

Creatures and Kings: A Viking Tale's Link with Winchester

Intro: Welcome to Hampshire HistBites. Join us as we delve into the past and go on a journey to discover some of the county's best and occasionally unknown history. We'll be speaking to experts and enthusiasts, asking them to reveal some of our hidden heritage, as well as share with you a few fascinating untold stories.

Aisha: Hello! And welcome to this week's episode on Hampshire HistBites. My name is Aisha Al-Sadie and I am the Learning Officer at Winchester Cathedral. Today I am going to be telling you a very old tale that has been passed down through the centuries through storytelling. In the past not everyone could read or write, so they passed on their people's histories through stories!

The story you are about to hear is a very small part of a large collection of tales called a saga, you may have heard that word before. This story comes from a collection of stories about the Vikings, called the Volsunga Saga. As stories were passed on through word of mouth over the years, they changed, as people made them more exciting and dramatic to keep their audience entertained and interested. So in this tradition I am going to be tweaking my version of the story for you.

After you have heard the story you may wish to visit Winchester Cathedral, as we have a beautiful carved piece of stone in our Kings and Scribes exhibition. This carved piece of stone shows part of the story, and it is called the Sigmund Stone. You will be able to come and see it from the 17th of May, subject to government guidelines.

Let's begin.

This is an Old Norse tale, told for centuries in the flickering light of the night fire. King Canute, who ruled England from 1016 to 1035, was a Danish Viking and also King of Denmark and Norway. Perhaps it was Canute who had the Volsunga Saga carved into stone and displayed in the Saxon Cathedral here in Winchester, but no one really knows. A fragment of the stone was found in the 1960s when archaeologists excavated the remains of the Saxon Cathedral. The story of the Volsunga Saga is very long and tells the adventures of many heroes, but the part we're interested in goes something like this ...

King Siggeir was the King of Gothland. Over many years he had fallen out with King Volsung, King of a nearby country. They argued about land, they argued about riches, they argued about almost everything. The arguments often resulted in great battles, each king trying to outdo the other and each trying to outwit his enemy.

King Siggeir had been plotting. He wanted to end this feud forever, he decided that he needed to kill Volsung and his family and take over his land and people. To do this he would need a cunning plan. One night, King Siggeir and his most trusted advisors had a secret meeting where they came up with a plan to defeat King Volsung. King Siggeir decided that he would send an invitation to King Volsung and his family to a great feast that he would hold in their honour. King Siggeir knew that King Volsung was so sick of the battles between them too, the idea of a great feast with peace talks would go down very well.

Little did King Siggeir know, his wife Signy was listening to his plotting through a crack in the door and she was horrified. Signy was the daughter of King Volsung and the idea that her whole family would be murdered here in her new home was terrifying. But Signy was clever. When the feast was officially announced, Signy went to her husband King Siggeir, and offered to take the invitation to her

family herself. King Siggeir thought about this for a long time. Was there a downside to this? But he didn't know that Signy knew of his plan and he thought if Signy took the invitation to her family, then they would definitely come. So, he said, yes.

Signy travelled for many days to visit her father. When she eventually got there, she broke down in tears. Signy told her father of the plot to kill him and her brothers. King Volsung listened carefully then told his daughter not to worry and to return to her husband. He thought his army was big and bold enough to defeat any attack by Siggeir. So, Signy dried her tears and returned home.

Once Signy had left, King Volsung gathered his army including his ten sons and marched to Gothland where King Siggeir put his dreadful plans into action. When the feast was in full flow and everyone had had lots to eat and drink, and everyone was feeling a little bit sleepy, suddenly the doors to the Great Hall slammed shut. King Siggeir had asked Volsung's men to leave all their weapons outside the hall, as was customary at peace talks, but King Siggeir's men had hidden their weapons in say the hallway. And as soon as the doors were shut, all of King Volsung's men and his brothers were either captured or killed.

When Signy heard of the death of her father and the imprisonment of her brothers, she ran to her husband, throwing herself down at his feet. Through tears in her eyes, she begged King Siggeir to put her brothers in the stocks in the Wildwood, so she might see them for a little while longer. King Siggeir thought she was mad at wanting to prolong the agony of her brothers but agreed to her request.

Signy's 10 brothers were tied to the stocks in the middle of the Wildwood. As darkness fell and the creatures of the night emerged, She-wolf came into the forest. Her coat was black. Her paws were huge, and her white teeth were sharp. She lifted her head and sniffed the air, her ears pricked up. Hmm, she thought. A new smell. The smell of man. Back in her den she had six hungry cubs to feed. A man would be more than enough to satisfy their hunger. She circled the area where the brothers lay and sniffed again. The brothers laid stock still, their eyes wide, hardly daring to breath. The wolf turned and circled the brothers in the other direction then she went down on her haunches and sprung forward. Quick as a flash, she grabbed the leg of one of the brothers in her strong jaws and dragged him away to her den where she fed him to her cubs. Licking her lips, her eyes narrowed as she thought. Hmm. It might be worth another visit to the Wildwood tomorrow. Then with a sigh, she curled up with her cubs and went to sleep.

