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FIRE-BURIAL

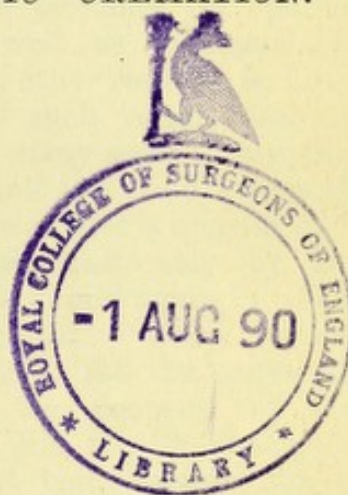
AMONG OUR GERMANIC FOREFATHERS:

A RECORD OF THE

POETRY AND HISTORY OF TEUTONIC CREMATION.

BY

KARL BLIND.



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FIRE-BURIAL AMONG OUR GERMANIC FOREFATHERS.



I

WHEN the question of Cremation is illustrated by historical references, we always hear much of the Indians of old, of the Phœnikians, of the Greeks, the Romans; but scarcely ever—at least in this country—do we see any mention made of our own Germanic forefathers. Yet those who combine an ardent zeal for progress with a faculty of musing over the ways of the past, might not be sorry to find from the records of history, as well as from poetical traditions, that with the Teutonic race also cremation was once the ruling custom.

In England, some astonishment has been expressed that the Germans—both those who dwell in their native home, and those who have settled beyond the Atlantic—should have so eagerly taken up the proposal of Sir Henry Thompson. At Vienna and Berlin, at Leipzig, Dresden, Breslau, Stuttgart, and in several other German towns, agitations in favour of fire-burial (*Feuerbestattung*), as the new term is, are in full course. In some cases, the communal councils are firmly heading the movement. At New York, it is stated, the Germans have erected a great Fire-Hall, with an altar in its centre, at which such ceremonies may be performed as

survivors may deem requisite for the repose of the departed ones, or for the softening of their own feeling of grief.

This idea of reverting to cremation as to a practice urgently required on grounds of public health, as well as commendable from various other reasons, is, however, not of such recent date in Germany as many seem to suppose. It has been put forth and advocated there for upwards of a quarter of a century; not least ably by Dr. Trusen in 1855, and again in 1860, with the motto: '*Salus publica suprema lex.*'¹ But the eagerness with which the proposal of Dr. Trusen and Sir Henry Thompson is at present being worked out on German soil, is certainly such as to have almost the appearance of a return to early notions and cherished customs, which centuries of a contrary practice have not been able to root out from the nation's mind. It is as if a spark of that spirit were again stirring which urged our light and fire worshipping ancestors to consign their dead to the purifying flame.

By not a few, the idea of reverting to cremation is saluted like the deliverance from a depressing thought. 'No people, to my knowledge'—says Jakob Grimm in his masterly special treatise²—'was seized more deeply by the terrors

¹ *Die Leichenverbrennung.*

² *Ueber die Verbrennung der Leichen.* 1849.

of the dank and narrow grave than the Saxons and Frisians of old, after they had made the change from burning to burying.' These were bold warrior-races, quite fearless of death. Yet, with the re-introduction, among them, of the Christian—or rather Jewish—habit of burying the corpse beneath the clammy soil, the terrors of the grave, which a long practice of dissolution by fire had obliterated in the people's mind, were gradually fed into the most oppressive superstitions. There is a ghastly mediæval literature full of those midnight dreams of an over-wrought fancy. The Ossianic wail about the 'narrow, dark house without a ray' is in the *Volkslied* often intensified by mystic horrors that make the blood curdle.

It had not been so among our Teutonic forefathers. With them, fire-burial even in the dark of night was no doubt a frequent occurrence. Lingering traces of such a custom are to be found even now in the funeral processions at night, with the accompaniment of torches, in honour of departed princes and noblemen, or of students, which still take place here and there in Germany, but are generally considered to have something weird and ghastly about them. Among the ancient Germanic races, these nocturnal obsequies must have been quite an unobjectionable ceremony. The blazing pyre, on which the corpse was resolved into ashes, drove away with its bright flames the host of hobgoblins and vampires which haunted the later Christian tomb.

With cremation, no danger could arise of living flesh being entombed and subjected to unspeakable torments. Hence the imagination of the surviving was not tortured into fears which Biblical cases of apparent death were only calculated to enhance. Who can say whether the change from burying to burning, which we can trace among so many nations of antiquity, had not as

much to do with this consideration as with sanitary reasons, or with the growth of peculiar religious doctrines?

II

At one time, simple interment seems to have been the rule. The Greeks, under Kekrops, still buried their dead. It is said that the myth of Herakles, who mounted the pyre after having been poisoned by the shirt of Nessos, first gave rise to cremation among the Hellenic tribes. This tale, it will presently be seen, fits in, to a certain extent, with what was said among the Scandinavians, about the introduction of fire-burial by Odin. The Lakedaimonians—in many things unlike the remainder of the Greeks—preserved the practice of inhumation. Sokrates speaks of the two modes of sepulture. At the time of Platon there was still interment, as well as cremation. Pythagoras was an enemy of cremation; a fact which may go to strengthen the view of those who regard him as the Buddhagoras, or propagator of Buddhistic doctrines. Buddhism, indeed, showed less favour to cremation than the Vedic religion did, which made it a general precept. The Romans also at first buried; but, if tradition can be trusted, the pyre had become an accepted institution already before Numa. A law of his is mentioned which forbids the pyre to be sprinkled with wine. (*'Vino rogum ne aspergito!'*) Interment was preserved among the Romans only for infants and for those who had been killed by lightning, and consequently been touched by the fire of Heaven itself.

Tacitus mentions that inhumation was the custom of the Jews without any exception: and this may be said to be proved by numerous passages in the Books of Moses; in the Judges; in Samuel; in St. John; St. Matthew; and so forth. Cremation evidently was regarded by the Hebrews as an unwelcome

prospect and an evil. (Jeremiah xxxiv. 5.)³ Yet there were occasions when even they employed fire-burial unhesitatingly—either to prevent further insult being offered to a corpse by the enemy (1 Samuel xxxi. 12)⁴ or to avoid the spreading of infectious diseases (2 Chronicles xxi. 18-19)⁵. This latter fact shows that the Jews, too, were well aware of the sanitary importance of incineration.

III

It is impossible, at so long a distance of time, and with the scanty historical materials before us, to find out whether a sanitary consideration was involved in the change of the burial-form which undoubtedly took place, in a pre-historic epoch, among the Teutonic nations. Early political law-giving generally clothes itself in a religious garb. Nevertheless, in the ordinances it issues on the everyday mode of life, on the festive and funeral ceremonials of a people, considerations of public health are frequently embedded, and still clearly traceable. The Mosaic legislation furnishes well-known instances. We are entitled to a similar surmise in the case at issue. At any rate, there can be no doubt that among the Northmen also, the Fire Age was preceded by a Mound Age. In other words, their Cremation Period followed upon an era during

which they, too, had placed the entire corpses in a hillock, a tumulus, or mound.

With the dawn of history, in the countries north of the Alps, we find fire-burial, even as among the Hindoo, the Greeks, and the Romans, also among the other branches of the Aryan race in Europe—among the Kelts, the Germans, and the Slavonians. When Caesar warred in Gaul, he observed that the natives practised cremation to the fullest extent.⁶ From his report we see that it was done pretty much in the same way as in India, whither a branch of the Aryan race, originally roaming over what at present is Turkestan, must have brought the custom.

The funeral ceremonies of the Gauls are described by Caesar as 'magnificent and costly.' Those of the Germans, on the contrary, were of a simpler kind, according to the testimony of Tacitus. In his *Germania* he says:—'There is no ambitious show in their funerals. The only distinction to be observed is, that the bodies of their leading men are burnt with a certain kind of wood. They cover the pile neither with garments nor with incense; only the weapons, sometimes the horse, are added to the structure. The funeral place is marked by a knoll of turf: they reject the honour of laboriously constructed, heavy monuments, as

³ Jeremiah utters a threatening prophecy against Zedekiah, the King of Juda, that he shall be given into the hands of his Babylonian enemies. 'But thou shalt die in peace; and with the burnings of thy fathers, the former kings which were before thee; and they will lament thee, saying, Ah, lord! for I have pronounced the word, saith the Lord.'

⁴ The Philistines had cut off the head of Saul, stripped off his armour and put it in the house of Ashtaroth, and fastened his body to the wall of Beth-shan. 'And when the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead heard of that which the Philistines had done to Saul; all the valiant men arose, and went all night, and took the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Beth-shan, and came to Jabesh, and burnt them there. And they took their bones, and buried them under a tree at Jabesh, and fasted seven days.'

