

The Gold of Toulouse

The legend of the Tectosages, to which we have already referred (p.278), relates how the remnants of Brennus's horde brought with them looted treasure from the temple of Apollo. Consistent with the Celtic magico-religious traditions, it seems that this gold was ritually cast into a sacred lake in the Toulouse area – perhaps as a means of placating the powers of the watery underworld. Here it remained, undisturbed for a number of centuries until it was seized by the Imperial Consul Servilius Caepio in 107 BC as part of his extortion of the wealth of the region. However, Caepio would reap little benefit from his plundering of this sacred treasure. An ancient curse seems to have clung to the 'Gold of Toulouse', and it is represented as destroying the lives of all who came in contact with it. After a run of bad luck following this looting, Caepio was to end his days in exile, a broken man – just like Brennus before him.⁴⁹⁰

It is hard not to see a parallel here with the Germanic myth of the cursed Rhinegold, which is the root-cause of the cycle of misfortune in the Nibelungenlied. This in turn can be related to Andvari's gold in the Eddaic Völsung tradition. Like the Gold of Toulouse, both of these hordes represent ill-gotten gains, driving its onlookers insane with covetous desire and delivering its possessors nothing but destruction. This cursed gold is integral, as a motivating impulse to the structure of many of these Germanic saga traditions, embodying a process of evil or transgression that is transmitted between peoples: a relentless relay of violence and revenge which defines the essential atmosphere of The Tragic Peaceweaver Tale and its related variants.

The Vylsung-Nibelungen complex of stories, though almost entirely mythological in conception, nonetheless appears to have a dimly-visible historical context: that of the Germanic successor states of the fifth-century post-Roman Gaul. Gunther (or Gunnar as he is known in the Icelandic tradition) has been identified with the historical *Gundicar*, king of the Germanic tribe of the Burgundians, who were displaced in 437 AD by the invading Huns. Attila the Hun himself features in this myth as the great king *Atli*, brother of Brynhild, and (in some traditions) the second husband of Kriemhild/Gudrun (whose first husband was the hero Siegfried). Siegfried's father Siegmund is sometimes known as the 'King of the Franks', although none of this family can be identified with any specific historic figure, and there is every likelihood they were partly mythical in origin.

However, the name of the 'Völsungs' themselves is interesting – relating as it seems to do to the Germanic element **walyas-*, which has the general meaning of 'foreigner' but seems to have been applied specifically to semi-Romanized populations on the borders of the Dark Age Germanic world. The word Welsh derives from this root, as do the names for the Walloons of Belgium, the Valiser of Switzerland, the Welsch of the Italian Tyrol and the Vlachs of Romania.⁴⁹¹ It is hard to escape the impression that the original tribal-historic significance of the Völsung people is related to this demographic complex. If this is the case, then a *Romano-Belgic* origin for a significant element of the Rhinegold myth might reasonably be assumed. According to Dark Age Germanic idiom, it

489 The remnants of similar sequence can be also be discerned in verses 38-39 of *The Second Lay of Helgi Hundings Bane* – part of the oldest stratum of the Völsung tradition extant, found in the pagan Icelandic *Verse Edda* (pp.131-132)

490 Stabo, I, 14 (Tierney p. 262)

seems Siegfried and his family were originally thought of as a *walisch* or ‘Welsh’ dynasty of Romanised Gauls, which makes it possible to believe that the legend of their inherited cursed gold might be traceable (via the lakes of Toulouse) to the original Belgic horde, the looted wealth of the temple of Delphi.

