consequence for her love for the Wälsungen: in *Die Walküre* she loses her divine nature because she protected Siegfried's father, ignoring Wotan's nonsense order; in the *Götterdämmerung* she uses her knowledge to protect him against physical attacks and, ignoring Waltraute's advice, she decides to keep the Ring out of love for Siegfried, who then betrays her by marrying Gutrune – so, at least, her interpretation. It is unsurprising, then, if she demands revenge: once she sees the Ring at Siegfried's finger, she understands Gunther had never stepped through the fire and falsely accuses Siegfried of adultery, implying a violation of the *Blutbruderschaft*. Falsely, as Siegfried was loyal to the oath and used Notung to keep him and Brünnhilde separated in bed:

SIEGFRIED:

das Schwert ziehend, - mit seiner natürlichen Stimme.

Nun, Notung, zeuge du,

daß ich in Züchten warb:

¹⁷⁸ *Götterdämmerung*, act I, vv. 326-29; 336-39.

¹⁷⁹ *Götterdämmerung*, act III, vv. 1670-71.

meine Treue während dem Bruder,
trenne mich von seinem Weib!¹⁸⁰

Zoppelli (2025, 195) argues that the suffering she had to go through brought her to a delirium in which she can no longer bear the pain: she has lost everything and now everyone – sisters, father, and lover; she has no ally and the only perspective of life ahead of her is to be a submitted wife to a weak man, manipulated by an evil half-brother with the help of her beloved one. She who loved the most is now blinded by vengeful rage: such is the effect of world corruption:

BRÜNNHILDE:

Heilige Götter!

Himmlische Walter!

Rauntet ihr dieß

in eurem Rat?

Lehrt ihr mich Leiden

wie keiner sie litt?

Schuft ihr mir Schmach

wie nie sie geschmerzt?

Ratet nun Rache

wie nie sie gerast!

Zündet mir Zorn

wie nie er gezähmt!

Heißet Brünnhild'

ihr Herz zu zerbrechen,

den zu zertrümmern,

der sie betrog!¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ *Götterdämmerung*, act I, vv. 829-832.

¹⁸¹ *Götterdämmerung*, act II, vv. 1172-87.

Götterdämmerung is the final act of a world on the verge of collapse, but the reading of the finale is far from being clear and univocal —perhaps an inevitable consequence of Wagner's two-decades long philosophical journey. As Berry notes, the first version of the closing monologue completed in December 1852 is explicitly Feuerbachian in its revolutionary optimism: Brünnhilde's last words before she joins Siegfried in the pyre enact a programmatic rejection of private property, custom, and contract, foretelling the immolation of Walhalla and foreseeing a world governed by Love alone — for Feuerbach the foundational principle of any healthy life, religion, and social order. The revision of 1856, following Wagner's encounter with Schopenhauer, shifts the message towards the metaphysical: Brünnhilde's renunciation of Walhalla becomes a renunciation of desire and illusion — *Wunschheim* and *Wahnheim* — and her self-immolation the liberation from the suffering induced by erotic love rather than the ignition of a new world order. As Whittall argues (2020), the distance between the two versions testifies to the shift from revolutionary utopianism to an acceptance of inevitable suffering and loss. Yet neither ending was set to music: in the final version, Wagner entrusted the meaning of the conclusion to the music alone, removing the closing speech almost entirely. The role of Brünnhilde as agent of love and redemption had already been declared by Wotan in act III of *Siegfried*:

WOTAN:

Die du mir gebarst,

Brünnhilde

sie weckt hold sich der Held:

wachend wirkt

dein wissendes Kind

erlösende Weltentat.¹⁸²

These verses, accompanied by the *Siegfriedliebe-motif*, seem to highlight a major difference between Brünnhilde and Siegfried: the latter had the chance to return the Ring to the Rheintöchter, but ultimately lacked the understanding and the love to do so; the former certainly keeps the Ring, but as a symbol of Siegfried's love, not as a way to gain power or wealth. Eventually, through Siegfried's death, she will develop the necessary comprehension of the world, accepting and willing the end: her sacrifice will purify the Ring and destroy the old world in favour of a new order.

¹⁸² *Siegfried*, act III, vv. 2144-49.

BRÜNNHILDE:

O ihr, der Eide

heilige Hüter!

Lenkt euren Blick

auf mein blühendes Leid:

erschaut eure ewige Schuld!

Meine Klage hör,

du hehrster Gott!

Durch seine tapferste Tat,

dir so tauglich erwünscht,

weihtest du den,

der sie gewirkt,

des Verderbens dunkler Gewalt: —

mich — mußte

der Reinste verraten,

daß wissend würde ein Weib! —

Weiß ich nun was dir frommt? —

Alles! Alles!

Alles weiß ich

alles ward mir nun frei!¹⁸³

Through a web of *Motive – Schicksal, Wälsungenliebe, Todesklage* – the orchestra intensifies her epiphany moved by Love and the accusation made to the gods – specifically to Wotan, the *hehrster Gott*. Indeed, she commands Wotan's raven to guide Loge to the Walhalla and to bring the gods' dominion to an end.

BRÜNNHILDE:

¹⁸³ *Götterdämmerung*, act III, 1955-73.

Fliegt heim, ihr Raben!

[...]

Weiset Loge nach Walhall!

Denn der Götter Ende

dämmert nun auf:

so – werf' ich den Brand

in Walhalls prangende Burg.¹⁸⁴

Since the gods perish but the human world remains untouched by the flames, leaves an open question about the actual degree of Schopenhauerian pessimism in this finale. Once again, the music completes the lyrics and the actions: the most recurring motifs are linked to the natural environment – *Welle*, *Rheintöchter*, *Rheintöchtersang* – the gods – *Walhalla* – and unconditioned Love as a source of redemption and hope – *Erlösung* – as if the orchestra described the defeat of the curse, the end of an empty and oppressing order, and the return to the original prosperous harmony. Particularly the *Erlösung-motif*, moreover, already heard in Sieglinde's greeting to Brünnhilde, seems to clothe the catastrophe in an unmistakably redemptive quality (Arblaster 2020).

Such redemption, however, is nowhere to be found in the ancient sources. The *Götterdämmerung* is the chapter that draws the most from the German sources – a presumable residual of the original *Siegfrieds Tod* inspired by the *Nibelungenlied*. However, as it was for the other parts, Wagner arbitrarily rewrites the elements and the meaning they carry.

The Norns of the *Prelude* are inspired by the Norse mythological figures, but in the *Fáfnismál*, an Eddic poem belonging to the *Völunga*-cycle, they are said to be numerous, belonging to the different races:

Fáfnir said:

'Of very diverse birth, I think, the Nornir are —
together, they don't have a [single] family:
some are of Áss-kind, some of elf-kind,
some are daughters of Dvalinn.'¹⁸⁵

The mention of three Norns somehow linked to a tree is given by the *Völuspá*, related to the Yggdrasill, which inspired the Wagnerian *Weltesche*:

¹⁸⁴ *Götterdämmerung*, act III, 2001; 2007-11.

¹⁸⁵ (Pettit 2023, 505)

‘I know a standing ash, it’s called Yggdrasill,
 A tall tree doused with white mud;
 From there come dews, those that fall in dales;
 It always stands, green, above Urðr’s spring.
 ‘From there come maidens, knowing many things,
 three [maidens], from the sea which stands under the tree;
 one was called Urðr, the second Verðandi,
 — they inscribed on a stick— the third Skuld;
 they laid down laws, they chose lives
 for the sons of men, the fates of men.¹⁸⁶

Their role as well is different in the *Ring*, where they appear only as extension of Erda’s knowledge, completely powerless to the course of the events:

ERDA:

Mein Schlaf ist Träumen,
 mein Träumen Sinnen,
 mein Sinnen Walten des Wissens.
 Doch wenn ich schlafe,
 wachen Nornen:
 sie weben das Seil,
 und spinnen fromm was ich weiß: —
 was fragst du nicht die Nornen?

WOTAN:

Im Zwange der Welt
 weben die Nornen:
 sie können nichts wenden noch wandeln;¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ (Pettit 2023, 43)

¹⁸⁷ *Siegfried*, act III, vv. 2027-37.

Moreover, the Gibichungen plotting a marriage precedes Siegfried's arrival at their Hall, which subverts the dynamics of the sources. In the *Nibelungenlied*, Siegfried arrives at Worms, befriends Gunther and his brothers – here non-existent – and accepts to help Gunther win Brünnhilde in exchange for Kriemhild's hand:

[C 338-39]

Des antwrte Sifrit: “swie mir min dinch da chuom,
gistu mir din swester, so bin ich dir fruom,
die schoenen Chriemhilde, ein kuniginne her.
Ine ger deheiner miete nach minen arebeiten mer.“

The only common aspect is Gutrune/Kriemhilde's passive compliance, which, however, changes in the second part of the *Nibelungenlied* in favour of a more active and vengeful attitude. Sîvrit, on the other hand, is far from being a naïf character ruined by the toxic courtly culture; on the contrary, Bockstock argues that “no contemporary could have failed to recognize and shudder at his monumental folly arising out of his impenetrable egoism, and to discern in him the deadly sin of pride”, interpreted as such in *Diu Klage* as well (1960, 206):

[33-9]

si hêten ouch âne wân
eine swester wol getân
diu nam sider einen man
dâvon sich prûeven began
vil maneges guoten recken nôt,
unt daz er selbe den tôt
gewan von siner übermuot.¹⁸⁸

The magic potion is mentioned in the *Völsunga Saga*, although in this case it's Grimhild, mother of Guðrún and Gunnar, that offers the drink to Sigurðr:

“Grimhild noticed how deeply Sigurðr loved Brynhild, and how often he talked of her. She thought that it would be a good thing if he settled there and married King Gjuki's daughter [...] One evening as they sat drinking, the queen got up, went to Sigurðr and addressing him said: ‘[...] Take this horn and drink.’ [...] and with that drink he lost all memory of Brynhild.

¹⁸⁸ (Piper 1889, 194)

[...] One day Grimhild went to King Gjuki, embraced him and said: ‘The greatest champion to be found anywhere in the world is here with us now. [...] Give him your daughter in marriage [...]’¹⁸⁹

If the *Snorra Edda* has no mention of it, the *Poetic Edda* confirms a dynamic of trickery that starts with Grimhildr. In *Grípisspá* Grípir foretells Sigurðr his future:

‘You two will swear all oaths,
very firmly — few will hold;
[when] you have been Gjúki’s guest for one night,
[...]
‘You’ll fall victim, prince, to the treacheries of another,
you’ll pay for Grímhildr’s counsels;
she’ll offer you a bright-haired girl,
her daughter— she’ll plot against the prince!’

As for Hagen/Högni and Gunther/Gunnar, they are both described brave heroes, the former being a trustworthy subject, the latter as a King of great importance and value. Hagen is never portrayed as a selfish schemer who follows personal interests, but as a loyal vassal who pursues only his chief’s honour and wealth. Most importantly, Hagen follows his king in his adventures, but he never pushes the events in any direction. Even Siegfried’s murder in the *Nibelungenlied* is carried out due to an oath of loyalty to Brünnhilde in order to avenge her wounded honour – an offense, moreover, not to her love but to her dignity of queen, being called Siegfried’s concubine by Kriemhild.