⁵ Jehoram had been defeated by the Philistines and the Arabians. 'And after all this the Lord smote him in his bowels with an incurable disease. And it came to pass, that in process of time, after the end of two years, his bowels fell out by reason of his sickness: so he died of sore diseases. And his people made no burning for him, like the burning of his fathers.'

⁶ *De Bell. Gall.* vi. 18.

if it were a burden upon the dead. Laments and tears they soon give up; but grief and sorrow last with them. For women it is meet to utter wails; for men, to keep up remembrance.'

There can be no doubt, in my opinion, that the words '*Funerum nulla ambitio; id solum observatur, ut corpora clarorum virorum certis lignis cremantur*,' imply a universal practice of cremation among the Germans of old. The emphasis is to be laid on the words '*clarorum*' and '*certis*.' In his concise phraseology, which so often verges upon the seemingly incomplete, Tacitus takes fire-burial as a self-understood Germanic custom. He consequently only lays stress on the fact of the simplicity of a German funeral being but slightly deviated from in the case of their chieftains, for whose incineration 'special kinds of wood' were set apart.

There is ample historical proof that some of the Thrakians,⁷ who, according to Herodotus himself, must be regarded as a Getic or Gothic people; that the Getes⁸ more specially, as well as the Gothic Herulians;⁹ that the Thuringians,¹⁰ the Trevirians,¹¹ the Frisians,¹² the Saxons,¹³ and the Northmen, all practised fire-burial. Where, as in the case of the Goths of Ulfilas, of the Franks, the Suabians, the Alamans, and a few other German tribes, a direct historical record is wanting, the gap can be filled up by the science of language. By means of it, it is proved, or at all events rendered probable in the extreme, that the same custom prevailed also among this section of the Germanic world. Among the Scandinavians, cremation was said to have arisen from a law given

by Odin, who, on falling sick, ordered a pyre to be raised for himself. So it is stated in the *Heimskringla*, or *World-Circle*, of Snorri Sturlason, the Icelandic historian and statesman, who wrote in the thirteenth century, and who has done so much for the preservation of the Norse hero-sagas.

IV

THIS statement about the Law of Odin, who appears in the quality of a Manu, Moses, Lykurgos, or Mohamed, may seem to merit little attention to those who only think of Odin the mythic All-father, the Ruler of the Heavens. The Odin of the *Heimskringla*, is, however, not the Odin of mythology. He is—at any rate in the sense of the ancient record itself—a historical or semi-historical Odin, the governor of a people originally settled near the Don, who later migrated as conquering warriors towards the North, driven forward as they were by the progress of Roman rule. As this is a subject not very generally known, and as it bears upon the question of cremation, I may be permitted to make a short, and after all but apparent, digression.

Odin's realm—the *Heimskringla* says—lay east of the river Tanais, or Tanaquisl, which formerly was called Wanaquisl, and flows into the Black Sea. That realm was in Asia, and bore the name of Asa-land, or Asa-heim. Its capital was Asgard. Between the arms of the Tanais lay Wana-land, or Wana-heim, the kingdom of a race with which Odin's people were frequently warring. Odin had possessions also in Tyrk-land. In Asgard he ruled in company with twelve temple priests, of whom he was the first.

⁷ Herodotus, v. 8.

⁸ Pomponius Mela, ii. cap. 2.

⁹ Procopius, *Bell. Goth.* ii. 14.

¹⁰ *Vita Arnulfi Metensis.*

¹¹ *Gesta Trevirorum*; Pertz, *Mon. Germ.* x. 31. 6.

¹² Cilicius, *Bell. Dithm.* i. c. 19. Walther, *1 Chron. Fres.* c. 8.

¹³ *Epist.* 72 Bonifacii.

These priests were called *diar* (that is Gods, or Divines); or *drottnar*, meaning Masters. A powerful captain in war this Odin was. His sword proved almost invariably victorious, except in the struggle with the Wana race, when the issues of battle were of a checkered kind, and the contest had to be made up by the exchange of hostages. Thus, Niord; his son Freyr; and his daughter Freyja—who were ‘not of Asian origin—’ came as hostages to Asa-land.

At that time—the Norse saga goes on—the Roman leaders made expeditions all over the world, subjecting nations to their rule. Odin, scanning the future, set his brothers over Asgard. He himself, with his trusty men, first went out in a western direction towards Gardariki;¹⁴ then southwards into Saxonland;¹⁵ from thence by sea to Fünen, where Odin’s-Oe (Odense) still bears his name. Then he sent Gefion northwards over the Sound, to seek after new lands. After his conquests in the North, he gave homesteads to Niord, Freyr, Heimdall, Thor, and Baldur. These were leading men around him. The names of the homesteads so conferred upon his staff, or chief warriors, tally in the Heimskringla with the names of the seats, or halls, occupied by the corresponding Gods in the Edda.

Of Odin it is further reported that he was often away for years, wandering through many lands. The laws of the Northmen were fixed by him:—

He gave his country those laws which formerly had been valid among the Asa race. Thus he ordained that THE DEAD SHOULD BE BURNT, and that everything that had been their own should be carried to the pyre. He said everyone should go up to Walhalla with as many riches as would be heaped upon his pyre, and that

he should enjoy in Walhalla also those things which he had hidden away in the earth. The ashes should be thrown into the sea, or be buried deep in the soil; but for illustrious men a mound should be raised as a token of remembrance. For all those who had shown great courage,¹⁶ *bauta*-stones should be raised; and thus it has been kept for a long time afterwards.

Such was the legislation of the great Chieftain. When he came near his death through illness—the Heimskringla says—he had himself marked with a spear, as he wished to go up to Godsheim, the dwelling of the deities. He was burnt on the pyre, and his funeral was a most splendid one. His successor in the kingdom was Niord; he, too, was burnt at his death. The same was the case with the *Diar*, or Priests, that died during Niord’s days.

Then Freyr followed as a ruler. ‘When he fell sick, his men built a hill, into which they put him; they let in a door and three windows. When Freyr was dead, they carried him secretly into the hill, saying to the Swedes that he was still living.’ Thus in the case of Freyr, who was buried at Upsala, the legislation of Odin was broken through. The Heimskringla then adds that, after the death of the *Diar*, Freyja alone still lived as a priestess, but married to Oddr. This latter name, I will observe in passing, is in Germanic mythology but another form of the name Odin, or Wodan. Odin himself—that is to say, the Odin of historical tradition, of whom the before-mentioned deeds are recorded—died, according to the Heimskringla, and went up to the Home of the Gods, before Freyja married Oddr.

The Swedes, it is further mentioned, would not burn Freyr. They called him ‘World-God’ and honoured him by sacrifices. After Freyr, Fiölnir ruled over the

¹⁴ Probably what is now Russia.

¹⁵ Evidently Germany.

¹⁶ This passage is somewhat obscure in the text. Some interpret it as meaning that a stone-fence should be erected wherever there was danger of the grave being trodden down by the frequent passing to and fro of men.

Swedes; and then the practice of fire-burial begins again among the Asa race.

V

I HAVE given this extraordinary semi-mythic narrative, which yet has some historical interest, because it bears upon Fire-burial in the sense of a state law as well as of a religious ordinance; the Odin who came from the Tanais to Sweden being represented as the warrior head of a theocratic Order—similar, if I may venture upon a comparison, to the later Teutonic knights of the Middle Ages. The tradition which seems to be preserved in the *Heimskringla* under a fabulous form has, of course, not the value of an authenticated fact. The whole record is a medley of national hero traditions, of priestly inventions, and of chronological incongruities. But there may, after all, be a kernel of truth in it. Hence it is invested with a strange interest, and gives rise to much speculation.

The very names of the river Tanais, or Wana-quisl, may set us thinking as to a possible lodgment, on the banks of the Don, first of Kelts, then of Wends, which latter may in their turn have been attacked by a Germanic tribe. For the Asgard of the Odin who ruled near the Black Sea, a confirmation might be found in Strabon's 'Aspurgum.' Asgard and Aspurg are, at all events, only two different forms of Germanic speech, signifying the town or the castle of the Æsir. The settlement of Germanic races on the shores of the Black Sea is a historical fact. Nor can we regard it as unlikely that among some Teutonic tribe, in grey antiquity, rulers should have arisen who thought it convenient to assume for themselves the names of deities or of deified heroes.