Connections between the Germanic and Belgic worlds were far from unknown even before the arrival of the Romans. According to Caesar, the *Belgae* even claimed to have originated east of the Rhine – perhaps reflecting a memory of the later stages of their trans-Alpine wandering which brought them from their Danubian homeland into Northern France (see pp. 279 above). However, it is beyond dispute that, like some of the other well-known western ‘German’ tribes (including the *Cimbri* and the *Teutones*), they were Celtic-speaking in the Roman Age, their leaders bearing Celtic names.⁴⁹² The words for ‘iron’ ‘lead’ and ‘kingdom’ were all imported from Celtic into the Germanic languages – suggesting that there had been a formative period, possibly coinciding with the Early Iron Age in Germany, when Celtic-speakers had been a dominant influence in trans-Rhenian Europe. All of which reinforces the suggestion that the boundary between the worlds of Celtic and German speakers was rather more porous than has sometimes been assumed. As archaeologist T. G. E. Powell once suggested ‘there must have been a shading off of one cultural linguistic and political region to another, and the process must go back to a time when there could neither be defined Celt nor Teuton, but only zones of Old Europeans’⁴⁹³.

The subsequent Roman occupation of Gaul undoubtedly heightened the significance of the Rhine as a border between the civilized and uncivilised worlds, consequently accentuating the distinction between the Gallo-Roman and Germanic peoples. But even after 58 BC these two culture zones were far from impervious to one another’s influence. Notably, a proto-Roman fringe seems to have developed on the southern and western borderlands of *Germania* (just as it seems to have done in Britain in the first century BC). When the Franks, Lombards and other Germanic peoples took possession of Gaul and Northern Italy they were assuming control of a cultural-political system that was neither new nor alien to them, but with which they had been extensively involved (as traders, mercenaries, prostitutes etc.) for a number of generations before. It is no accident that the Franks so readily adopted the Latin language of their subject peoples, following their conquest of Gaul in the fifth century AD. They may even have thought of themselves as Roman already.

This, then, was the tribal-historic context in which the saga of the *Völsungs*, the *Nibelungs* and the cursed Rhinegold would have been originally located. As we have seen, many of the elements of this tradition would be re-used in other saga contexts, and the *Völsung-Nibelung* tradition would also be enriched with various other elements and motifs in its various extant versions: whether these were composed in Anglo-Saxon England, Nordic Iceland or High Medieval Germany. But a substantial core of this tradition, I would argue, goes back even further to a Romano-Belgic core. In particular,

491 John Davies (1990) p. 71

492 Powell (1990) pp. 21, 190

493 *ibid* p. 192

the motif of *ancient, cursed gold* – echoing the legend of the Gold of Toulouse – may have become involved with the basic Heroic Age legend of the Tragic Peace-weaver at this stage. Other elements, including ‘the hidden warriors’ and ‘the watchman device’ may well have been present from the beginning, with these apparently Homeric devices perhaps even entering into the proto-Belgic narrative tradition during the years of Graeco-Celtic contact before the sack of Delphi in 279 BC. Whether or not this was the case, these elements, as well as the more universal features such as the inter-tribal feud (at the heart of which is a royal female with links to both of the groups involved), the fight in the Great Hall, and even the otherworldly ‘coda’ (see pp. 332-335 etc.), were almost certainly present in the Belgic origin myth brought to Britain in the late Iron Age, out of which Branwen primarily evolved.

The all-important ‘Gold of Toulouse’ element itself is possibly identical (in functional terms) with the *peir dedani* or ‘Cauldron of Resurrection’, which plays a mysteriously significant role in the Second Branch. As we note on p. 299, n. 525, its significance is almost identical to the ‘otter payment’ in the Eddaic account of the Völsunga Saga. The doom-laden, mythical provenance of this cauldron is equally pronounced. Although this cauldron is not central to the plot (in the way that the rhinegold is to the *Nibelungenleid*, for example) its initial association with the sinister Llasar Llaes Gyfnewid; its role as bargaining chip in a fated negotiation process; and its final destruction at the hands of the war-monger Efnisien all bring it into close association with the cursed gold of the Germanic stories. It is not unreasonable to believe that both elements had a common source, namely the gold of Toulouse, which owes its mythical status to the Sack of Delphi and the subsequent migrations of the former host of Bolgios.