The mythicization of Brünnhilde in the *Ring des Nibelungen* brought to a striking divergence with the original character: neither the *Nibelungenlied* — where she simply vanishes after Siegfried's death, her role extinguished — nor the Norse tradition — where she dies on the pyre without any redemptive dimension — offers the slightest precedent for her function as the agent of world redemption. On the contrary, the *Nibelungenlied* portrayal of her strength does not aim at the audience’s admiration; it rather serves to ridicule her until she is justly submitted to her husband through violence. In the German poem she is meant to be a behavioural example, changing the view on the character once she is subjugated to Gunther (Whobrey 2018). Such submission is explicitly told by Brünnhilde herself after Sívrit broke her limbs and forced her still on the bed:

[C 678]

¹⁸⁹ (Finch 1965, 47)

Owe, gedaht der reche, sol ich nu minen lip
 von einer magt verliesen, so mugen elliu wip
 her nach immer mere hohe tragen den muot.
 So versuochtet ez vil mænegiv, diu ez sus nimmer getuot.

[C 686-87]

Do greif si nach dem porten, da si den ligen vant,
 und wold in da mit binden. do vert ez so sin hant,
 daz ir diu lit ercharchten. Do verzagt ir lip,
 des wart der strit gescheiden; do wart si Guntheres wip.

Si sprach: „kunic edele, ir sult mich lebn lan.
 ez wirt vil wol versfnet swaz ich iu han getan.
 ich gewer mich nimmer mere der edeln minne din,
 wand ich han wol erfunden, daz dv chanst frowen meister sin.“

The violence in the *Götterdämmerung* stops at the chamber doors, where Siegfried takes out his sword to lay it between him and Brünnhilde, as a form of respect to his *Blutbruderschaft*, a scene drawn from the Nordic sources – where, nonetheless, there is no mention of violence.

Concerning the finale, in both traditions Sîvrit/Sigurðr's death represents a pivotal event that inaugurates the story of Kriemhild/Guðrún's revenge, which will end with a fatal fight between Huns and Nibelungen. The poem ends with Kriemhild's death and the narrator admits to ignore what happens after:

[C 2438-39]

Ine chan iuch nicht bescheiden waz sider da geschach,
 wan christen und heiden weinen man do sach,
 wibe und knehte und manige schone meit.
 die heten nach ir friunden diu aller grozisten leit.

Ine sage iu nu niht mere von der grozen not –
 die dar erslagen waren, die lazen ligen tot –
 wie ir dinch an geviengen sit der Hunen diet.
 hiet hat daz mære ein ende: daz ist der Nibelunge liet.

The mention of a new beginning, symbolised by the coronation of Gunther and Brünnhilde's son Sîvrit as new King of the Burgunden, is mentioned in the later *Diu Klage*, an attempt to patch up an ending that, otherwise, would remain nothing more than bloodshed with no winners.

The Nordic sources, on the other side, do not even pose the question: Guðrún survives the Niflungar's doom and marries king Jónakr, from which she has two sons, who will die in the attempt to avenge Svanhildr, Guðrún and Sigurðr's daughter and therefore their half-sister, killed by her husband's Jormunrekkr:

PoE: "Then the one descended from ruling powers roared at that,
bold in his mail-coat, as a bear roars:
'Stone the men, since spears don't bite,
[or] edges or iron, Jónakr's sons!'
[...]
There fell Sqrli at the hall's gable
and Hamðir sank at the back of the house.

This is called Hamðismál in fornu."¹⁹⁰

SnE: "Then the king's men got up and attacked them and found they could not overcome them with weapons. Then Iormunrekk shouted that they must be stoned. This was done. They fell there, Sorli and Hamdir. Thus the whole family and progeny of Giuki were now dead. There survived boy Sigurðr a daughter called Aslaug who was brought up at the home of Heimir in Hlymdales, and from her important family lines are descended."¹⁹¹

In the *Volsunga Saga* their death is also Odin's responsibility:

"They were now attacked. And they defended themselves valiantly and well, and were the death of many a man. No iron bit home. Then a grey-haired man of aged appearance and with one eye [Odin] came up and said:

'You people aren't clever if you don't know how to slay these men.'

'Give us advice about it if you can,' replied the king.

'You should stone them to death,' he said.

So it was done, and then stones flew at them from all quarters, and this ended with their death."¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ (Pettit 2023, 737–39)

¹⁹¹ (Faulkes 2002, 105)

¹⁹² (Finch 1965, 78)

Not only does Wagner deliberately stop at the first dramatic apex – also ignoring Guðrún’s evolution in the second narrative arc – but he also eschews the tragic ending of the original myth, opting for a more positive conclusion.

Beyond the fact that neither Brünnhilde and Siegfried nor Siegfried and Guttrune give birth to children, Siegfried’s death is portrayed as the ignition of the *Götterdämmerung*, implying that the aftermath belongs to a new, unfathomable and yet positive world. Such ending is clearly drawn from the *Völuspá*, where the sorceress announces the end and the rebirth of the world with the gods and humans who survived:

“‘She sees coming up for a second time
 earth, green again, from the sea;
 waterfalls tumble, an eagle flies above,
 the one who hunts fish on the fell.
 ‘The Æsir find each other on Iðavöllr
 and talk about the mighty earth-rope,
 and Fimbultýr’s ancient runes.’”¹⁹³

What Wagner ultimately constructed was not a synthesis of his sources but a systematic rewriting of them in light of his own philosophical and dramatic agenda: the mythology of the *Ring des Nibelungen* is, in this sense, an invention that merely wears the costume of antiquity.

¹⁹³ (Pettit 2023, 51)

6 Computational analysis.

6.1 Introduction.

The analysis presented in the preceding chapters relied on traditional philological comparison of the sources; the data were therefore analysed qualitatively, by comparing systematically the sources. In recent years, however, increasingly sophisticated computational tools have established themselves as effective methodologies for processing information at scale, particularly given the growing availability of digitised texts and the structural impossibility for a single scholar to analyse and interpret corpora of considerable size. On one side, machine learning research has developed computational models capable of automatically identifying thematic structures within large textual collections; on the other side, such structures can only acquire scholarly meaning through the interpretive lens of an expert. What Sobchuk and ŠeĽa (2024) call computational thematics — namely the study of thematic similarities between texts for the purpose of grouping them by genre or cultural affinity — rests precisely on this dual condition.

The utility of such methods does not lie in producing definitive results or automating interpretation, but in opening avenues of inquiry that traditional close reading could not pursue or could only pursue at disproportionate cost in terms of time and resources (Kapitan and Wills 2023). Topic modeling is not a proof but rather a tool for discovery, a methodology that defines the epistemological status of computational analysis: a complement to close reading, not its replacement, generating hypotheses that the scholar is then called upon to evaluate, contextualise, and interpret. A methodology, therefore, which allows researchers to examine cultural and literary trends across entire corpora, revealing latent structures that individual reading could not detect (Blei 2012). Its success, however, depends only partially on the sophistication of the algorithms employed; it relies mainly on the critical engagement of the researchers who use them, namely corpus selection, definition of parameters, evaluation of results, to name a few among interpretive acts that require disciplinary competence (Li et al. 2024).

In other words, macroanalysis does not eliminate close reading: it makes it more targeted and more informed. The computational methods must be controlled, validated, and interpreted by someone with deep knowledge of the texts and the philological tradition. Without such disciplinary expertise, even the building of the corpus would produce results with no philological anchorage.

6.2 Topic Modeling as a Methodology for Thematic Analysis.

Among the computational methods available, topic modeling has established itself as one of the most productive approaches to the analysis of large literary corpora. As Blei (2012) observed, it functions as a transformative tool for discovering the abstract topics occurring in a collection of documents, making visible cultural and literary trends that individual reading could not detect. Its fundamental advantage lies in the fact that it is an unsupervised quantitative approach: themes emerge from the analysis of the original texts with no need for prior annotation or labelling, enabling the organisation of collections too vast to be processed manually (Li et al. 2024; Blei 2012).

Neural topic modeling such as BERTopic generally outperforms probabilistic models and matrix decomposition methods on contemporary language corpora, thanks to its pre-trained embedding system (Egger and Yu 2022; Grootendorst 2022). However, when it comes to historical corpora, the model seems to underperform (Ginn and Hulden 2024; Mihajlov et al. 2024) if not properly fine-tuned or trained from scratch (Manjavacas and Fonteyn 2022; Tangherlini and Chen 2024). In the same studies, however, Non-Negative Matrix Factorization (NMF) shows good results especially regarding Topic Coherence. Such method is a non-probabilistic, linear-algebraic approach that relies on matrix factorisation: based on TF-IDF, thematic structures are extracted by decomposing a term-document matrix (A) into a terms-topics matrix (W) containing the basis vectors and a topics-documents matrix (H) containing the corresponding weights (Egger and Yu 2022).

Being both promising models, the choice fell on the best performing: in a preliminary exploration of the models, it turned out that BERTopic applied one sole topic for document identifying the literary works belonging to the same traditions – Norse sources, German sources, *Ring des Nibelungen* – but failed to assign an appropriate distribution and to identify topics specific to each document. NMF, on the other side, managed to trace an overview of similarities and peculiarities for document through the assignment of the proper topic and weight. The choice, therefore, fell on the NMF model.

Following the description of the used corpus, the model results will be discussed. The results extracted from each document will then be compared against one another, in order to examine the thematic content and the relationships among the texts, and to test whether the computational findings confirm or challenge the conclusions reached through the traditional philological analysis presented in the preceding chapters.

6.3 Intents, corpus, approach.

As already mentioned, Wagner – and not only Wagner (Eichner 2020) – claimed that the *Ring* was the renovation of the ancient German myth, the depiction of the *Volksgeist* in its original. The

qualitative analysis, however, showed otherwise: the *Ring des Nibelungen* draws its themes and motifs widely from extra-cultural sources, namely Norse, and inserts them in a system which does not reflect the cultural codes of the Germanic peoples, but rather relies on the hidden aesthetic-political manifesto.

From a computational perspective, the NMF model is expected to give us valid insights about how Wagner relates to the sources and how the sources relate to each other, in order to understand whether the model supports or denies the qualitative conclusion.

The documents inserted in the corpus were chosen by responding to two parameters: on one side it depended on the availability online of a digitised version which did not require OCR scraping nor much text cleaning; secondly, the documents were qualitatively identified as Wagner's major sources – the *Eddas*, *Thidrekssaga*, *Volsunga Saga*, *Nibelungenlied*; thirdly, the documents had to be among the translations Wagner read – as in Simrock's – or, where those were not available, a version published in a similar cultural stage – as in Hermann's. Each document was published in German between the late 19th and the early 20th century.