Under other religious systems also, the names of apostles, of saints, of a Son of God, of a Madonna, or Mother of God, are borne by believers. In Spain and in the Catholic countries of South America, the name of the Christian Saviour is often given to boys at baptism. Among the Spaniards, the Italians, and the French it is a frequent custom to add even the name of the Virgin Mary to a boy's name. So also are there a number of names in Germany, most of them having their synonyms in the languages of other Christian nations, into the composition of which the word 'God' enters—such as Gottfried, Gotthelf, Gotthold, Gottlieb, Gottwalt, Gottschalk. The name of Odin as a human designation is, therefore, by no means startling.

Moreover, in the Norse *Langfeðgatal*, or Royal Genealogy, which is of a half-mythical, half-historically traditional character, a 'Voden, whom we call Oden,' is mentioned, who is the common ancestor of Anglo-Saxon, Norwegian, Danish, and German kingly families. The *Langfeðgatal* fabulously begins with Japhet, the son of Noah; then goes through a confused list of names from the Greek, Persian, and Trojan legendary cycle; but finally gives a list of Germanic names from Thor to Finn, Frealaf, and 'Voden, whom we call Oden.' Here, a Thor precedes an Oden; whereas, in mythology, Thor is Odin's son. The *Langfeðgatal* styles this heroic Oden a King of Tyrk-land, which would make him a ruler also over Turanic races near the Caspian Sea. Even as in the *Heimskringla*, it is fabulously said of him that he fled before the Romans towards the North.¹⁷ (*Han var Tyrkia Konungr. Han flyði firir Romveriom norðr hegat.*) After a number of his successors, another Oden, or Odin, is

¹⁷ Anglo-Saxon and other German dynasties trace their descent from Voden, or Odin. Properly understood, no divine descent was thereby incontestably meant, though the magic qualities attributed to the chieftain of that name easily led to a confusion. It may not

mentioned in the genealogical table. Odin, at one time, was consequently a frequent name of kings; and that name in itself ought not to be taken as a proof that no such ruler could ever have promulgated a Cremation Law in the North.

If it is objected that among the early Teutonic tribes a priestly caste was not so fully formed as the Heimskringla asserts, I think this objection, too, is not an insuperable one. In Germany proper, according to the reports of Roman historians, the people were certainly far from being priest-ridden. They worshipped in groves and forests, not in temples.¹⁸ The priest, as he does everywhere, considered himself the link between man and Heaven. His was also the right and the duty of calling for and maintaining order during a public meeting. On the field of battle he had, so to say, the function of a provost.¹⁹ Otherwise he seems to have exercised little actual power beyond his magic tricks. The love of freedom, which is mentioned as so strong a characteristic of the Germans, rendered them not less disinclined to theocratic than to an oppressive aristocratic or monarchical rule. Things were otherwise, according to Cæsar, in priest-ridden Gaul. There, the mass of the people occupied the position almost of serfs; and the Druids, well-nigh equal in power to the nobility, had it all their own way both in religious matters and in civil law.²⁰

But in different ages, and among different tribes of the Teutonic stock which once was spread over

so vast an area, institutions naturally differed. Hence, whilst there is, beyond the Heimskringla tradition, no collateral historical evidence of an order of Warrior Priests having, in Indian caste-fashion, once held sway east of the Don, and thence, under Odin, introduced a Cremation Law in the North, it would yet, perhaps, be an error to look upon the whole account as a fable. Its chronology is certainly at fault; and apparent historical elements are so mixed up in it with myth that an inextricable confusion is produced. If the Wana race, however, were to be regarded in a historical light, the position of Niord, Freyr, and Freyja might be compared, in some manner, to that of the rulers of Etruscan race in Rome.

In full keeping with the nature of such semi-historical traditions, the Odin of the Heimskringla, half-soldier, half-priest, appears in the character of a great sorcerer, who was even able to throw himself into various incarnations—exactly like the Odin of mythology. Still, he is a military leader; towards the end of his days he, like a common mortal, falls sick; and as he wishes to obtain eternal blessing, he orders himself, before expiring, to be marked with the point of a spear. For thus only, according to the rules of the great God whose name he bore, he was enabled to go up to Walhalla. In many religious systems, it is true, we meet with a mixture of deities that are enthroned in the welkin, and of incarnations which represent or embody them on earth. Nevertheless, in the case before us, we

be amiss here to mention that those err who believe that in Germanic mythology the rulers of men are designated as a special creation of the All-father: In the Rigsmál of the Edda, the three social orders—the Thralls, the Karls, and the Jarls (the serfs, the freemen, and the nobles)—are all alike the progeny, not of the All-father himself, but of his son Heimdall. Only, in the case of the Jarls, certain qualities of that order are mentioned which approximate them to some extent to the divine possessors of witchcraft. The Jarls, it ought to be remembered, combined the position of warrior chieftains with the functions of high-priests, or magic mediators, between the Gods and man.

¹⁸ Tacitus, *Germ.* c. 9.

¹⁹ *Germ.* c. 8.

²⁰ *De Bell. Gall.* vi. 12.

rather seem to see a real human person, who, for the sake of better swaying men, and making his title of a ruler 'by the grace of God' more valid, assumes the name of the Supreme Being, and surrounds himself with a mystical halo, as kings were wont to do down to rather modern times. I need only refer to the old French and English superstitions about the cure of some maladies by the King's miraculous touch.

I have entered into these details in order to show that the Scandinavian tradition which speaks of a 'Mound Age' being followed by a 'Burning Age,' or Cremation Period, in accordance with a decree of the leader of the invading Asa race, may after all repose on a substratum of historical fact. The breach made in the law in the case of the ruler who assumed the name of Freyr, could be understood on the hypothesis of some aristocratic conspiracy having found it convenient to 'spirit away' the king, or to keep him as a prisoner in a hill ('with a door and three windows!'), whilst the people were told that he was alive, yet had attained to a divine condition. Ancient Roman tradition furnishes an obvious parallel for such secret making-away with a ruler. When a special necessity of this kind for refraining from a public cremation ceremony had ceased, Fire-Burial, we can easily understand, would once more be reverted to at the demise of a Norse King.

VI

LET us now turn, from the *Heimskringla* and the *Langfeðgatal*, to the *Edda*, the great Germanic Scripture. There also we meet with numerous instances of cremation. I will premise here that what the *Edda* says of the Gods and Heroes of the Northmen

may, in its essential parts, be regarded also as the substance of the views of the Germans proper. This holds good most especially of the *Hero-Saga*, as well as of the *Younger or Prose Edda*.

Icelanders, like Sæmund himself, travelling in Germany, clearly gathered there some of the chief contents of those epic ballads which we have lost, but which afterwards were, like the Homeric poems, put into a connected form, glossed over, and wrought into a whole, hight the *Nibelungen-Lied*. Sigurd himself, the German Siegfried, is in the *Edda* a Southern prince—that is, a German. The scene of his death is laid near the Rhine. (*Soltinn varð Sigurðr sunnan Rínar*).²¹ We see the Black Forest under the name of the Dark Wood; the *Sieben-Gebirge* under the name of the Holy Mountains. The familiar names of the Saxons, the Franks, the Burgundians, the Goths, even of Swawa-land, or Suabian-land—which, besides its mythic meaning, may here have a tribal signification—meet us in the Norse record, together with the name of the Huns. 'German men' (*Þýðverskir menn*) are referred to, in the *Edda*, as sources of the Siegfried tale. The *Wilkinsa-Saga* specially mentions, as sources, German men from Soest, Bremen, and Münster. When, therefore, the great Teutonic Scripture speaks of fire-burial among the *Æsir* and the heroic chieftains, we are warranted in concluding that, in a general way, a Scandinavian as well as a German institution is meant.

The universality of the practice of incineration appears at once from the *Eddic Lay of the High One*, a didactic poem similar to the *Proverbs of Solomon*, where it is said:—'Better to be blind than to be burnt;' ²² and again: 'At eve, the day may be praised; a woman,

²¹ Fragment of a *Brynhild Lay*, 5.

²² *Hávamál*, 70.

after she is burnt.' ²³ An instance of fire-burial is related from the divine circle of the Æsir themselves. It concerns Baldur, the sweet God of Light, whose very name, in its first syllable, indicates the Sun or the Fire. At the instigation of the evil-doing god Loki, Baldur was shot with a mistle-toe twig by the sightless god Hödur, the representative of Night, or of wintry darkness. The myth originally typifies the change of seasons. The ultimate fate of the whole Germanic Olympus was, however, afterwards brought into connection with the death of the White God.

