



# The Saga of the Volsungs (Legends from the Ancient North)

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**Legends from the Ancient North: Five classics of Norse literature that inspired J. R. R. Tolkien's epic vision in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings***

Legendary fantasy writer J. R. R. Tolkien spent much of his life studying, translating, and teaching the ancient tales of northern Europe at Oxford and drew on them for his own writing. These epic stories, with their wizards and knights, dragons and trolls, cursed rings and magic swords, are as fascinating today as they were thousands of year ago. Reading them brings us as close as we will ever get to the magical worlds of the Vikings and the origins of their twentieth-century counterpart: Tolkien's Middle Earth.

Based on Viking Age poems and composed in thirteenth-century Iceland, *The Saga of the Volsungs* combines mythology, legend, and sheer human drama in telling of the heroic deeds of Sigurd the dragon slayer, who acquires runic knowledge from one of Odin's Valkyries. Yet the saga is set in a very human world, incorporating oral memories of the fourth and fifth centuries, when Attila the Hun and other warriors fought on the northern frontiers of the Roman empire. In his illuminating introduction Jesse L. Byock links the historical Huns, Burgundians, and Goths with the extraordinary events of this Icelandic saga. With its ill-fated Rhinegold, the sword reforged, and the magic ring of power, the saga resembles the *Nibelungenlied* and has been a primary source for such fantasy writers as J. R. R. Tolkien and for Richard Wagner's Ring cycle.

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