The chosen documents were considered only for those parts regarding the same narrative material, namely the *Nibelungenstoff*, with each document being either a German composition or a German translation of a Norse source published in Germany between the late 19th and the early 20th century. Eventually, the choice fell onto the following works:

1. The complete *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, divided into 14 acts – or scenes, concerning *Das Rheingold*¹⁹⁴.
2. A selection of 20 poems from the *Poetic Edda*, namely *Völuspá*, *Helgakviða Hundingsbana fyrri*, *Helgakviða Hundingsbana önnur*, *Sinfjötllok*, *Grípisspá*, *Reginmál*, *Fáfnismál*, *Sigrdrífumál*, *Brot af Sigurðarkviðu*, *Sigurðarkviða in skamma*, *Helreið Brynhildar*, *Guðrúnarkviða fyrsta*, *Dráp Niflunga*, *Guðrúnarkviða önnur*, *Guðrúnarkviða þriðja*, *Oddrúnargrátr*, *Atlakviða*, *Atlamál*, *Guðrúnarhvöt*, *Hamðismál*.¹⁹⁵
3. A section from the *Skáldskaparmál* from the *Snorra Edda*, corresponding with the *Otter Ransom*.¹⁹⁶
4. The complete *Nibelungenlied* – 39 âventiuren.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁴ Wagner, Richard; Voss, Egon (ed.). *Der Ring des Nibelungen: ein Bühnenfestspiel für drei Tage und einen Vorabend: Textbuch mit Varianten der Partitur*. (Reclam, 2022).

¹⁹⁵ Simrock, Karl (trans.). *Die Edda: die ältere und jüngere nebst den mythischen Erzählungen der Skalda*. 6th ed. (J. G. Cotta'schen Buchhandlung, 1876). 3-11, 133-246.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid. 307-13

¹⁹⁷ Simrock, Karl (trans.). *Das Nibelungenlied*. 19th edition. J. G. Cotta'schen Buchhandlung, 1868.

5. The complete *Volsunga Saga* – 44 chapters.¹⁹⁸
6. A selection of chapters from the *Thidrekssaga af Bern* – 113 chapters.¹⁹⁹

The texts were pre-processed and divided into 200-word chunks for a total of 1073 chunks, then cleaned of all non-lexical words with a German Stanza model²⁰⁰. Since the model does not understand semantics, it considers synonyms and different name variations for the same characters as unrelated entities, which may represent an obstacle to the correct identification of themes: therefore, names in the corpus were normalised in order to create the possibility to link the same character to the same action in each tradition. When characters are present in the three areas (*Ring des Nibelungen*, Norse tradition, German tradition), Wagner's *dramatis personae* were taken as reference for the standardisation – Sigurðr/Siegfried/Sîvrit = Siegfried; otherwise, the standard name was drawn from the *Nibelungenlied* – as in Etzel/Atli = Etzel (Appendix I).

The corpus is divided as follows: Norse sources (*Poetic Edda*, *Snorra Edda*, *Volsunga Saga*); German sources (*Nibelungenlied*, *Thidrekssaga*, the latter being a bridge between two worlds); Wagner's *Ring des Nibelungen* (*Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, *Götterdämmerung*). After several attempts, the model was found to present more interpretable topics with less noise by setting the number of topics to 16. Moreover, a further inquiry about the models' comprehension of the text brought to submit the same prompt²⁰¹ to two different models, namely Claude's model Opus 4.8²⁰² and Gemini 3.5²⁰³, and, although some assigned labels cover their topics, some others seem to be too vague and general. Therefore, the labels were eventually adjusted by the researcher through a qualitative analysis of the associated words. For instance, T04, here called *Nibelungen-not*, was labelled by Claude as *The final battle and its warriors* and by Gemini as *Heroic combat and the massacre at court (Hagen, Volker, and the clash)*, completely missing the catastrophic feature of doom. At the same time, T06 *Geschwisterliebe*, was labelled by Claude as *Siegmund and Sieglinde (the Wälsungs)* and by Gemini as *The tragic love of the Völsungs/Wälsungs (Siegmund, Sieglinde, and Hunding in Die Walküre)*, ignoring their incestuous feature. Although labels had to be manually adjusted, the models still proved to give an imperfect yet close interpretation of the topics.

¹⁹⁸ Hermann, Paul (trans.). „Isländische Heldenromane“. In *Thule. Altnordische Dichtungen und Prosa*, edited by Felix Niedner and Gustav Neckel. (Eugen Diederichs Verlag, 1923). Vol. 21, 37-136.

¹⁹⁹ Erichsen, Fine (trans.). „Die Geschichte Thidreks von Bern“, in *Thule Altnordische Dichtung und Prosa*, edited by Felix Niedner and Gustav Neckel. (Eugen Diederichs Verlag, 1924). Vol. 22, 210-446.

²⁰⁰ https://github.com/UniversalDependencies/UD_German-HDT

²⁰¹ The prompt was as follows: “go by steps: 1. read the content of the .json files; 2. read the content of the .txt files (you will find lists of words, each list progressively numbered); 3. give me a table: label number + label names” (16/06/2025)

²⁰² <https://www.anthropic.com/news/claude-opus-4-8>

²⁰³ <https://blog.google/innovation-and-ai/models-and-research/gemini-models/gemini-3-5/>

# Topic	Researcher's labels	Claude (opus 4.8)	Gemini (3.5)
01	Gutrune's wailing	Lament and mourning (Gutrune's grief)	Tragic lament, sorrow, and death (the fate of Gutrune/Kriemhild)
02	Divine cosmic knowledge	Gods, fate & the world's end	Wotan, Erda's wisdom, and the Norns' prophecies (the fate of the gods)
03	At Etzel's court	Etzel's court and the Huns	The Hunnic court of King Etzel (Attila) and the Nibelungs
04	Nibelungen-not	The final battle and its warriors	Heroic combat and the massacre at court (Hagen, Volker, and the clash)
05	Gold theft and divine pact	The Rhinegold — gods and giants	The Rhine gold, Loge's deceit, and the compact with the giants (<i>Das Rheingold</i>)
06	Geschwisterliebe	Siegmond and Sieglinde (the Wälsungs)	The tragic love of the Völsungs/Wälsungs (Siegmond, Sieglinde, and Hunding in <i>Die Walküre</i>)
07	At Gunther's court	Brünnhilde's betrayal and the broken oaths	Siegfried's betrayal, deceit, and Brünnhilde's vengeance (<i>Götterdämmerung</i>)
08	Thidrek's knightly world	Thidrek and Isung (the duels in Bertangenland)	Chivalric challenges and duels of King Thidrek of Bern (<i>Thidreksaga</i>)
09	Siegfried's search for fear	Mime and the forging of the sword	Siegfried in the forest: Mime's fostering and the forging of the sword Nothung
10	Knightly lore	Messengers and courtly embassies	Courtly journeys, messengers, and embassies between kingdoms
11	Courtly Costume	Courtly splendour and festivity	Courtly splendor: the reception of noble ladies, guests, and knights
12	Sigurd Fafnisbani	Regin and Fafnir (the dragon and the gold)	The Eddic myth of Sigurd: Hreidmar's hoard, the smith Regin, and the dragon Fafner
13	Helgi's cycle	Helgi and Sigrun (the Helgi lays)	Heroic deeds in the Eddic lays of Helgi Hundingsbane and the love of Sigrun
14	Rheingold and Rheintöchter	The Rhinemaidens and Alberich	The aquatic play of the three Rhinemaidens and Alberich's hatred
15	Rüdiger's courtly hospitality	Rüdiger of Bechelaren (gifts and hospitality)	Margrave Rüdiger of Bechelaren: gifts, hospitality, and the tragic moral dilemma
16	Siegmund's cycle	Sigmund and the Völsungs (Signy, Siggeir, Sinfjötli)	The legend of Völsung origins: the trials of Sigmund, Signy, and Sinfjötli against Siggeir

Figure 3 Topic labels assigned by annotator and by LLMs

6.4 Results

The results produced by the NMF model (Appendix II) are overall consistent with the expectations grounded in the traditional philological analysis, although the corpus size was restricted if compared to the corpus size of the quoted studies. Although some noise alters the final results making them not as precise as the traditional close reading, the computational analysis adequately captures the peculiarities of each document and distribution of the topics highlights relationships

between the macro-area. Furthermore, by considering only the sources without Wagner's *Ring des Nibelungen*, it is possible to notice peculiarities and similarities among the literary works.

Regarding the Norse sources, the model represents the narrative cruxes of the narration: the genealogy before Sigurðr about Helgi and Siegmund (T13, T16); the Otter's ransom (T05); Sigurðr slaying Fafnir (T12); the action that takes place at Gunther's hall (T07) and that leads to Guðrún's wedding with Etzel (T03). Moreover, the divine and mythological dimension in which the action takes place is detected in T02 and 05.

Unlike the *Eddas* and the *Volsunga Saga*, the *Nibelungenlied* has unsurprisingly no score regarding genealogy or mythology; yet, its courtly-knightly feature is noticed in *Knightly Lore* (T10), *Courtly Costume* (T11), and *Rüdiger's Courtly Hospitality* (T15). The better representation of the Nibelungen-not (T04) and Kriemhilde's grief (T01) is justified by the stronger focus of the narration on these aspects: Kriemhilde's suffering will grow into a thirst for revenge that will eventually push the events to the Nibelungen doom: the end of the story corresponds to the end of the Nibelungen. Yet, since the revenge takes place at Etzel's court, a higher score was expected from T03 *At Etzel's court*; a further puzzle regards T07 *At Gunther's court*, which shows Gunther's hall as an almost irrelevant topic, when it is presented as the main setting of the first half of the poem.

An interesting aspect that confirms the different perception of the primary groups emerges from the words populating the topics – see appendix: the Norse sources favour words belonging to the *Sippe* environment (T03: bruder; T07: frau, mann, weib; T12: bruder, gesippe; T13: sohn, tochter; T16: sohn, mann, vater, knabe), while the *Nibelungenlied* – associated with T07 and, with the highest value, to T01 – seems to be more focused on the family nucleus formed through marriage. This is also coherent with the final revenge: Kriemhild stands for her husband, Guðrún for her *Sippe*.

The topics associated with the *Thidrekssaga* on one side identify a distinctive feature regarding Thidrek's adventures (T08), on the other side it confirms the before-mentioned consideration about the difficulty to completely assign it to the one or the other tradition: the saga, transcribed in Norse in Norway on the basis of oral tales brought by German sailors, shares topic both with the *Nibelungenlied* and the Norse works. *Thidrekssaga* and *Nibelungenlied* are the only documents to be associated with courtly-knightly values (T10 and 15), with the *Thidrekssaga* being slightly closer to the *Nibelungenlied* regarding Kriemhild's wailing (T01). Closer to the Norse tradition, however, although treated differently, Siegmund is not simply mentioned as Siegfried's father, but he is protagonist of 11 chapters before being a patronymic. Moreover, the slaying of the dragon (T12) – completely absent from the *Nibelungenlied*, unsurprisingly since it is only mentioned by Hagen in âventiure 3 and by Kriemhild in âventiure 15 – finds traces even in this Saga, where it is described in chapters 16 and 17 and again mentioned in chapters 18 and 19.

Concerning Wagner's *Ring des Nibelungen*, coherently with the analysis of the previous chapters, the model clearly identified the major theme of each opera and showed what the traditional approach suggested, namely the distance between the *Ring* and the sources: the above-mentioned themes are absent, almost absent or widely enhanced.