A full description is given, in the Younger Edda, of the funeral ceremonies over Baldur's corpse. The Æsir took it and carried it to the sea. There they put it on Baldur's ship *Hringhorn*, the greatest of all vessels. There was some difficulty in moving the ship; the Gods had to invoke the aid of a Titaness from Iötunheim, the abode of the Giants. Hyrrockin was her name: which is explained as the one who is surrounded by fire and smoke. On seeing Baldur's corpse placed on board ship, his loving wife, Nanna, the daughter of Neps, burst with grief and died. She also was then carried to the ship, when the pyre was lit; the God of Thunder consecrating it with his hammer. A dwarf, called Lit, ran before the feet of Thor, who thrust him, with his foot, into the fire, so that this pigmy creature also was burnt. Many guests were present at the funeral: first Odin; with him, Frigg and the Walkyres; and Odin's ravens; and Freyr in his car, drawn by the boar Gullinbursti, or Golden-bristles. Heimdall came, riding on his stallion Gulltopp, or Golden-plaits. Freyja appeared in her cat-drawn chariot. A great many Mountain-Giants also were

present. Odin laid the ring Draupnir on the pyre; wherefrom it obtained the quality that, every ninth night, eight equally beautiful golden rings dropped from it. Together with Baldur, his steed, with all its trappings, was burnt.²⁴

I have alluded to the particulars of this tale, because it has its practical significance, as well as its mythic beauty. It was a custom of the sea-faring northern race to light a pyre for a viking on his boat, and then to let the boat drift out to sea. In the Baldur myth quoted, this custom is transferred to the divine circle in Asgard. The ship *Hringhorn*, which the Æsir have a difficulty in moving after the death of the sunny God of Light, is interpreted as signifying the Sun itself. The Titaness who helps in moving it, and whose name is identical with the fiery element, represents, as the whole Giant race in Germanic and other mythologies does, the elementary powers of Nature, which were in a great measure held to be superior to the later-fashioned deities, who rather typify the finished forms of life. Baldur's wife, Nanna, the daughter of Neps, is, from the Norse word '*neppr*,' explained as the bud of flowers: a fit companion of the representative of sunny summertime. The death of the God of Light naturally entails the death of the flowery bud. The same pyre consumes them both.

Lit, the dwarf, is interpreted by Uhland, who has exerted himself so powerfully to find out the key of myths, as the rich tint of summer; from the word '*litr*'—that is, colour. Colour dies when the God of Summer dies. The consecration of the pyre by the hammer of Thor symbolises the sacredness of the flame in which the corpse was to be consumed. In Germanic mythology, the souls were supposed to

²³ *Hávamál*, 80. (*At qveldi skal dag leyfa, kono er brendar.*)

²⁴ *Gylfaginning*; or, *the Infatuation of Gylfi*, 49.

have come earthwards on a ray of lightning—like a flame. On the wings of the flame, which rises heavenwards from the pyre, they therefore return to their original home. Odin and Frigg are present at Baldur's funeral as his progenitors. Freyr, a sun-god himself, whose golden-bristled boar signifies the rays of the fiery orb, makes a good show at a ceremony of fire-burial. So does Heimdall, the guardian of the bridge Bifröst, over which the Æsir daily ride—in other words, of the heaven and earth-spanning rainbow, the red colour in which was assumed to be a flame. The idea of Light is connected even with Freyja, the goddess of love—another mourner at Baldur's obsequies. At night, when gliding over the earth, Freyja was said to leave after her a streak of rosy shimmer, so bright that the wayfarer who had mistaken his path could right himself during the sudden refulgence.

But what is the significance of Draupnir? Whilst the God of Light lived, there was a golden era, so to say, in which Time flowed on with scarcely a perceptible break. With his death, a change comes. The ring which Odin places on the pyre, now produces, every ninth night, eight golden rings—probably a symbol of the nine days which it is supposed made up a week among the ancient Germanic races, as among the early Romans. Lastly, the burning of Baldur's stallion is in accordance with the similar custom at Scandinavian and German cremation rites. Thus Baldur's obsequies are typical in their mythic and their practical meaning.

VII

LIKE the God of Light, so also the heroic figures of the Edda are, after death, placed on the pyre. In that grand tragic lay, the *Third*

Song of Sigurd the Dragon-killer, Brynhild strikes herself with the poniard from grief at Sigurd's murder, which yet she herself has occasioned. In her dying moments she gives orders for the erection of the pyre²⁵ :—

One prayer yet I have to pray thee;
'Twill be the last in this my life:
A spacious pile build up in the plain,
That room there be for all of those
Who came to die together with Sigurd!

Surround the pile with shields and garments,
With funeral cloth and chosen suite!
And the Hunic King burn at my own side!

Near the Hunic King my slaves burn,
Adorned each with costly chains :—
Two at our heads, two at our feet;
Two hounds thereto, two hawks as well,
Thus all things are allotted alike.

Let also lie between us both
The ring-set sword, the keen-edged steel,
Again so placed, as when the couch we
ascended,
And were then called by the name of
consorts. . . .

For him will follow five female thralls;
Retainers eight, of gentle race,
Fostered with me, brought up with me,
Whom to his daughter Budli gave.

Much have I said; more would I say
If the God would grant me yet time for
speech.

My voice now falters; my wounds are
swelling.

The truth I spoke. So will I die.

From this description—unless we make great allowance for poetical licence and for the exaggeration which is to be expected in heroic myth—we might conclude that princely funerals, among the ancient Scandinavians, were somewhat similar, in terrible pomp, to those of Eastern races. In Brynhild's *Ride to the Nether World* it is said :—'After Brynhild's death two pyres were made: one for Sigurd, which burnt first; then Brynhild was burnt; and she lay off a chariot which was hung with gorgeous tapestry.'²⁶

²⁵ *Sigurdharkvida Fafnisbana Thridja*, 62-68.

²⁶ *Helreið Brynhildar*.

There is another song referring to Brynhild—the *Lay of Sigurdrifa*,²⁷ from which the tale of the Sleeping Beauty is derived, and which also bears poetically upon fire-burial. In it we see Sigurdrifa—that is, Brynhild—sleeping on a mountain, in full armour. She is surrounded by flames that rise heavenwards. She had been a Walkyre once, a Virgin of Battle; but Odin, to punish her for having killed a Gothic king to whom he had promised victory, stung her in the veil with a ‘sleeping-thorn.’ In the *Song of Fafnir*²⁸ it is said that her sleep was not to be broken by a Prince’s son before the Nornes, the Sisters of Fate, had willed it. Now, the *Song of Sigurdrifa* relates how Sigurd rides towards Franconian-land, where on a mountain he sees a great fire. On coming nearer, he perceives a structure of shields on which a banner is planted. Sigurd enters, and apparently finds a warrior sleeping with full armour on. Drawing the helmet away, he discovers a woman’s features; she is so firmly clad in the harness as if it were grown into her flesh. With his good sword Gram he rips up the armour, first near the head, and then along her arms. She awakes, rises up; whereupon follows a lay, containing words of strange wisdom which the Walkyrian demi-goddess addresses to Sigurd for his future guidance.

I will not deal here specially with the symbolical meaning of Sigurdrifa’s sleep. It may be enough to say that it evidently refers, like the Baldur myth, to the change between Light and Darkness, between Winter and Summer; the original type of Sigurd being interpreted as a God of Spring, whose touch re-awakens dormant Nature. I mention this without wishing to deny the large infusion of historical elements into these heroic myths.

The structure of shields by which Sigurdrifa is surrounded, undoubtedly represents a pyre. The tight armour is the thorn-hurdle within which a corpse was placed at a fire-burial. The flames which shoot up to Heaven are those of a lighted pile. The mountain on which the scene is laid, is the hillock, or mound, raised after the funeral ceremony. It is characteristic of all myths that they have their meaning within a meaning; that their imagery lends itself to double or threefold interpretations—not contradictory to, but fitting in with, each other: and so it is also with this *Lay of Sigurdrifa*, which contains the germs of the *Dorn-röschen* tale.

Sigurd and Sigurdrifa are, in one sense, only heroic transmutations of Odin and Frigg, the deified active and receptive powers of Nature. This process of changing gods into heroes is as frequent as that of changing heroes into gods. In a later stage of mythic decay, Sigurdrifa, or Brynhild, becomes the Sleeping Beauty, or *Dorn-röschen*. *La Belle au Bois Dormant* is an Old Frankish tradition of Brunihild. *Dorn-röschen* she is called because she sleeps enchanted within a thickly grown hedge of thorns—which is but a transfiguration of the thorn-hurdle or thorn-hall (*thornechale*, in Old Frankish) that encircled the dead body which was destined to cremation. The horses, the dogs, all things that are with *Dorn-röschen*, also fall entranced asleep. They are the horses, the dogs, and so forth, which were placed on the pyre. The thorn with which Brynhild had been stung by Odin is converted in the fairy-tale into the spindle of a hag. *Dorn-röschen*, like Sigurdrifa, is re-awakened by a Prince. She celebrates marriage with him—and so also are vows of eternal union exchanged between

²⁷ *Sigrdrífumál*.