Meanwhile, Signy was waiting for an opportunity to rescue her brothers. She didn't know about the wolf and thought her brothers would be safe in the wildwood until she could put a rescue plan together. She sent a man she could trust into the wildwood to check upon her brothers. He came back wild-eyed and shaking and told her the dreadful news of the wolf and the death of one of her brothers. Signy listened with growing dread. She thought long and hard. A plan was needed to save her brothers. The wolf had made things even more difficult. What could she do?

Back in the Wildwood, the wolf had quickly realised that the brothers provided a quick and easy meal for her and her cubs. Each night, for nine nights she approached the brothers, circled where they lay, her eyes gleaming in the moonlight and snatched one of them and dragged him back to her cubs until only Sigmund was left alive. Time was running out, but then Signy had a brilliant idea. She sent her bravest most loyal man into the wildwood carrying a big pot of honey. She gave him careful instructions, which must be followed absolutely. He was to approach Sigmund and spread the honey over Sigmund's face in a thick, sticky layer then he was to pour the remaining honey into Sigmund's mouth, all the while whispering in his ear the plan made by Signy.

Night fell again in the wildwood and the she-wolf returned. She circled Sigmund as he lay on the floor and raised her head to sniff the air. She smelt man, but what was that? Some other aroma filled the air. She sniffed again and there it was, the unmistakable smell of lovely, sweet honey. The wolf drooled.

She had the honey all to herself. There was no way she could take it back to her cubs. She would enjoy this meal.

She licked the honey from Sigmund's face. Sigmund lay completely still and silent. The wolf then started to lick the honey from his eyes, his neck, around his hair and then she started to lick the honey from his mouth. Sigmund waited, hardly daring to breathe then caught her tongue in his teeth and held fast. The wolf was startled. She pulled back setting her front paws against the stock. She pulled and pulled and still Sigmund hung on, clamping his teeth firmly onto the tongue of the wolf. Suddenly, the wolf fell back, Sigmund held fast, and the wolf's tongue came away by the roots. With a huge howl she fell and breathed no more. Sigmund lay there, hardly daring to believe what had happened. His chest was heaving. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a shadow emerge from behind a large tree. He lay still, closed his eyes, and waited, thinking it was one of Siggeir's men coming to finish him off. He had no strength left to fight. As the figure came closer Sigmund saw that it was the same man who had brought the honey and whispered the plan. He approached Sigmund cautiously, checking to make sure the wolf was dead then ran up to Sigmund and released him from his bonds. Sigmund was weak with hunger and fear. The man gave him water to sip and rinsed the remaining honey from his face. From his bag he brought bread, cheese, and dried meat. After a simple meal Sigmund felt ready to go. The man led Sigmund to the horses tethered in a clearing and together they rode to Signy who hid him in the wood.

The next day, King Siggeir sent a soldier to the wildwood to check on the brothers, but when he arrived at the clearing, all he saw was the dead wolf and signs of a struggle. He thought the men must have been eaten by a pack of wolves and then the wolves had fought leaving one dead. He reported his findings to Siggeir who sat back on his throne congratulating himself on finally getting rid of his enemy. The Volsung's were dead and would no longer be a problem.

This is where this part of the story ends. The Saga tells of many more adventures of Sigmund and his family. He eventually kills King Siggeir and his two sons and becomes a mighty King known far and wide as a good King. The poets and storytellers told Sigmund's story for hundreds of years, sat around the flickering light of the night fire.

The Sigmund Stone is displayed in our Kings and Scribes Exhibition at Winchester Cathedral and in stone, you can see carving of Sigmund and the Wolf.

I hope you enjoyed listening to this small part of the Volsunga Saga. From the 17th of May, subject to government guidelines, you will be able to visit our wonderful Kings and Scribes exhibition which shows some fantastic objects which tell different stories about this amazing building. On the ground floor of the exhibition you can see the beautiful Winchester Bible which we think was hand written by one monk hundreds of years ago! You can also find out about the Anglo-Saxon Cathedral that was here before our current Norman one and the people who lived and worked at the cathedral, including one particular person who saved the cathedral from sinking! On the very top floor of the exhibition among many other interesting objects is an incredible carved stone called the Sigmund stone, and if you have been listening to my story very carefully you will recognize that name, and when you see the stone you will know why I have asked you to go and see it, because the carving on it links directly with our story.

Thank you for listening and I hope to see you at Winchester Cathedral very soon.

Outro: We hope you enjoyed listening to today's episode. If you would like to find out a little bit more about what we've been talking about, then please visit the website, www.winchesterheritageopendays.org, click on Hampshire HistBites, and there you'll find today's show notes as well as some links to more information.

Thank you.