The most important topic associated with each of the opera highlighted the central core: T05 *Gold theft and divine pact* is dominant in *Das Rheingold*, describing the action that will lead to the catastrophe initiated by the gods themselves. The mythological theme is completed by T02 *Divine cosmic knowledge*, representing the prophetic thread that accompanies the whole cycle, and T14 *Rheingold and Rheintöchter*, identifying the recurrent theme of the Rheintöchter and the Rheingold. This mythological frame identifies the active role of the gods, in contrast to its claimed sources: this supernatural level is exclusive to the Norse sources where, however, is not as prominent, to the point that the Eddic poems dealing with the *Nibelungenstoff* are categorised as heroic lays rather than mythological ones. The gods never appear as protagonists, but only as entities whose actions has consequences for the human world. *Das Rheingold* carries the highest score concerning the mythological frame, followed by *Die Walküre*, where it is present as a secondary feature. As expected, this opera is dominated by the theme of Siegmund and Sieglinde's love (T06), a fusion of the Norse myth of Sigmund and Signy's incestuous union and Sigurðr son of Sigmund and Hjördis. As expected, the tragic relationship hindered by the divine will is not only absent from any source, but in the Norse literature Siegmund's theme (T16) is populated by words regarding *Sippe* and social status (T16: sohn, mann, vater, knabe, könig), not to sacrality, divinity or perception (T06: heilig, auge, stimme, blick).

The third part, *Siegfried*, reveals a huge distance from its sources: the episode of Siegfried killing the dragon is split in two different topics, namely T09 and T12, highlighting how the form carries a different content; on one side, there is the Wagnerian Siegfried accompanied by words that describe his formative quest (schwert, notung, lernen, fürchten, wurm, wald), on the other side the focus is on the fight and the gain from the victory (schwert, gold, herz, wurm), including the circumstances that brought Sigurðr to Fafnir (regin, hreidmar, bruder, gesippe, regin fafner). The complementary distribution, however, proves that these two topics share a common ground: part of Sigurðr the heroic dragonslayer is to be found in *Siegfried* (0.028) while part of Siegfried, the boy who knew no fear, is also present in the *Volsunga Saga* – although with a very low value.

Lastly, the *Götterdämmerung* revolves around Gunther and his court (T07), coherently with the setting and the action of the opera. The fatalistic and prophetic feature of this opera, which brings to an end all the elements previously introduced, is the final stage of a thread that gathers the totality of this universe; such continuity is visible in the fact that every topic found here had already appeared

in at least one earlier source. The cosmic knowledge of T02 finds here its realisation on the background of Gods' pact with Fafner (T05), allowing the Rheintöchter to take back their Rheingold (T14) – a theme, this last one, that registers the highest value since the *Rheingold*, where they were firstly introduced.

The results, however, are far from being perfect: noise and an imperfect distribution affect the values to the point that a topic may be attributed to the wrong document – as Siegmund's cycle in the *Nibelungenlied*, where he is only quoted as Sîvrit's father – or may be thought to be quite irrelevant for said document – as in the topics regarding Etzel and Gunther, which are basically absent from the *Nibelungenlied* although they represent two narrative cruxes. It must also be remembered the limits of this research within the corpus itself, whose documents are different regarding genre and length. Moreover, as mentioned, NMF does not understand the semantics, making it impossible to discern between homonymous words. Nonetheless, as mentioned, the model does not substitute the researcher and human evaluation should be the final confirmation or rejection of the results. Overall, the model was able to identify the fundamentals for each document and to give at least a glimpse on the relationship among the sources and between these and Wagner's *Ring*: not only peculiarities and common ground between German and Norse tradition, but also the ambiguous status of the *Thidrekssaga*, along with Wagner's preference to draw from the Norse tradition – which confirms the Björnsson statement in chapter 5.2.2: the *Ring* draws 80% of its material from the Norse source, 5% from the *Nibelungenlied*, and 15% from both.

Therefore, it could be confirmed that the computational topic modeling is a valid resource for an overall comprehension of vast corpora, to which, however, the qualitative human evaluation must follow in order to give the data the right interpretation.

6.5 *Leitmotive*: statistical analysis

The results of the previous topic modeling offer a distribution of themes across the *Ring* and its sources, useful for a comparison of thematic motifs among the documents that sheds light on the nature of Wagner's work. However, the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* assigned the music such an important role that a purely text-based approach would only partially capture the complexity of the dramatic core of the *Ring*. Music, therefore, expressed in its web of *Leitmotive*, speaks a second language complementary to the text.

In order to have better insights on the *Leitmotive* and the meaning they carry, the *Ring* was encoded into four TEI-XML²⁰⁴ encoded texts – one for each part of the cycle – and the *Leitmotive* annotated using the @ana attribute on the corresponding line. Reference for the labels and their right association with the corresponding line or stage direction was Burghold's *Der Ring des Nibelungen: vollständiger Text mit Notentafeln der Leitmotive* ([1913] 2013).

The *Dichtungen* were later parsed one by one through a Python script that extracted and calculated for each motif its relative frequency, namely its proportion of the total number of motivic occurrences within the dramatic unit, namely scenes for the *Rheingold*, acts for *Die Walküre* and *Siegfried*, Prelude and acts for *Götterdämmerung*. The decision to split each *Dichtung* in units was dictated by the attempt to examine not only the main *Leitmotive* of each text – and consequently their reference *Grundthema* – but also their evolution through each text.

The resulting data (Appendix III) was then represented in a heatmap where each cell presents the weight of each Leitmotiv in each section, making it possible to see at a glance the musical comments of the orchestra in its function parallel to the ancient Greek chorus.

Regarding the *Rheingold*, the most recurrent motifs relate to nature (*Rheingold*, *Rheintöchter*, *Natur*, *Rheintöchterang*, *Wellen*), the ring and the hoard (*Ring*, *Wehe*, *Entsagung*, *Tarnhelm*), and the deities (*Loge*, *Freia*, Wotan in the motifs regarding the *Vertrag* and *Walhall*). This reflects the mythical, pastoral genre of the plot, which begins with the presentation of the Rhein as an idyllic phase of the world corrupted by the ring and its curse. As the chorus anticipates the action, here the orchestra introduces in the last scene the *Schwert*-motif, foreshadowing his intention of having an heroic human kin. If this motif is tied with *Die Walküre*, *Erda* and *Götterdämmerung* let the audience know already in the first chapter what the finale will be: the complete destruction of the world as it is known and the death of the gods.

In *Die Walküre*, the tragic feature of this chapter is expressed through motifs such as *Wehe*, *Wehwalt*, *Unmut*, *Unruhe*. However, a new feature is introduced that will last until the very end: Love, in its form of *Geschwisterliebe*, *Liebe*, *Wälsungenliebe*, grows in the first two acts, as Sieglinde and Siegmund acknowledge each other first as lovers and then as siblings, only to lower its value in the third act, where the focus is on the tragic feature. Yet, motifs as *Wälsungenliebe*, *Brünnhildens Wälsungenliebe*, *Erlösung*, and the first – already powerful – appearance of *Siegfried* carry a promise of hope for the future. In act III a *Leitmotiv* is introduced that exemplifies the complexity of the motifs, which do not refer uniquely each to one meaning: the *Loge*-motif, indeed, is not here to present the reference God as in the *Rheingold*, where he belonged to divine realm; here is placed alongside all those motifs that enhance his nature as element of fire (*Feuerzauber*, *Waberlohe*). The same motif,

²⁰⁴ P5 version 4.11.0 <https://tei-c.org/release/doc/tei-p5-doc/en/html/index.html>

therefore, referring to two different dimensions of the same character – who does not appear anymore after he pronounces his last lines in the *Rheingold*, scene 4.

Siegfried, the fable of the man who grew up in the forest, slayed the dragon and survived an attempted murder, is here reconstructed through the music: the higher value in the opera belongs to the *Waldweben*, highlighting the natural environment where Siegfried was raised. *Jugendkraft* and *Arbeit* enhance here the vigorous young spirit of the New Man envisioned from Wagner, whose communion with nature (*Waldvogel*) allows him to see through Mime's lies (*Mimes Erziehungslied*, *Loge*) and to reach Brünnhilde's rock. Love (*Liebesbund*, *Liebe*, *Liebesverwirrung*, *Liebessehnsucht*) is here a strong component, opposed to the evil represented by the *Nibelungenhass* and the *Fluch*, but the upcoming twilight of the gods is pre-announced by the motifs of *Erda* and *Götterdämmerung*. Unsurprisingly, the divine realm has a limited space of expression, coherently with Wagner's intent to slowly shift to a completely human action: it is the last opera where the gods are directly involved with the events.

The last chapter, the *Götterdämmerung*, opens on a Prelude that follows the finale of the *Siegfried*: on one side, motifs regarding Brünnhilde and Siegfried's Love (*Brünnhilde*, *Gattenliebe*); on the other side, the constant presence of the curse (*Ring* and *Wettesche*) that would bring the world to its inevitable end, as Erda prophesised already in the *Rheingold* (*Seil*, *Götterdämmerung*, *Fluch*). As the scene shifts to the Gibichungen's hall, here the motifs regard mostly its newly introduced characters (*Gibichung*, *Gutrune*, *Hagen*) while others reveal their real intentions: *Ring* is here accompanied by motifs such *Goldherrschaft* and *Fluch* (intensified), expressing an environment where the characters are oriented to personal gain. Hagen's intentions became clearer as *Mord*, *Nibelungenhass*, *Wehe* and *Ring* reach their peaks. Act III represents not only the accomplishment of the cosmic prophecy, but also the beginning of a new, purified era: exactly as it was in the *Rheingold*, here the dominant motifs regard nature (*Wasserspiel*, Rheintöchter-related motifs, *Waldvogel*, *Waldweben*) and the ring, now freed from his curse and returned to the Rhein.

The annotation of the *Leitmotive* allowed the statistical detection of the most frequently occurring motifs and their distribution in each part and in each unit of the cycle, allowing an overview of its thematic content expressed through music, namely completing the analysis of the texts by adding the features non-verbally expressed. The analysis confirmed the literary analysis of the *Dichtung*, highlighting the same themes and offering insights on the characters. As was the case for topic modeling, the methodology of annotation offers new possibilities of insights in less time and resources, but it is ultimately left to the researchers to find the right inference, proving once again the status of computational technologies not as an equivalent – and therefore possible substitute – of the researcher, but an auxiliary – therefore subordinated – to their abilities and intentions.

7 Conclusion.

The present research aimed to determine whether Wagner's *Ring des Nibelungen* involved a process of cultural manipulation and appropriation and, if so, to what extent. The final results, obtained with both traditional and computational methodologies, point to an affirmative answer.

In a first step, cultural appropriation was defined as the unjustified taking of a cultural content, led by conscious or culpably negligent claim of ownership or co-ownership, which rightfully belongs to another culture and whose reactions, if any, would contest the act as illicit, since it harms the collective cultural value (Lenard and Balint 2020; Matthes 2019; Arya 2021). In the Wagnerian context, this means an appropriation of Norse cultural elements, claimed as part of the modern German heritage and arbitrarily manipulated to best respond to Wagner's aesthetic and political *Weltanschauung*.