²⁸ *Fafnismál*, 44.

Sigurd and Sigurdrifa in the Eddic song.

VIII

FIRE-BURIAL is again mentioned in the *First Lay of Gudrun*.²⁹ Herborg, the Hunic queen, has lost her seven sons, her father and mother, and brothers four. So she herself has to raise the pyre and to prepare the ride to Hel for them.

As the name of Herborg indicates, she, though called a 'Hunic' queen, must not be supposed to be of Hunnic, but of Germanic origin. Sigurd also is called a 'Hunic' king (*hunskr konungr*) which is but another term for 'German'—like the word 'Southron' (*Sigurðr inn suðrœni*) before mentioned, by which the Scandinavians distinguished the Germans from the Teutonic race in the high North. In other Eddic lays, however, the word 'Hun' and 'Hunic' has the meaning usually attributed to it; Atli, the father of Erp and Eitil, being to all appearance mythically mixed up with the historical Attila, the Scourge of God.

In the *Song of Atli*,³⁰ which strongly foreshadows the subject treated in the *Nibelungen-Lied*, Gudrun—who here stands for the later Kriemhild—takes revenge for the murder of Sigurd. In answer to the appeal of her second husband, Atli, whom she is about to kill, and who implores her for an honourable burial, she says:—

A keel I will buy and a painted cist;
The sheet I will wax to enwrap thy corpse.
All that shall be done, as though we had
loved each other.

The 'keel' seems to refer to cremation on a vessel, or on a pyre shaped in boat-form. The 'painted cist,' on the other hand, and the 'waxed sheet of linen' indicate earth-burial. In the same way, in

the *Lay of Sigurdrifa*,³¹ the redeemed Walkyrian maid says:—

For the ninth I tell thee: 'Take care of
the dead,
Wherever thou findest them in the field—
Whether sickness felled them, or the
foundering ship,
Or whether a sword had smitten them.

Let a mound be raised to their memory:
Their heads and hands be washed first!
Combed and dried they shall come to the
coffin.
Then do thou pray for their happy sleep!

Here we see a mixture of funeral rites; perhaps to be accounted for from the occasional interpolation of later Christian ideas into these heathen lays. It may be noted on this occasion that when interment was introduced in the Christian era, some of the previous fire-burial customs were retained among the Germanic nations. Thus, on sepulchral monuments, a cairn, in the shape of a boat, was frequently superposed; the entire corpse being buried beneath this symbol of the Odinic cremation law. At Alamannic and Suabian funerals, the corpse was often placed in the trunk of a tree, hollowed out in the shape of a boat.

It is not to be wondered at that later Christian ideas should occasionally be mixed up with Eddic contents, seeing that this Norse Book was collected, after the introduction of the new faith in Iceland, by Christian converts. They generally preserved the pagan tone with wonderful fidelity. Here and there, however, some different substance and colouring has crept in. In the Younger Edda, in the *Infatuation of Gylfi*, All-father is described in a way utterly contrary to the usual conception of Odin. It is there said of him:—

He lives through all ages, and rules his
whole kingdom, and ordains all things,
great and small. He created Heaven and

²⁹ *Gudhrúnarkhvida Fyrsta*, 6-8.

³⁰ *Knörr mun ek kaupa ok kistu steinda*. (*Allamål in Groenlenzku*, 101.)

³¹ *Sigrðrifumål*, 33, 34.

Earth, and the Air, and everything that is in it. . . . This is the chief thing, that he created man, and gave him a spirit which shall live and never die, although the body rots in the earth or is burnt to ashes. Furthermore, all men shall live that are of good behaviour, and be with him at the place which is called Gimil (Heaven), or Wingolf. But bad men shall go down to Hel, and then to Nifhel; that is, below the ninth world.³²

One has only to cast a glance at the subsequent passages of the very same tale to see that the above is a Christian interpolation, superadded on the principle which the Fathers of the Church, especially Origen and Chrysostom, systematically employed and recommended for pious purposes. In sections 4-9, and 51, of this same *Infatuation of Gylfi*, the world is *not* created by Odin alone, but by the three sons of Bór—Odin, Wili, and We; and they create it out of the limbs of the previous giant-form, Ymir. So also, man is *not* created by Odin alone, but by the three gods; and they fashion man and woman out of two trees. Bad men, again, are *not* sent exclusively to Hel; heroes also go there. Lastly, Odin does *not* live through all ages, but dies, like Thor, at the great fiery catastrophe which occurs at the end of times. In such contradictory statements, in one and the same poem, the Norse Scripture does not stand alone. We have to distinguish, therefore, between the old text and a later interpolation, the object of which, perhaps, was to render the transition from heathenism to Christianity more easy.

Though, in the *Song of Atli*, Gudrun speaks of a 'keel' as well as of a 'painted cist,' or coffin, for her husband Atli, in a subsequent

song, named *Gudrun's Incitement*,³³ in which reference is made to the former lay, she calls for the erection of a pyre when she herself is about to die. Musing, before death, on the love borne to her by her first consort, who had been treacherously slain, she exclaims in mingled words of woe and of hopeful reunion:—

Remember, Sigurd, what we together said,
When on our bed we both were sitting:
That thou, O brave one, wouldst come
to me

From the hall of Hel to fetch me back!

Now build, ye Jarls! the oaken pile,
That high it may rise under Heaven's
vault.

May the fire burn a breast full of woes,
The flames round my heart its sorrows
melt!

May more peace be given to all men's
minds,

All women's sorrows be lessened,
If they hear to the end this song of grief.

IX

WHEN we turn over, from the poetical records of the Northern race, to those in which the mythic element somewhat recedes before a more distinct historical tradition, we find it stated, in Saxo's *Danish History*, that when the Saxon king, Gelder, had been slain in war by King Hother of Denmark, his body was cremated. The obsequies were conducted according to the most beautiful rite. The pile was raised by making use of the boats of the vanquished. No sign of respect for the dead was wanting, and a prominent mound was erected over the ashes.³⁴

In the same way, Saxo describes the fire-burial of Harald Hyldetand, when King Ring ordered a similar construction of a pyre.³⁵ All the

³² *Gylfaginning*, 3.

³³ *Gudhrúnarhvöt*, 19-21.

³⁴ Gelderum quoque, Saxoniae regem, eodem consumptum bello, remigum suorum cadaveribus superjectum, ac rogo navigiis extracto impositum, pulcherrimo funeris obsequio extulit. Cineres ejus perinde ac regii corporis reliquias, non solum insigni tumulo tradidit, verum etiam plenis venerationis exequiis decoravit. (Saxo Grammaticus, *Hist. Dan.* iii. 41, ed. Steph. J. Stephanus.)

³⁵ Saxo, viii.

weapons, golden trinkets, and other movable property belonging to Harald, were thrown into the fire. The ashes were collected and buried, with the remnants of his weapons and his horse, on Seeland. Ships, it may be as well to remark here, were at that time rather small craft, so that we need be less astonished at their frequent destruction for the purpose of obsequies. In later times the dead kings were not seldom placed in their boats and buried with them in the earth.

The dog of the Norse warrior was burnt with him. It is much forgotten now what important part a ferocious kind of dogs once played in the more barbarous warfare of our ancestors, down to a comparatively recent time. The Kimbrians, at the time of Marius, brought such dogs with them across the Alps. In Arnkiel's curious work³⁶ it is stated that Henry VIII. of England sent to the Emperor Karl V., together with four hundred soldiers, four hundred dogs, with iron collars. So far as it can be made out from historical sources, the custom of burning horses and dogs, at the funeral of chieftains, was more regularly observed in Scandinavia than in Germany. To this day, a custom prevails in many countries of placing the arms of an officer of high rank on his coffin, and of leading his horse after the hearse. This custom has come down from early times through the Middle Ages. It is a symbolical remnant of an ancient sacrificial performance; its meaning being no longer understood by the many.

Among the Northmen abroad, fire-burial was continued down to

the tenth century. Regino, referring to the year 879, says:—'The Normans, having burnt the corpses of their men, fled during the night, and turned their steps towards their fleet.'³⁷

In Orkney and Shetland, the heathen Northmen practised, for at least a century and a half, the fire-burial customs which they had brought with them from Norway.³⁸ The same was done in the tenth century, by the Warangian rulers of Russia, who had given the country a Norse dynasty and aristocracy, and probably even its name. A striking picture of those Germanic cremation rites in Russia has been handed down to us by Ahmed Ibn Fozlan, an Arab ambassador from the Khalife Al Moktador, who, in 921, wrote a report of his journey.³⁹ His description is one of the most graphic; the minutest details being given. 'You Arabs'—said one of the Northmen in Russia to Ahmed Ibn Fozlan—'are fools! You take the man whom you must have loved and honoured, and put him down in the earth, where vermin and worms devour him. We, on the contrary, burn him up in a twinkling; and he goes straight to Paradise.'

