**IDH2930**

The *Nibelungenlied*:

A Poetic History of Imperial Europe from the Romans to the Present.

I. The *Nibelungenlied* as Uncommon Reading: Introduction.

Synopsis
The *Nibelungenlied* (henceforth NL) begins with the story of the hero Siegfried, who becomes nearly immortal by bathing in the blood of a dragon he has slain (the leaf of a linden tree falls on his back and covers the area between his shoulders, leaving him vulnerable here). He also defeats an army of dwarfs and hereby wins their priceless treasure, which includes a magical cloak that makes its wearer invisible. Subsequently he journeys to the realm of the Burgundians, where he challenges their king Gunther to a winner-take-all single combat. The Burgundians wisely avoid conflict at this moment and eventually make Siegfried their friend, though the friendship is an uneasy one and the initial possibility of conflict remains latent. Siegfried later helps Gunther win the hand of the mighty Valkyrie-like Brunhilde by besting her in several contests of physical strength (thus causing Brunhilde to lose her superhuman strength). This can only occur by means of subterfuge: Gunther appears to be the winner of the contests as he is seen to carry them out successfully, but it is really the superhero Siegfried -- beneath and behind him, and wearing the magic cloak of invisibility -- who makes all the movements and applies all the force. In exchange for helping Gunther overcome and win Brunhilde as his wife, Siegfried receives as his reward and wife Gunther’s own sister, Queen Kriemhilde.

The latent conflict between Siegfried and Gunther reemerges when Queens Brunhilde and Kriemhilde themselves begin to argue about which of their husbands is the more powerful. When Kriemhilde is able to produce tangible evidence that it was Siegfried and not Gunther who really overcame Brunhilde, things spiral out of control. Gunther and his henchman Hagen plot and carry out the assassination of Siegfried, again necessarily by means of subterfuge: they challenge Siegfried to a race, and Hagen stabs Siegfried through the back in his vulnerable spot when the latter, unsuspecting, kneels to drink from a fountain. The downward spiral has only just begun. Upon discovering her brother and Hagen have murdered her beloved husband, Kriemhilde is consumed with desire for revenge. In the second part of the NL, Kriemhilde marries the powerful Etzel (i.e. Attila), king of the Huns, invites the Burgundians to what is supposed to be a court festival, and then turns the Hun forces loyal to her loose on the Burgundian guests. Nearly in their entirety, the armed hosts of the Burgundians and the Huns are annihilated in a cataclysmic bloodbath that also claims the lives of Gunther, Hagen, and Kriemhilde herself.

Approach

In this discussion-, presentation-, and project-based one-credit course, we will employ the NL, a heroic epic composed in Germany in the early 13th century (which we read at the beginning of the course in an accessible English translation), as a lens through which to view the imperial history of Europe from the Romans to the present. Imperial history is examined through this poetic lens at five crucial points: 1) the Germanic migrations from the 3rd to 5th century leading to the Fall of the Western Roman empire; 2) the Frankish consolidation of “Holy Roman” imperial power under the Carolingian emperors (particularly Charlemagne) in the 8th and 9th centuries; 3) the High Middle Ages (12th-13th centuries) when imperial power in Western Europe assumes via the Crusades patently colonialist dimensions; 4) the 19th-20th century reception from Richard Wagner to National Socialism and WWII; and 5) recent and contemporary creative (and possibly post-imperial) uses of Nibelungen-lore (such as Tarantino’s film “Django Unchained” and the above-mentioned “Game of Thrones”) in post-World War II and post-Cold War Europe and globally.

II. Texts:

The *Nibelungenlied* (Penguin Classics edition).

Brief readings, music, and films from 19th and 20th century scholarly and artistic reception of the Nibelungen-tradition, including selected sections from Richard Wagner’s Ring Cycle, excerpts from Fritz Lang's film versions of the *Nibelungenlied*, and more to be assigned and made available online.

III. Assignments and Grading:

Informed participation in class discussions: 25%
Individual commentary on a section of the *Nibelungenlied*: 25%
Individual presentation on European imperial cultural history as

viewable via the *Nibelungenlied* and broader Nibelungen-tradition: 25%
Final project with Partner: 25%

Grading Scale

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| A | A- | B+ | B | B- | C+ | C | C- | D+ | D | D- | E |
| 94-100 | 90-93 | 87-89 | 84-86 | 80-83 | 77-79 | 74-76 | 70-73 | 67-69 | 64-66 | 60-63 | 0-59 |

V. UF Policies

Students with disabilities requesting accommodations should first register with the Disability Resource Center (352-392-8565, [www.dso.ufl.edu/drc](http://www.dso.ufl.edu/drc) ) by providing appropriate documentation. Once registered, students will receive an accommodation letter which must be presented to the instructor when requesting accommodation. Students with disabilities should follow this procedure as early as possible in the semester.

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IV. Class Schedule (to be modified as necessary):

January

10: Introduction

17: The Lens: NL chapters 1-18, pp. 17-145.

24: The Lens: NL chapters 19-34, pp. 145-252.

31: The Lens: Follow-up textual discussion of the NL.

February

7: In the Orbit of Rome: Migration period history, Germanic mythology, and Old Norse poetry. Readings: From Tacitus, “Germania”; Old Norse Nibelungen sources and analogues; the “Song of Atli”; “Short Lay of Sigurd.”

14: Franks, Charlemagne, and the Convergence of the Epic and the Religious: The Lay of Hildebrand; vernacular (& heroic) religious poetry.

21: The NL in the High Middle Ages: Epic poetry alongside romance poetry and love lyrics; high medieval (chivalric) heroism, the Crusades, and colonialism.

28: The NL in the High Middle Ages: The “Lament” (a poem about the aftermath); on the NL manuscripts and immediate medieval reception; high medieval (chivalric) heroism, the Crusades, and colonialism.

March

7: Spring Break

14: The modern reception of the NL; German nationalism in the 19th century and the NL as German *Nationalepos*.

21: Richard Wagner’s Ring Cycle: “Rheingold” and “Siegfried”; Wagner and Nietzsche.

28:  Richard Wagner’s Ring Cycle: “The Valkyrie” and “Twilight of the Gods”; Wagner and National Socialism.

April

4: Fritz Lang’s Film “Siegfried”; NL monuments along the Rhine and the NL museum in Worms.

11: Fritz Lang’s film “Kriemhilde’s revenge”; clips from Leni Riefenstahl’s Nazi documentary “Triumph of the Will.”

18: Recent and contemporary versions: TBA according to class preference.

25: Presentation of partner projects.