The study of the historical background showed that the act of appropriating foreign cultural elements – especially Norse (Zernack 2011) – was an approach positively seen in some intellectual environments, since it dealt with the lack of witnesses which hindered the reconstruction of the past self-image, a need that followed the development of the modern German collective identity. Specifically, the appropriative tendency originated from a new cultural code carried by the rising new middle class of Romantics and an Idealist conception of the past. The events between the 18th and 19th century gave rise in the Romantic generation to a sense of mistrust in politics and economics, in other words in that sense of rational progress and patriotic faith in the *Staat* that unified the members of the *Bildungsbürgertum*. This cultural code was substituted with a transcendental idea of superiority that offered an aesthetic detachment from the mundane world, essences and forces of history sublimed into a collective individual of historical action (Eisenstadt and Giesen 1995). Not a *Staat*, but *Nation* with a tension towards its own past, made of independent stages of the *Volksgeist*, a *Weltanschauung* shared by Wagner (Salmi 2020).

Compensating the void by filling it with foreign elements was not blameworthy in itself, as Schlegel argued, provided that the *Geist* was enriched and not dominated by foreignism: as long as the cultural and linguistic core remained intact, appropriation was a valid answer²⁰⁵. Moreover, the German *Geist* was believed to assume, absorb, and ennoble foreign cultural elements in its universal role of educator of humankind. Slowly, the idea of synonymity between *Deutsch* and *universell* faced the intellectual environment, Wagner included (Berry 2004).

The major void was comprised between Tacitus' *Germania*, idealised into the description of the early stage, an idyllic settlement populated by rude but innocent barbarians, and the

²⁰⁵ Schlegel, Karl Wilhelm Friedrich. *Geschichte der alten und neuen Literatur* (1815). Quoted in (Vick 2003).

Nibelungenlied, a medieval poem whose events are rooted in the Age of Migration (Ghosh 2007). Such events manifested in an oral literary production that originated two different traditions, which preserved structures and motifs but adapted them to each different cultural stage. The similarities among the traditions – to which contributed the mixed origin of the *Thidrekssaga*, a Norwegian transcription of Northern German stories – worked as a bridgehead to claim property over the Norse literature. As they presented pre-Christian elements, they were believed to be a more archaic variant of the original myth, making it closer than the medieval German production to the original cultural core.

In this context where both the claim of property and the act of taking were supported and justified by the law of necessity and an idea of cultural superiority, Wagner took part in the reconstruction of the national myth by arbitrarily choosing, manipulating, and reassembling together Norse and German cultural elements in a claimed renovation of the German myth, namely *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. This opera cycle, however, is far from responding to the author's idea: the analysis of the *Ring* and its sources and their comparison showed a formal similarity and a substantial divergence – already manifest in the plot, drawing exclusively from the first part of the *Völsunga-Nibelungen* cycle.

Norse and German sources are certainly fixed points in time, in Assmann's words (1995), but on the one side, despite their similarities, they are respectively expression of different cultures, on the other side they are not representative of the modern German cultural identity. The Wagnerian myth is the artistic manifestation of a post-Romantic, aesthetic-political manifesto exposed in Wagner's Zurich essays: the reconstructed myth was meant to be the model of the future society where each social dimension was fused and guided by Love. Its sources, however, revolved around different cultural codes: the German sources were meant to be educative, transmitting the right values and codes of conduct by presenting negative examples as in the *übermuot* of the *Nibelungenlied* (Bockstock 1960) or positive models, as declared in the Prologue of the *Thidrekssaga* (E. R. Haymes 1988); the Norse sources, another alteration of the original myth, were meant as a way to preserve ancient literary knowledge without, however, sharing their pagan *Weltanschauung*, as in Snorri, or to point to a divine genealogy of an aristocratic family, as in the *Völsunga saga* and the Norwegian royal house. Whatever their functions, it is clear that historical events underwent a mythification process of the past, whose substance was adapted to the contemporary cultural frame of each historical stage, with no claim of fidelity to the original.

Furthermore, their themes revolve around social class status, courage before challenges, family values, where the gods' influence – if present – is not as dense as Wagner presented, nor is the *Ring's* unifying force of Love. Even those elements in Wagner pointing to an idea of racial purity,

such as the dialogue between Siegfried and Mime about physical resemblance or Sieglinde and Siegmund's union, were completely absent in the sources. A character of primordiality, namely the unacquirable, natural right to belong to a group, is not to be found in the *Volksgeist* but rather in the *Sippe* or in the social class membership.

The divergence with the sources is corroborated by the results obtained with the computational topic model NMF (Appendix II), although the topic distribution is far from being perfect: a higher value was expected from topics as *T03 At Etzel's court* and *T07 At Gunther's court* in the *Nibelungenlied*, where the action is mainly focused in these two environments; moreover, there has been no trace of the Christian divine dimension, while the Norse mythological feature had been individuated. Nonetheless, the model highlighted the independence of each manifestation of the *Nibelungenstoff* – Norse, medieval German, and Wagnerian – and the topic diversity between the ancient compositions and Wagner's *Ring*. Furthermore, its results were supported by the analysis of the *Leitmotive*, carried out by annotating in a TEI-XML file each *Leitmotiv* on the corresponding <l> and <stage> element: the results showed thematic coherence with the NMF results, namely it confirmed the substantial thematic distance between the *Ring des Nibelungen* and its sources.

The *Ring*, therefore, is not a mere adaptation of ancient material, nor a faithful philological reconstruction of the myth, and surely is not representative *in itself* of the German *Volksgeist*: it is the result of a claim of property solely based on cultural similarity, which manipulated foreign cultural elements in order to fill a cultural void and represent an idealised version of a collective identity; in the background, the exhortation to rebuild the original harmonic totality of reality – a concept, however, closer to the Classic world rather than the Norse one.

Ironically and yet unsurprisingly, the further development of the national identity made Wagner a victim of the same process he enacted: driven by ideological and aesthetical purposes, Wagner's work was manipulated immediately after his death, in order to make it more appealing for the *völkisch* environments. Its revolutionary core, of anarchist and socialist inspiration, was left aside and ignored, insisting rather on a pessimistic and transcendental *Weltanschauung*, and even interpreting elements such as the Mime and Alberich as part of an antisemitic and racist program. The extent of Wagner's impact and Wagner's manipulation would be the occasion for a further inquiry, whose focus would shift from an *intercultural* to an *intracultural* perspective, resulting in a deeper insight about the dynamics and dangers of cultural appropriation; in fact, the association between Norse culture and ultra-conservative, *völkisch* or even nazi environments inevitably changed the perception of the cultural elements, shifting their values towards a political manifesto of racial supremacy (Butters 2023).

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APPENDIX I: NAME NORMALISATION

* at the end of the name to include declensions (e.g. Hagen-Hagens)

Siegfried*	→ SIEGFRIED	Frigg*	→ FRICKA
Sigfried*	→ SIEGFRIED	Alberich*	→ ALBERICH
Sigurðr*	→ SIEGFRIED	Andvari*	→ ALBERICH
Brünnhilde*	→ BRÜNNHILDE	Mime*	→ MIME
Brünnhild*	→ BRÜNNHILDE	Regin*	→ MIME
Brünhild*	→ BRÜNNHILDE	Fasolt*	→ FASOLT
Brynhild*	→ BRÜNNHILDE	Siegmund*	→ SIEGMUND
Brunhild*	→ BRÜNNHILDE	Sigmund*	→ SIEGMUND
Wotan*	→ WOTAN	Sieglinde*	→ SIEGLINDE
Odin*	→ WOTAN	Hunding*	→ HUNDING
Odhin*	→ WOTAN	Hreidmar*	→ HREIDMAR
Wanderer*	→ WOTAN	Grimhild*	→ GRIMHILD
Loge*	→ LOGE	Giuki*	→ GIUKI
Loki*	→ LOGE	Helgi*	→ HELGI
Hagen*	→ HAGEN	Rüdiger*	→ RÜDIGER
Hogni*	→ HAGEN	Rodingeir*	→ RÜDIGER
Högni*	→ HAGEN	Gernot*	→ GERNOT
Gunther*	→ GUNTHER	Gernoz*	→ GERNOT
Gunnar*	→ GUNTHER	Geiselher*	→ GEISELHER
Kriemhild*	→ GUTRUNE	Giselher*	→ GEISELHER
Guðrún*	→ GUTRUNE	Volker*	→ VOLKER
Gutrune*	→ GUTRUNE	Nornen*	→ NORNEN
Etzel*	→ ETZEL	Norne*	→ NORNEN
Atli*	→ ETZEL	Norn	→ NORNEN
Attila*	→ ETZEL	Walküren*	→ WALKÜREN
Fafner*	→ FAFNER	Walküre*	→ WALKÜREN
Fafnir*	→ FAFNER	Niflung*	→ NIBELUNGEN
Erda*	→ ERDA	Niflungar*	→ NIBELUNGEN
Wala*	→ ERDA	Nibelungen*	→ NIBELUNGEN
Fricka*	→ FRICKA	Nibelung*	→ NIBELUNGEN

APPENDIX II: NMF REPORT

Model parameters:

Chunk size: 200 words

Number of topics: 16

Words per topic: 15

ngram_range: (1, 3)

max_features: 5000

min_df: 2 | max_df: 0.90

l1_ratio: 0.5 | max_iter: 5000

CORPUS:

- (partial) Poetic Edda, Snorra Edda, Thidrekssaga;
- (complete) Volsunga Saga, Nibelungenlied, Ring des Nibelungen.

1. Extracted topics — words by weight (descending)

T01 · Gutrune's wailing

1. leid (0.594)
2. leben (0.576)
3. freund (0.468)
4. Gutrune (0.442)
5. weinen (0.400)
6. lieb (0.383)
7. edel (0.378)
8. tod (0.373)
9. klagen (0.342)
10. weib (0.334)
11. nimmer (0.328)
12. leide (0.324)
13. bleiben (0.312)
14. degen (0.305)
15. mut (0.293)

T02 · Divine cosmic knowledge

1. wotan (0.734)
2. wissen (0.611)
3. ewig (0.499)
4. gott (0.414)
5. Erda (0.397)
6. Brünnhilde (0.389)
7. welt (0.383)
8. Nornen (0.347)
9. heilig (0.308)
10. seil (0.258)
11. ende (0.257)
12. brechen (0.243)
13. rat (0.236)
14. einst (0.232)
15. liebe (0.231)

T03 · At Etzel's court

1. Etzel (0.928)
2. könig Etzel (0.785)
3. Nibelungen (0.468)
4. könig (0.443)
5. Hagen (0.414)
6. Gutrune (0.393)
7. Hune (0.290)
8. Gunther (0.266)
9. Aldrian (0.221)
10. könig Gunther (0.207)
11. bruder (0.198)
12. mann (0.187)
13. groß (0.182)
14. gold (0.172)
15. garten (0.168)

T04 · Nibelungen-not

1. Hagen (0.391)
2. kühn (0.369)
3. hand (0.346)
4. schlagen (0.340)
5. degen (0.281)
6. stark (0.268)
7. held (0.260)
8. Volker (0.257)
9. blut (0.230)
10. helm (0.227)
11. schlag (0.219)
12. sehen (0.218)
13. schild (0.214)
14. wunde (0.196)
15. Iring (0.172)

T05 · Gold theft and divine pact

1. Loge (0.829)
2. Wotan (0.716)
3. Alberich (0.446)
4. ring (0.399)
5. Freia (0.366)
6. Fricka (0.325)
7. Fasolt (0.310)
8. Donner (0.252)
9. Fafner (0.237)
10. hort (0.228)
11. gold (0.221)
12. riese (0.196)
13. lösung (0.177)
14. Froh (0.174)
15. frei (0.152)