So also Sidonius speaks of fire-burial among the Goths. An idea of Anglo-Saxon cremation may be gathered from *Beowulf*. I may, however, first mention that when the hoary-headed Skild, Beo-Wulf's father, dies, he is brought, according to his wish, to the sea-shore, and placed in the hold of a vessel⁴⁰ with all his treasures, his weapons, and armour. It is not said that either he or his things were burnt. The ship was simply allowed to drift out

³⁶ *Die Cimbrische Heyden-Religion* (1703).

³⁷ Pertz, *Monum. Germ.* i. 591.

³⁸ Introduction, by Mr. Joseph Anderson, to the *Orkneyinga Saga*. (Translated by Íón Andrésson Hjaltalin and Goudie.) 1873.

³⁹ See *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquarians of Scotland*. Vol. ix.

⁴⁰ *álædon þá leófne þeóden,
beága bryttan, on bearm scipes
maerne be mæste.*

to sea; and the epic almost ironically adds that 'men do not know who got the gifts.'

At Hnäf's funeral, on the other hand, the pyre is distinctly alluded to in *Beowulf*. A very full description is given of the fire-burial of Beo-Wulf himself. Before dying, he asks his warriors to raise for him, after the funereal fire, a mound upon the cliffy height at Hronesnaess, so that it may stand as a lasting memorial, ever before the eyes of his people; and sailors, tossed on Ocean's dark waves, may point to it and say: 'This is Beo-Wulf's Mound!' The epic goes on:

Him þa gegiredon Geāta leóde
 ád on eorðan unváclíene,
 helmum behongen, hildebordum,
 beorhtum byrnum, svá he bēna vās;
 álegdon þá tō-middes maerne þeóden
 hāled hiófende, hlāford leófne.

Geatland's men for him then made
 A pyre broad, most firmly built,
 With helms bedeck'd, with war-shields
 hung,
 And armour bright, as he them bade.
 In the midst they laid, the sorrowing
 heroes,
 Their mighty ruler, their beloved lord.

Ten days were spent in raising over the burnt corpse a tumulus and a monument. Precious stones and ornaments were buried with it. Twelve noble warriors rode round the hillock, with words of grief and songs of praise, lauding Beo-Wulf's bravery and his glorious deeds.

X

The Thuringians of Germany burnt their dead⁴¹ down to the seventh century. In an epistle of Winfrid, or Boniface, the so-called Apostle of the Germans, the custom of incineration among the Saxons is referred to. Karl the Great, who displayed such zeal in fighting against the pagan and freedom-

loving hosts of Witukind, that on a single day he had nearly six thousand prisoners of war decapitated, whilst at other times he drove the vanquished rebels by shoals into the rivers, there to be baptised—Karl the Great made a special enactment against cremation:—'If anyone lets the body of a dead person be consumed by fire, and the bones be reduced to ashes, according to the rites of the heathens, he shall suffer capital punishment.'⁴²

Albeit there is no direct testimony for cremation among the Goths of Ulfilas, yet, as Grimm has shown, we are fully warranted in concluding that they, too, had practised fire-burial. A few words in the Gothic bishop's translation of the Bible are sufficient proof. When he has to translate the word 'grave,' he uses the expression *aurahi*, or *aurahjô*, which is equal to *τάφος*, in which a burnt corpse, among the Greeks, was deposited. For 'thorns,' or thorn-bush—in a passage in St. Luke, vi. 44—he uses the Gothic *aihvatundi*. The literal meaning is 'horse-burner.' The hawthorn was, no doubt, so called because it was used for the sacrifice of horses among the pagan Goths.

Again, though there is no written testimony for cremation among the tribes of Upper Germany, which at an early time were converted to Christianity, and therefore had to give up their ancient burial custom, still a great many tumuli on Bavarian, Alamannic, and Burgundian soil, which have been laid open, and which are evidently neither of Keltic nor of Roman origin, show by their cinerary urns, the remnants of a cremation performance. Some of these graves, from the coins found in them, are held to be as late as the sixth century. There are also various Old High German and Middle

⁴¹ Capite amputato, cadaver more gentiliū ignibus traderetur. (*Vita Arnulfi Metensis*.)

⁴² Cap. vii. (Pertz, 3, 49.)

High German locutions referring to the pile (*pigo*, or *piga*), the pyre (*eit*), the thorn-cover (*thornechale*), and the hurdle (*hurt*, or *hort*)—all pointing to the burning of bodies. In many of these latter cases, it is, however, not cremation that is meant, but penal execution upon the body of real or supposed criminals.

The fact is, when fire-burial as a sanitary practice, founded on a religious ordinance, was abolished by the introduction of a new creed, the pyre and the hurdle were retained as modes of criminal punishment, or for the purpose of laying ghosts and wraiths to rest! According to early Swedish laws, witches were burnt. The same was done—and this is a noteworthy point—with the corpses of persons whose troubled spirits were said to haunt and do harm to living men. Thus cremation was considered a cure against the horrors of nightly apparition. One superstition was fought by means of another.

In German criminal law, in the Middle Ages, the expression frequently occurs: '*mit der hürde richten*'—to judge with the hurdle. In the *Sachsenspiegel*, the law code of Lower Germany, of the thirteenth century, the expression 'to burn upon the hurdle' (that is, at the stake) is employed in an enactment directed against heretics, sorcerers, and criminals.⁴³ Whilst not tolerating cremation of the dead, though public health benefited by it, the Roman priesthood made cremation of the living flesh of heretics and professors of witchcraft (meaning, in many cases, the adherents of the old Germanic belief) a cruel State institution.

XI

THE remembrance of fire-burial lingered in the mind of the German

people for a long time after the introduction of Christianity, in spite of the Roman Catholic clergy having degraded the destruction of bodies by the agency of fire to a mark of infamy upon those that came under its operation. Such popular remembrance of a Burning Age was kept up in the very names attaching to certain localities as burning, i.e. burial-places. But, gradually, the meaning contained in these names became obscured and lost to the general understanding.

In German fairy-tales which are current to this day, the pyre is repeatedly mentioned, but only as a means of punishment—for instance, in *The Twelve Brothers*; or in *Marien-Kind*,⁴⁴ where also the thorn-bush occurs, which a princely deliverer cuts through. In the tenth and eleventh centuries, the tradition of fire-burial was still strong among the people of Lower Germany, who had last been converted to the new religion. In the fifteenth century (1475), a burial-place in Southern Germany is mentioned, called '*im brand zen haidengrebern*,' which explains itself as 'The Burning-Place near the Heathen Graves.' Mediæval poetry also dimly preserved a recollection of the old custom. In a poem by Stricker, on Karl the Great, it is said that after the battle of Runzevâl, or Roncesvalles, a great miracle was wrought. At day-break it was found that a hawthorn twig had grown through every dead heathen. Near each Christian's head, a beautiful white flower had sprouted up.

Zwei ungeliche wunder
sach man an in beiden.
durch ieslichen heiden,
der dâ ze tôde lac erslagen,
was gewachsen ein hagen. . . .
die kristen lügen hin dan.
dâ sach man ieslichem man

⁴³ Swilch cristen man ungeloubic ist, oder mit zcoubere umme get, oder mit vergifnisse, unde des verwunden wirt, den sal man uf der hurt burnen. (*Sachsenspiegel*, Art. 13, § 17.)

⁴⁴ *Grimm's Tales*, 3. 9.

bi sinem houppe stân
 eine wize bluomen wolgetân.
 do die gotes pilgerine
 von des liechten tages schine
 die hagedorne sâhen,
 si begunden dar gâhen,
 und sâhen die heiden sô geschant,
 daz bi den schanden wart erkant,
 daz die sêle verloren wâren
 unde aller gnâden erbâren.⁴⁵

The hawthorn twig is here the symbol of fire-burial, though perhaps poetically misapplied to a people who did not use cremation. The beautiful white flower signifies the martyrdom of the Christian warriors in their struggle against unbelievers. 'God's pilgrims,' in Stricker's poem, thus had no difficulty in finding out whose soul was saved, and whose destined to eternal damnation. The hawthorn near them was the visible mark of disgrace. It is curious to learn that *Hagedorn* (Hawthorn), in the Middle Ages, actually became a nickname in Germany. Probably it meant then an infidel. It would be interesting to know whether that name was so handed down from olden times to the excellent German poet whose songs have something of a pagan, Anakreontic tinge.