T06 · Geschwisterliebe

1. Siegmund (0.618)
2. Sieglinde (0.611)
3. Hunding (0.318)
4. Brünnhilde (0.213)
5. schwert (0.189)
6. blick (0.176)
7. Wälsung (0.175)
8. Walküren (0.157)
9. auge (0.149)
10. halten (0.148)
11. stimme (0.146)
12. blicken (0.146)
13. Waltraute (0.139)
14. heiaha (0.139)
15. heilig (0.138)

T07 · At Gunther's court

1. Brünnhilde (0.910)
2. Siegfried (0.807)
3. Gunther (0.671)
4. Guttrune (0.462)
5. Hagen (0.306)
6. frau (0.233)
7. halle (0.228)
8. eide (0.221)
9. mann (0.192)
10. könig Gunther (0.187)
11. weib (0.185)
12. mannen (0.181)
13. feuer (0.169)
14. Siegfried Gunther (0.164)
15. du (0.151)

T08 · Thidrek's knightly world

1. Thidrek (0.658)
2. könig Thidrek (0.612)
3. Isung (0.369)
4. jung Siegfried (0.366)
5. könig Isung (0.360)
6. Widga (0.355)
7. könig (0.333)
8. Amlung (0.281)
9. jung (0.278)
10. roß (0.270)
11. mann (0.217)
12. reiten (0.189)
13. schild (0.166)
14. kämpfen (0.163)
15. Siegfried (0.163)

T09 · Siegfried's search for fear

1. Mime (1.033)
2. Siegfried (0.443)
3. wald (0.263)
4. schwert (0.256)
5. fürchten (0.233)
6. Notung (0.206)
7. lernen (0.202)
8. stück (0.181)
9. höhle (0.174)
10. jetzt (0.173)
11. schmieden (0.167)
12. mutter (0.159)
13. stahl (0.151)
14. wurm (0.148)
15. knabe (0.144)

T10 · Knightly lore

1. land (0.584)
2. bote (0.416)
3. könig (0.367)
4. freund (0.294)
5. reiten (0.292)
6. könig Gunther (0.275)
7. Gunther (0.259)
8. herr (0.243)
9. ehre (0.204)
10. gewand (0.195)
11. degen (0.191)
12. Siegfried (0.181)
13. lieb (0.179)
14. märe (0.178)
15. fahrt (0.173)

T11 · Courtly Costume

1. schön (0.604)
2. frau (0.432)
3. sehen (0.330)
4. gast (0.321)
5. minniglich (0.288)
6. reich (0.286)
7. tragen (0.276)
8. maid (0.237)
9. herrlich (0.233)
10. hoch (0.225)
11. wirt (0.216)
12. edeln (0.211)
13. Guttrune (0.208)
14. gewand (0.196)
15. ritter (0.192)

T12 · Sigurðr Fafnisbani

1. Regin (0.706)
2. Fafner (0.642)
3. Siegfried (0.428)
4. schwert (0.285)
5. gold (0.211)
6. herz (0.199)
7. Hreidmar (0.166)
8. bruder (0.163)
9. Regin Siegfried (0.163)
10. wurm (0.146)
11. Siegfried Regin (0.144)
12. Fafner herz (0.143)
13. gesippe (0.142)
14. liegen (0.140)
15. Regin Fafner (0.134)

T13 · Helgi's cycle

1. Helgi (0.787)
2. Sigrun (0.421)
3. sohn (0.284)
4. Hunding (0.227)
5. Granmars (0.175)
6. fürst (0.166)
7. fahren (0.161)
8. schiff (0.149)
9. tochte (0.148)
10. könig Hunding (0.139)
11. kampf (0.139)
12. Sinfjötli (0.135)
13. heer (0.135)
14. Hödbrodd (0.133)
15. reiten (0.131)

T14 · Rheingold and Rheintöchter

1. Woglinde (0.472)
2. Wellgunde (0.451)
3. Alberich (0.435)
4. Flosshilde (0.388)
5. tauchen (0.280)
6. lachen (0.268)
7. drei (0.260)
8. flut (0.205)
9. mädchen (0.173)
10. riffe (0.167)
11. Rheintöchter (0.161)
12. tief (0.143)
13. drei Rheintöchter (0.139)
14. Woglinde Wellgunde (0.138)
15. ring (0.130)

T15 · Rüdiger's courtly hospitality

1. Rüdiger (0.823)
2. markgraf (0.420)
3. gabe (0.253)
4. edel (0.239)
5. edel Rüdiger (0.227)
6. markgraf Rüdiger (0.207)
7. gut (0.169)
8. Etzel (0.150)
9. graf (0.150)
10. bieten (0.149)
11. gerne (0.141)
12. gräfin (0.135)
13. heun (0.132)
14. gast (0.123)
15. bote (0.122)

T16 · Siegmund's cycle

- 1. Siegmund (0.442)
- 2. könig (0.338)
- 3. könig Siegmund (0.282)
- 4. sohn (0.246)
- 5. Völsung (0.216)
- 6. mann (0.212)
- 7. groß (0.209)
- 8. Siggeir (0.196)
- 9. Signy (0.191)
- 10. könig Siggeir (0.172)
- 11. Sinfjötli (0.160)
- 12. erzählen (0.155)
- 13. vater (0.155)
- 14. tag (0.140)
- 15. knabe (0.137)

2. TOPIC DISTRIBUTION BY CORPUS

Corpus	T01	T02	T03	T04	T05	T06	T07	T08	T09	T10	T11	T12	T13	T14	T15	T16
Snorra Edda	0.000	0.000	0.154	0.000	0.231	0.000	0.154	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.231	0.077	0.000	0.000	0.154
Poetic Edda	0.035	0.078	0.200	0.026	0.026	0.000	0.139	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.009	0.165	0.296	0.000	0.000	0.026
Völsunga Saga	0.000	0.014	0.148	0.000	0.014	0.000	0.218	0.000	0.007	0.000	0.000	0.134	0.035	0.000	0.000	0.430
Thidrekssaga	0.000	0.000	0.226	0.030	0.000	0.000	0.075	0.398	0.045	0.030	0.000	0.008	0.000	0.000	0.053	0.135
Nibelungenlied	0.131	0.000	0.028	0.259	0.000	0.000	0.012	0.000	0.000	0.206	0.231	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.124	0.009
Götterdämmerung	0.000	0.220	0.000	0.000	0.017	0.017	0.593	0.000	0.051	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.102	0.000	0.000
Siegfried	0.000	0.169	0.000	0.000	0.028	0.056	0.042	0.000	0.662	0.000	0.000	0.028	0.000	0.014	0.000	0.000
Die Walküre	0.000	0.242	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.758	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Das Rheingold	0.000	0.020	0.000	0.000	0.700	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.040	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.240	0.000	0.000
Corpus	T01	T02	T03	T04	T05	T06	T07	T08	T09	T10	T11	T12	T13	T14	T15	T16

Topic legend

- T01 Gutrune's wailing

T02 Divine cosmic knowledge

T03 At Etzel's court

T04 Nibelungen-not

T05 Gold theft and divine pact

T06 Geschwisterliebe

T07 At Gunther's court

T08 Thidrek's knightly world

T09 Siegfried's search for fear

T10 Knightly lore

T11 Courtly Costume

T12 Sigurðr Fafnisbani

T13 Helgi's cycle

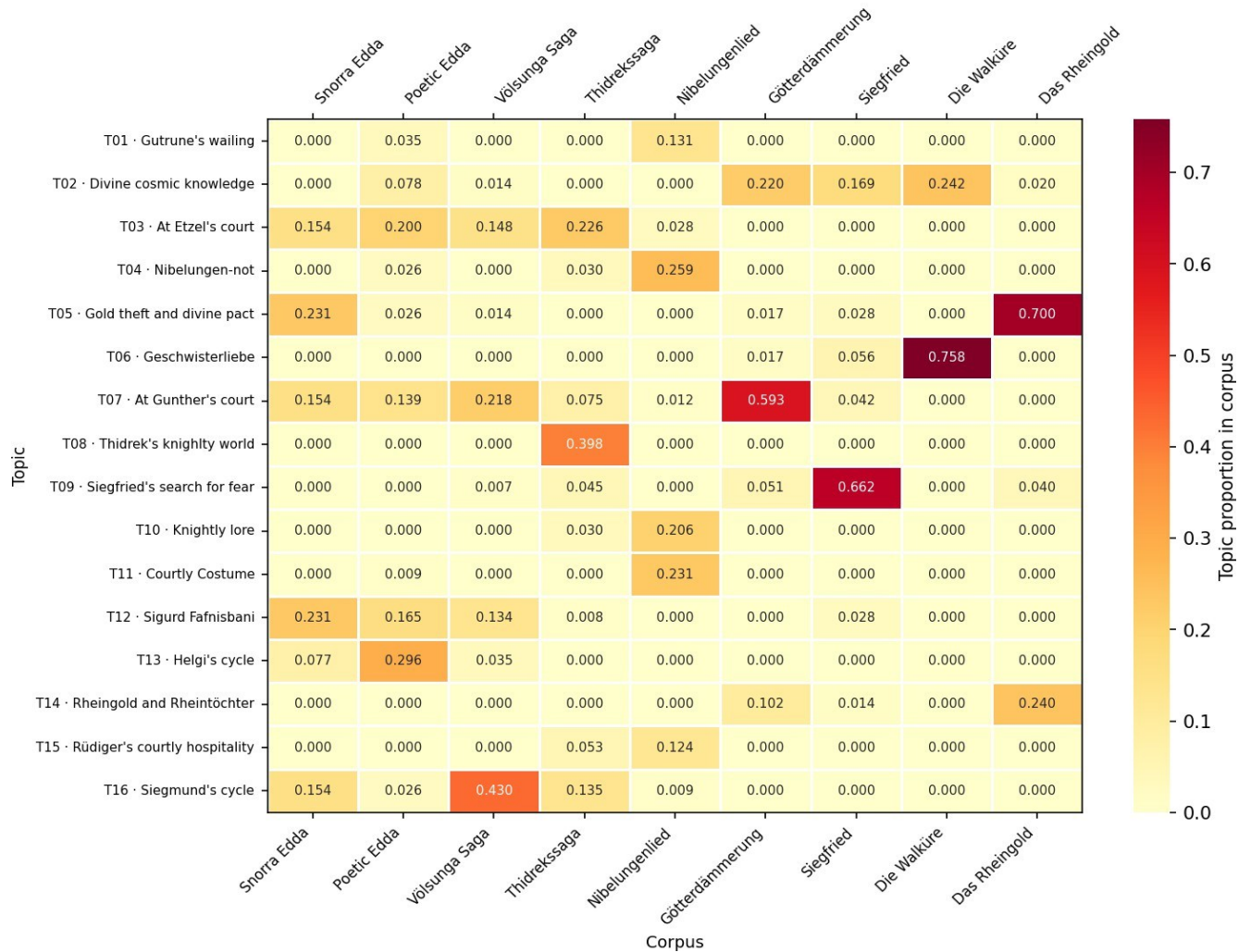
T14 Rheingold and Rheintöchter

T15 Rüdiger's courtly hospitality

T16 Siegmund's cycle

3. HEATMAP: DISTRIBUTION OF TOPICS BY CORPUS

Distribution of 16 NMF topics by corpus
(chunks of 200 words, TF-IDF 5000 features)