The 'peculiar kinds of wood' with which, according to Tacitus, German chieftains were cremated, may partly refer to the hawthorn, partly to the juniper tree and other bushes that emit a fragrant smell. Olaus Magnus⁴⁶ records that the juniper tree was used for the fire-burial of princely persons. For others, oak and beech wood was used. The rose-gall (*Sentis canina*) is even now called in German either *Dornrose* or *Schlafrose* (sleeping-rose), and a mossy excrescence on it *Schlafapfel* (sleeping-apple). German plant-names having much reference to mythological ideas, it seems obvious to connect the name of this plant with the sleep-thorn used by Odin for entrancing Brynhild, the later Dorn-röschen. In

other words, we would come here upon the plainer fact of the thorn-rose, or rose-gall, having been used in cremation-rites at the burial of more distinguished persons.

Jakob Grimm, who has carefully collected the facts bearing upon this subject, points out that the tumuli themselves, which were raised after cremation, had frequently a hawthorn plantation upon them. Such plantations were considered sacred. The axe was not to touch them. Ancient grave-mounds in Schonen are called either *bâlhögen* (burning-hills), or *tornhögen* (thorn-hills). The tradition of the sacredness of such hawthorn has been kept up in this country also down to a recent time. According to a note in the Statistical Account of Scotland, 'there is a quick-thorn of a very antique appearance, for which the people have a superstitious veneration. They have a mortal dread to lop off or cut any part of it, and affirm, with a religious horror, that some persons who had the temerity to hurt it, were afterwards punished for their sacrilege.'

XII

WHEN we remember the views of many nations of antiquity, as well as the former Hindoo practice of *suttee*, it will scarcely be wondered at that among the Norsemen, and among some of the ruder Getic tribes of old, there should have been the custom of the voluntary sacrifice of bereaved widows. Among the German people, no trace of this, to our feelings so utterly repulsive, practice can be made out. Tacitus does not mention it. The passage on cremation in his *Germania*, which I have before mentioned, would be differently worded had widow-sacrifice been in existence among the race which was located between the Maas, the Danube, and the Baltic. The very expression: 'For women it is meet to utter wails; for men,

⁴⁵ Stricker, 10854.

⁴⁶ *Historia de Gentibus Goth. &c.* iii. cap. 11.

to keep up remembrance,' is a proof that *suttee*, even in the fullest voluntary form, was not an institution among the Germans of old.

Their Gallic neighbours had, though not the practice of widow-burning, still that of burning serfs and retainers on the pyre of a prominent man. From Cæsar we must, moreover, conclude that there was, among that Keltic race, not the least respect for the personal rights of women, or of menials and dependants.⁴⁷ It was not so among the Germans whom Cæsar and Tacitus describe. The ideas of personal right were far more developed among them. Over the very serfs the master had no right of life and death. If slaves were slain, it was rather from a sudden impulse of anger than because the law permitted it. The children of freemen and serfs grew up together indiscriminately; no specially tender care being taken of the former. Only with riper age, and with the display of manly virtue, the distinction between the freeman and the serf became visible. Among those German tribes where kingly government was established, the liberated serf could attain even to high administrative position.⁴⁸

Women, among the Germans of old, were held in the highest estimation. Their position was far higher than that of the female sex among the Semites, the Hellenes, the Romans, or the Kelts. Though not equals of men in duty, and therefore not loaded with the responsibilities of men, something sacred and prophetic attached to them. Their counsels did not remain disregarded, nor their opinion ne-

glected.⁴⁹ The names of Veleda, of Aurinia, and many others, are cited as typical of the remarkable influence exercised by German women. Captivity, whilst being loathed more than death itself by German warriors, yet had less terror for them than the idea of seeing women of their own race fall into the hands of the foe. The Romans, therefore, with the cold calculation of statecraft, frequently exacted, from a temporarily vanquished German tribe, some female hostages as a pledge of peace. Mainly monogamous, the Germans possessed marriage laws which excited the wondering admiration of the Roman historian. Not the bride presented a morning gift to the bridegroom, but he to her: namely, cattle; a bridled horse; and a shield, with a sword and spear. The wife was not to consider herself outside the pale of man's thoughts and perils. During a battle, German women, together with the very children, remained near their husbands and relations. The presence of women was regarded as a most sacred testimony for the bravery of men; their applause as the highest that could be earned. Mothers and wives kept close to the battleground to tend wounds, to bring food, and to exhort men.⁵⁰ The bearing of a Thusnelda in captivity elicited words of surprise and admiring awe from the Roman victors themselves.

Under such laws and customs, and with the prevalence of such views concerning the relation between the two sexes, is it possible to believe that widow-sacrifice in any form should have been practised among the pagan Germans?

⁴⁷ Viri in uxores, sicuti in liberos, vitæ necisque habent potestatem. Et quum paterfamilias illustriore loco natus decessit, ejus propinqui conveniunt: et de morte si res in suspicionem venit, de uxoribus in servilem modum quaestionem habent: et si compertum est, igni atque omnibus tormentis excruciatas interficiunt. (Cæsar, *De Bell. Gall.* vi. 18.)

⁴⁸ Tacitus, *Germ.* c. xx. and xxv.

⁴⁹ Inesse quin etiam sanctum aliquid et providum putant, nec aut consilia earum aspernantur aut responsa negligunt. (Tacitus, *Germ.* viii.)

⁵⁰ Tacitus, *Germ.* vii. viii. xviii.

XIII

OF the Thracians in Eastern Europe, who were probably of Germanic origin, Herodotus relates that the women frequently disputed between themselves as to which of them should be allowed to ascend the pyre together with the departed husband.⁵¹ The same is related of the Getae—undoubtedly a people of Germanic origin. It is stated that the Getic women left behind wept at their dereliction, envying her who was allowed to sacrifice herself.⁵² The same was stated by Latin authors about Indian women.

Among the Scandinavians, the custom of voluntary widow-sacrifice was once deeply rooted. There was no enforced law; but women themselves—and a tolerably strong-willed race they were—assented to the practice, probably from a religious notion; often from highly-wrought feelings of union for life and death. The voluntary character of widow-sacrifice appears from an Eddic Lay,⁵³ where Brynhild says, after the death of Sigurd:—

More seemly 'twould be if our sister
Gudrun
Were to mount the pyre with her consort
and lord—
Had good spirits to her but given the
counsel,
Or had she a soul resembling mine!

Gudrun, however, does not mount the pyre. She remains alive for the purpose of revenge, whilst Brynhild, inflamed with love for Sigurd, stabs herself with the poniard, and asks to be burnt at his side (*brenni mér inn húnska à hlíð aðra.*)

The monk Oddo relates how a

Swedish queen would not remain with her husband because the latter had vowed he would not live ten years after the death of his foe Styrbiorn. This shows that, in the popular view, conjugal fidelity was measured by the standard of conjoint death. The queen in question, therefore, thought it prudent to withdraw at once from the fatal bond. On the other hand, there is a passage in Saxo⁵⁴ where Hermutrud says to her husband, King Amleth:—‘That is a detestable wife who would scruple to die with her consort’ (*detestabilem inquam feminam, quæ marito morte conferri formidaret*).

Saxo also tells the touching story of Sygne, which has been so frequently treated in mediæval poems. Sygne, the King of Denmark's daughter, was married, against her father's will, to Hagbarth, duke in Sweden. Captured by the Danish King, Hagbarth asks his wife whether, if her father were to inflict death upon him, she would enter upon another marital vow. Sygne replies:—

Believe me, dearest! I shall die with thee,
If changeful Fate shall have such mischief
wrought.
Life's span I shall not care more to prolong,
When to the mound thou'rt driven by dark
death.⁵⁴

Thereupon Sygne prevails upon her maids to die with her. They all twist ropes from their veils, and hang themselves, after having set fire to the hall. Hagbarth, led to the place of execution, sees from afar the well-known chamber in fiery glow, and the figure of Sygne within it. Death has no longer any terror for him: Sygne's love,

⁵¹ Herodotus v. 5. ἔχει γυναῖκας ἕκαστος πολλάς· ἐπεὶ ἂν τις αὐτέων ἀποθάνῃ, κρίσις γίνεται μεγάλη τῶν γυναικῶν, καὶ φίλων σπουδαί ἰσχυραὶ περὶ τοῦδε, ἥ τις αὐτέων ἐφιλέετο μάλιστα ὑπὸ τοῦ ἀνδρός.

⁵² Pomponius Mela, ii. c. 2:—‘Ne feminis quidem segnis est animus. Super mortuorum virorum corpora interfici simulque sepeliri, votum eximium habent: et quia plures simul singulis nuptae sunt, cujus id sit decus, apud judicatuos magno certamine affectant. Moribus datur, estque maximum laetum, cum in hoc contenditur, vincere. Moerent aliae vocibus, et cum acerbissimis planctibus efferunt.’

⁵³ *Sigurdharkvidha*, iii. 59.

⁵⁴ Saxo, iv.

proved to the end, is his consolation; and he dies cheerfully.⁵⁵

Not to women, however, was the custom of self-sacrifice confined. Friends, among the ancient Norsemen, frequently did the same. Twelve men of a warlike retinue sometimes 'went with the chieftain into the grave-hill,' in order to prove their devotion unto death. In some cases it would seem that the 'hill' was only a hiding-place, where the chieftain himself, with some of his trustiest men, kept concealed before a victorious enemy. From this practice it can be more easily understood that so many stories should have arisen about enmountained heroes and great warriors, albeit for not a few of those tales a strictly mythological explanation can be given, as I have shown elsewhere in an essay on *The Barbarossa Legend*.

For us it is difficult to imagine a state of society in which the bonds of marriage, or of companionship-in-arms, were considered so strong as to entail death all round when the main link was broken. To those who accuse antique nations of cruelty on that account, Grimm replies that such self-sacrifice cannot justly be stigmatised as cruel, whilst 'there was real cruelty when, among Christian nations, heretics and wretches were in masses delivered over to the flames in the most inhuman manner by the infatuated zeal of priests'—who burnt men and women alive!

XIV

AFTER cremation, the Scandinavians buried the ashes of the dead in the open field, or in groves, when flowers and herbs were planted on the tomb. Probably the burial in groves and woods was the more general custom. Hence, in *The Song of Harbard*, graves are metaphorically called 'the wood-dwell-

ings of the old.'⁵⁶ The tumulus of those who had been more distinguished in life was encircled with *bauta*-stones—a word variously interpreted as meaning either fence-stones, or sacrificial stones. At any rate, they were also memorial stones; various signs being engraven on them—such as serpents, hammers, or crosses. The hammer of Thor was one of the numerous forms of the pre-Christian cross. Among the most different races all over the world, the Cross has been found; and those who have given any attention to the subject know well that in numerous religions this symbol is by no means connected with the idea of martyrdom.

Graves were held in high veneration among the pagan Scandinavians. It was assumed that protecting deities dwelt near them. Fire-burial had certainly not the effect of blunting or destroying the feelings of respect for the memory of the departed. The runic inscriptions on gravestones were invariably of the simplest kind; no highly-flown words of praise, but a plain, unadorned sign of remembrance. Yet, such was the reverence paid to the last dwelling-place of man, that no desecrating hand could be laid on those heathen monuments even some time after the change of faith had been operated. Only when two or three generations of converts had died away, such devastation became a system.

Then, these runic stones were built into Christian churches, or used for common edifices; for bridges, fences, even for seats before house-doors! Arnkiel, who wrote after Sir Thomas Browne,⁵⁷ and who occupied the position of a Protestant pastor in Schleswig-Holstein, gives a number of instances from Denmark and Schleswig. Thus, he says, the splendid runic stone of King Gorm,

⁵⁵ Saxo, 7, 130.

⁵⁶ *Harbardsliodh*, 45.

⁵⁷ *Hydriotaphia*; or Urn Burial. 1658.

of Denmark, was, at his time, embodied in a stone fence in a parish of Schonen. The runic gravestone of Tufe was to be seen in the wall of a church at Sandby, in Seeland. Near Apenrade, a church was partly built of such rune-inscribed stones. Not to speak of the want of respect for the relics of generations gone by, a great many valuable monuments of historical and literary import were in this way recklessly maltreated, and often disfigured or destroyed.

XV

THOSE who object to fire-burial, as if it were a desecration of the human body, will see from the above that our Germanic forefathers, even when little advanced yet in civilisation, were by no means forgetful of raising a record over the ashes of their dead. There are some who oppose cremation from the point of view of orthodox theology. Now, the Germanic tribes not only believed as strongly as any Christian could in the immortality of the soul, but also in a resurrection of the flesh. Yet this did not prevent them from changing their earlier custom of interment into that of fire-burial.

In their view, the soul—when leaving its heavenly home in the flowery realm of the Goddess of Love—was first carried earthwards, as a divine spark, in the shape of a flash of lightning, to be embodied here in the form of a child. To carry the soul back towards the Abode of Blessedness on the wings of a flame, seemed to them no greater miracle than its wonderful descent to, and incarnation on, earth. Who can say whether the introduction of fire-burial did not eventually turn out even a means of fortifying, among

our ancestors, the belief in the immortality of the soul? They were Fire and Sun worshippers since the days when they had dwelt as rude hunters and herdsmen on the plains of Central Asia. At Ariovist's time, according to Cæsar, they adored the Sun, a God of Fire, and the Moon. The Sun and the flickering flame represented to them—as to the Indians,⁵⁸ the Persians, the Greeks, and the Neo-Platonics—pre-eminently the vivifying powers, the spark of life, the essence of the soul. There have been, and there are, races to whom Fire is so sacred that on that very account they refrain from cremation. The Germanic nations, too, believed in the sacredness of the flame. For that very reason they made it the hallowed conveyance of the dead. The twirling fiery tongues which rose from the pyre towards Heaven did not fill them with the idea of final destruction, but rather with that of ennobling purification. They were easily brought to see in it a cleansing of what they conceived to be man's eternal being from mere earthly dross. They looked upon the flame as the true conductor of the dead, as the emancipator of the soul. The application of fire to the corpse appeared to them to be a means even of appeasing and purifying the soul: a view we also find among the Greeks⁵⁹ and Romans.⁶⁰ The very idea of Purgatory in the Roman Catholic Church has been a graft on this early pagan view.

The strength of the Germanic belief in the resurrection of the flesh may be seen from the elaborateness with which this idea was worked out and upheld among a race so systematically given to fire-burial. The departed leaders of men, who had fallen in battle, were supposed

⁵⁸ 'I am the fire that dwells in the bodies of all things which have life,' says Krishna in the *Bhagavad-Gîtâ*; or, 'I am the brightness in the flame, the vitality in all beings,' according to the translation used in Mr. Hurrey Chintamon's recently published *Commentary on the Text of the Bhagavad-Gîtâ*.

⁵⁹ See *Iliad*, vii. 410.

⁶⁰ Lucanus, *Pharsalia*, ix. 9.

to dwell bodily in Walhalla with Odin, in the golden, shield-adorned hall called Gladsheim, the roof of which is built of shafts. There the heroes fight and feast, in full physical vigour. With Thor, in Thrudheim, the common folk were assumed to lodge. Other hosts of the dead dwelt with Freyr, in Alfheim. Others with his sister Freyja—for of her it was said that, like Odin, she could choose daily one-half of those who had fallen in battle, to receive them as her companions in Folkwang. Again, with Hel, in Niflheim, dwelt those who died, not in battle, but from old age or from illness. According to a passage in the Younger Edda, which I have before quoted, 'bad men travel Hel-wards;' but the whole text of this passage shows it to be a later addition. In the older, poetic Edda, there are references even to the dwelling of heroes with Hel, who, like Demeter, was regarded as a Mother of Life as well as of Death, ruling over the nine nether worlds.

The assertion of an English bishop that cremation must injure the belief in bodily resurrection—a view ridiculed already by pagan Latin controversialists—is certainly not tenable, when looked at from a historical point of view. Those who incline towards the miraculous are never stopped by minor considerations. The belief in the Supernatural is not affected by this burial question; or how could the strictly orthodox reconcile their theory with the fact of many

people losing their lives accidentally by fire? Are those who have the misfortune of being so burnt also excluded from continued existence in another world? Will either Catholic or Protestant assent to this logical consequence? And if not, can the premiss be upheld by them?

Again: are the Christian martyrs whom Nero is said to have burnt for a night's sport, doomed, in the opinion of orthodox Christians, to eternal destruction? Or will the adherents of the Reformed faith acknowledge that the early martyrs of their own creed, who perished, like Huss and Hieronymus, at the stake, were, by this process of cruel cremation of the living flesh, effectually disposed of for all eternity? These and similar questions, which suggest themselves too obviously to require amplification, need only to be put, in order to show at once to the most thoughtless that objections to fire-burial cannot be maintained even from the point of view of strict orthodox theology. As to men of a scientific way of thinking, their opinion has been made up long since. For them, the question of Cremation resolves itself into one of public health,—to be settled in the public interest, though with every due regard for the memory of the dead. And if, in doing so, we have to revert to a custom which was surrounded, among our forefathers, with a poetical halo, that very fact is apt to recommend a practice most urgently required for the welfare of the living.