Topic legend

T01 Guttrune's wailing

T02 Divine cosmic knowledge

T03 At Etzel's court

T04 Nibelungen-not

T05 Gold theft and divine pact

T06 Geschwisterliebe

T07 At Gunther's court

T08 Thidrek's knightly world

T09 Siegfried's search for fear

T10 Knightly lore

T11 Courtly Costume

T12 Sigurðr Fafnisbani

T13 Helgi's cycle

T14 Rheingold and Rheintöchter

T15 Rüdiger's courtly hospitality

T16 Siegmund's cycle

APPENDIX III: Leitmotiv distribution (relative percentages)

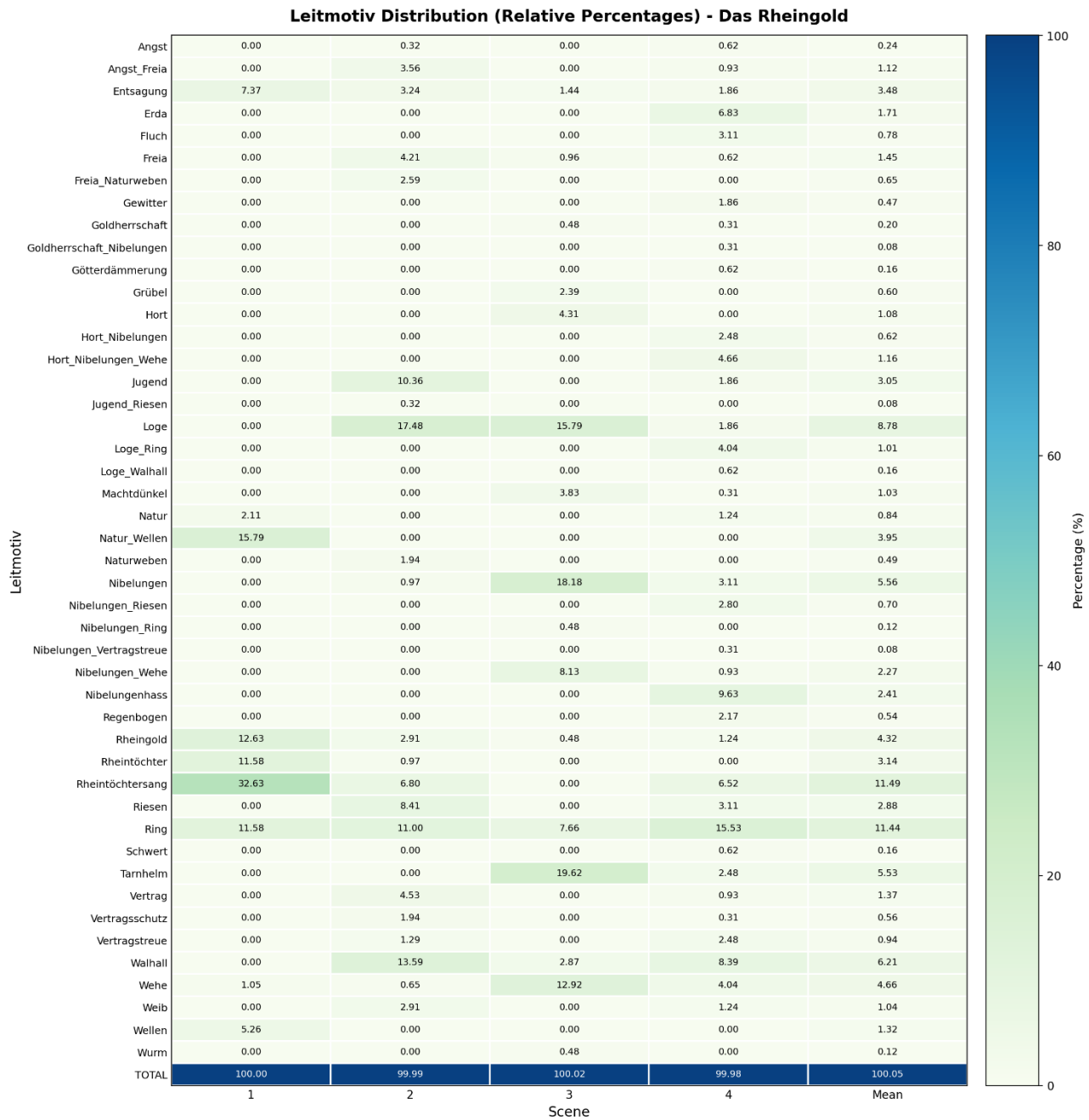
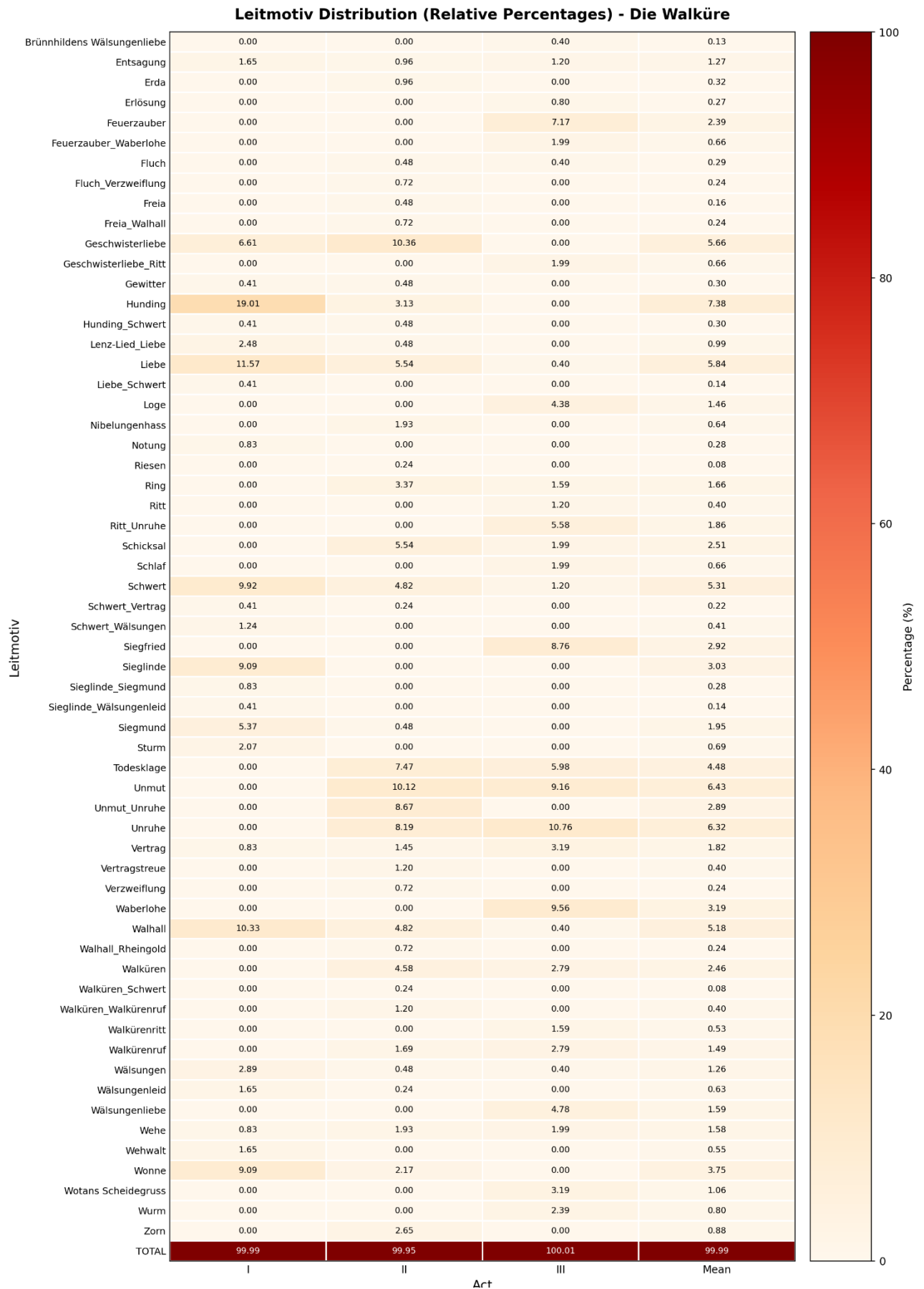


Table 2 Leitmotiv Distribution - Das Rheingold



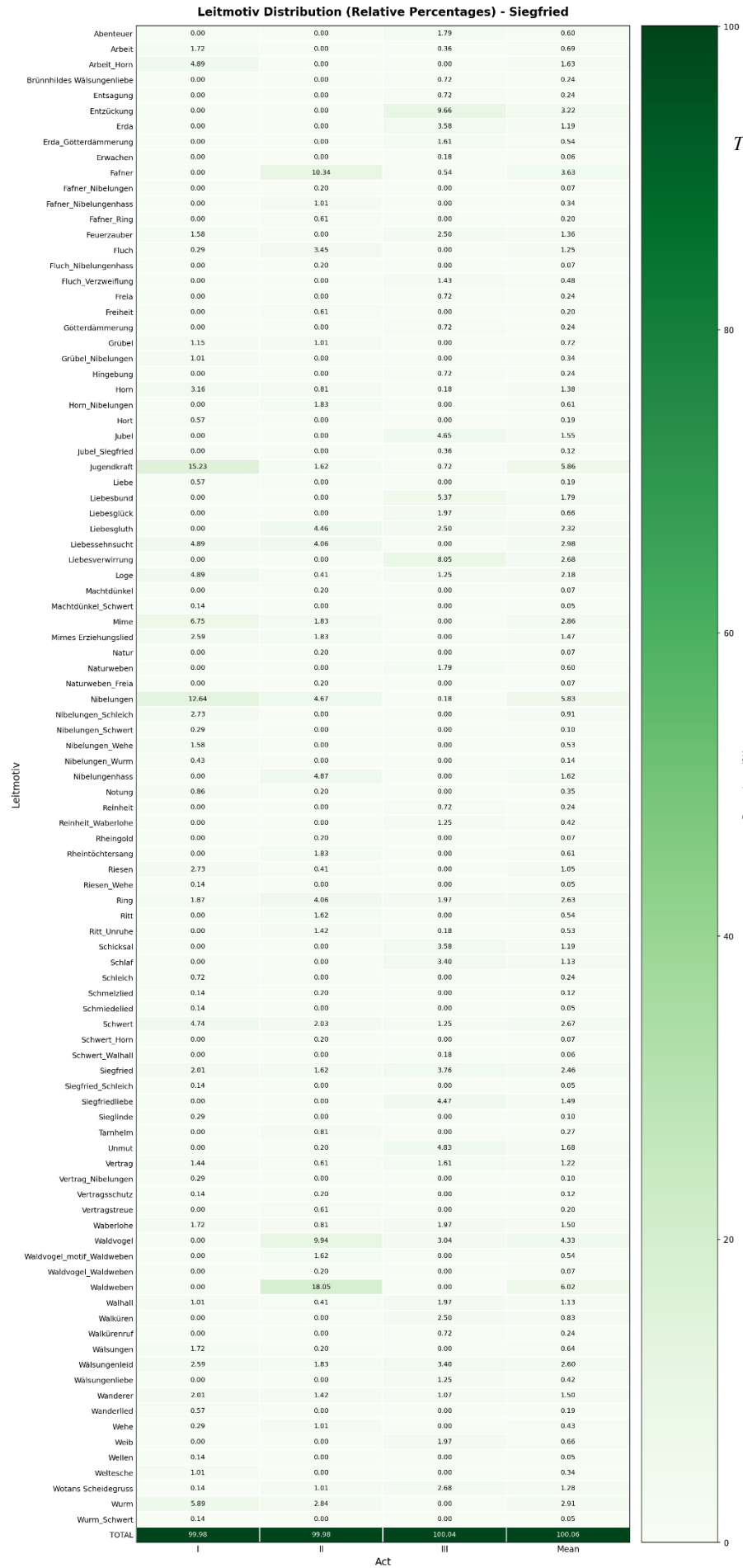


Table 4 Leitmotiv distribution - Siegfried

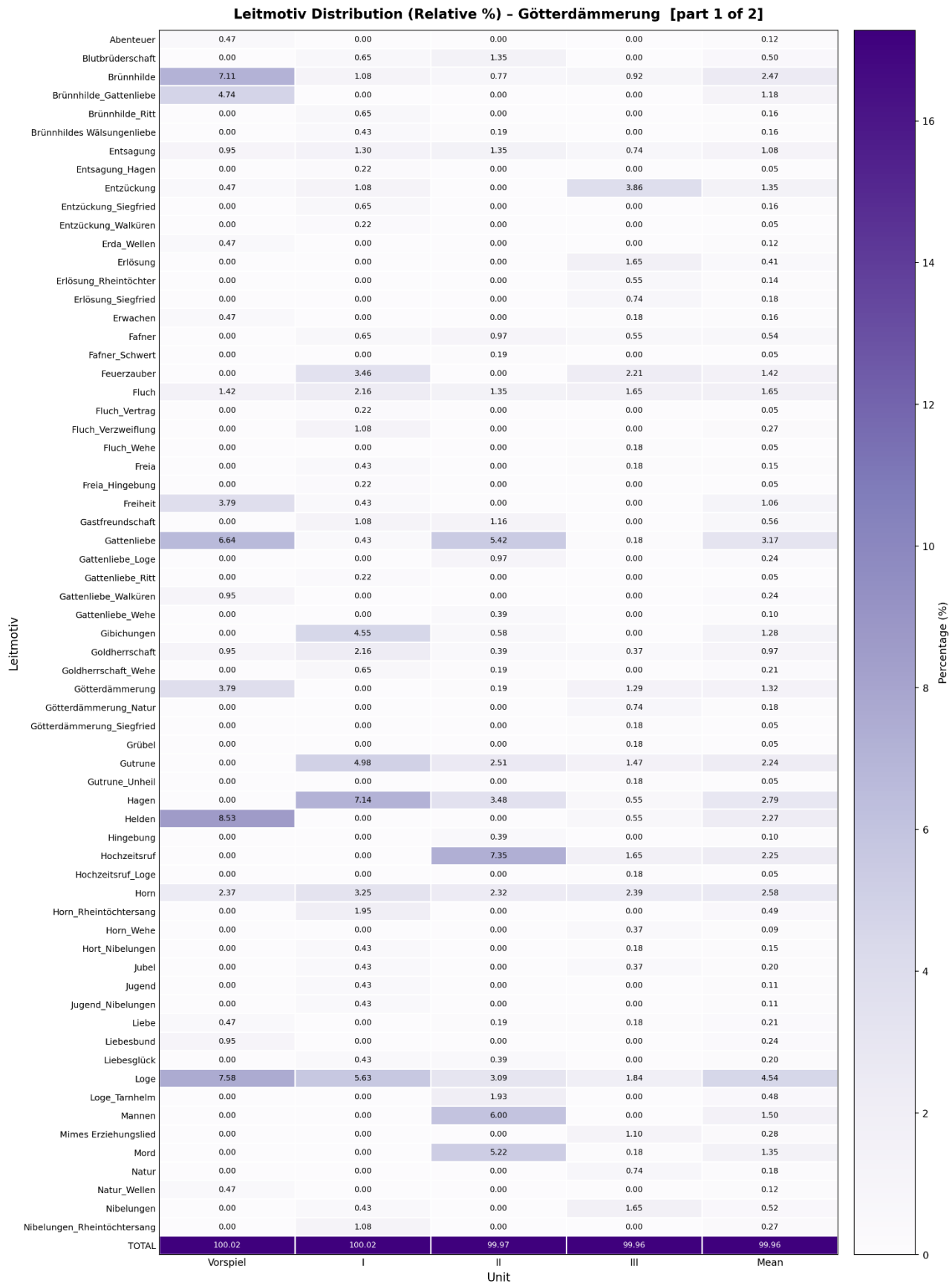


Table 5. 1 Leitmotiv distribution - Götterdämmerung

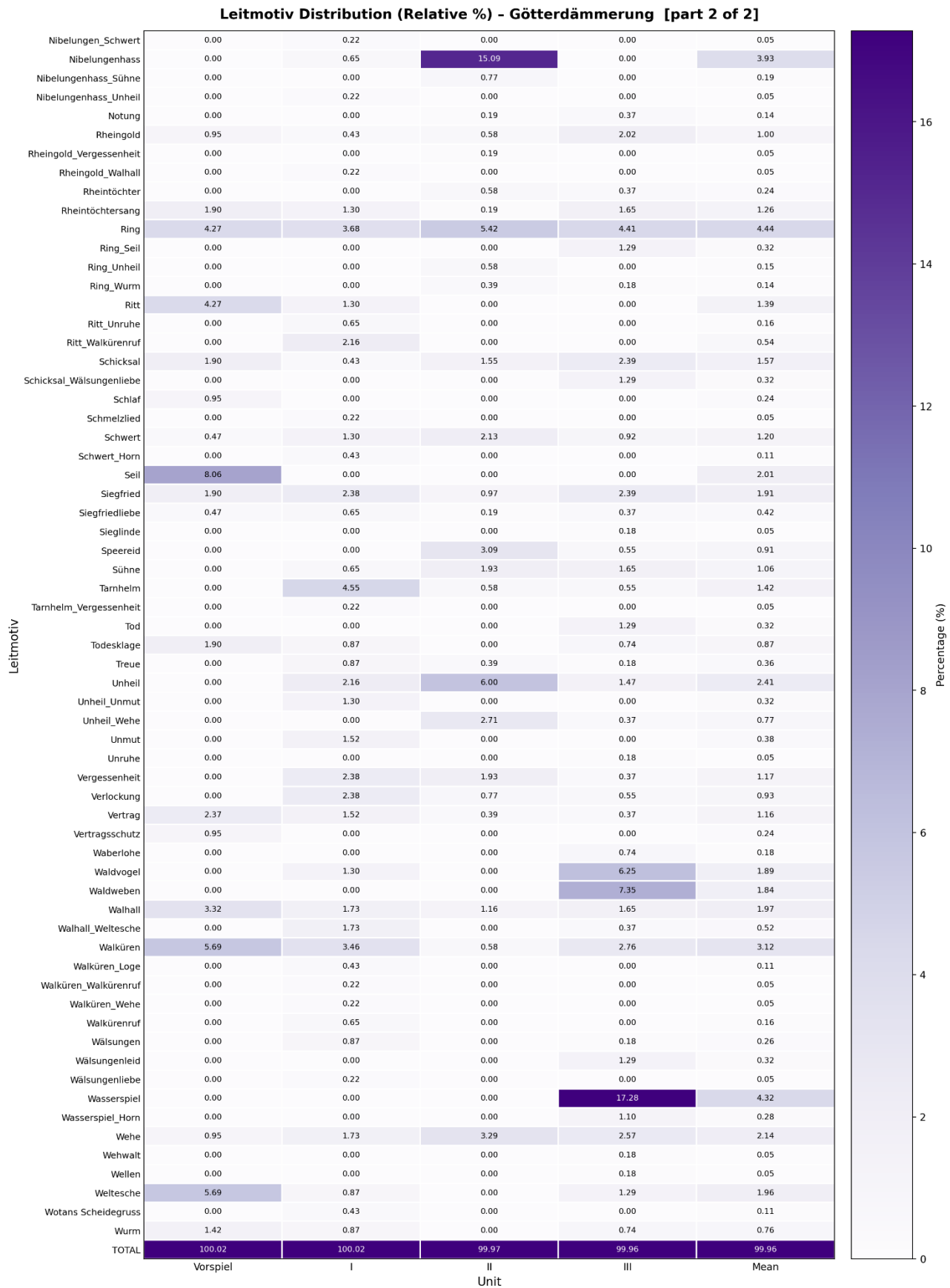


Table 5. 2 Leitmotiv distribution – Götterdämmerung

Dichiarazione del ricorso a strumenti di Intelligenza Artificiale (IA)

Il sottoscritto **Carlo Alberto Magri**, matricola numero **853499**, iscritto presso Ca' Foscari al corso di Laurea magistrale in **Scienze del Linguaggio**, autore della tesi di laurea *Götterdämmerung: cultural appropriation and manipulation in Wagner's Ring des Nibelungen*: relatrice **prof.ssa Chiara de Bastiani**, consapevole delle sanzioni previste dall'art. 76 del Testo unico, D.P.R. 28/12/2000 n.445, e della decadenza dei benefici prevista dall'art. 75 del medesimo Testo unico in caso di dichiarazioni false o mendaci, sotto la propria personale responsabilità ai sensi degli artt. 46 e 47 del D.P.R. 28/12/2000 n. 445,

DICHIARA

- di aver fatto ricorso a tecnologie di intelligenza artificiale generativa per supportare vari aspetti della ricerca e della scrittura della mia tesi di laurea, in particolare *(per ogni punto scrivere per esteso quanto viene richiesto)*:
 - *tecnologie usate:*
 - *Claude con modelli Sonnet 4.6 (febbraio 2026) e Opus 4.8 (maggio 2026)*
 - *Gemini 3.5 (maggio 2026)*
 - *Informazioni su come è stato utilizzato lo strumento:*
 - *revisione e ottimizzazione dei testi per migliorare chiarezza e coerenza;*
 - *supporto nella generazione di codici Python per l'effettuazione di Topic modeling ed estrazione di metadati da file TEI-XML annotati (Claude); generazione di labels per i topic estratti (Claude e Gemini).*
 - *La generazione di codici Python comprende in parte il capitolo 6 **Computational analysis**; la revisione è stata operata sul testo intero.*
 - *I testi generati sono stati sopposti ad attenta revisione, spesso utilizzando il materiale generato come semplice input di partenza per la formulazione autonoma dell'autore; i codici sono stati controllati e il loro risultato verificato sulla base della letteratura esistente e sul close reading presentato nella tesi.*

DICHIARA INOLTRE

che tutto il materiale generato dall'IA è stato attentamente verificato, rivisto e rielaborato dall'autore, che si assume la piena responsabilità per la qualità, l'accuratezza e l'integrità scientifica del lavoro.