

THE GIFT OF THE SUPERNATURAL GIVER IN THE HEROIC SAGA OF THE NORTH.

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This paper has been inspired by the Swiss folklorist Max Lüthi, who studied the gift-motif and its functions in his thesis: "Die Gabe im Märchen und in der Sage" ("The gift in the magic tale and in the legendary tale").¹ Lüthi states that he has excluded all discussions on heroic legendary tales. So it came to me that perhaps it would be worth while to study the gift-motif in the heroic stories of the North. It soon became clear to me, however, that the problems involved with such an examination and its results - it goes without saying that heroic stories belonging to other countries will not be considered - would be quite unlike those of Lüthi. This paper must therefore be taken separately.

In the scope of the present paper there is but little room for theoretical discussions. The Old-Norse word "saga" and the German "Sage" are considered etymologically identical. Everybody has always (most often tacitly) assumed, that there must be some relation between the two kinds of narrative as well. André Jolles tried to determine the essentials of the "Einfacher Form" of the Sage by studying the Icelandic Saga.² He assumes that the Saga is a kind of Sage.

Nowadays nobody will think that Sagas are anything like "einfache Formen", which was Jolles' idea. Sagas are literary creations; however, these literary creations originated from oral stories, the "building-stones" of the Saga (sometimes designated by names like "munnmali, þættir", etc.), which may have been more like what Jolles had in mind. If these simple stories were still available, we would probably have no problem in comparing them with simple stories from other countries. Yet as soon as oral tales become literature, we have to cope with the combined problems of oral traditions and literature, and it will often be impossible to distinguish which is which. When we decide that some motif has originated from oral tradition, it could well be a piece of fiction by someone who was still in touch with oral traditions. Yet there are some cases in which it can be said

¹Max Lüthi (1943). The translation of these two words by "magic tale" and "legendary tale" may be questionable but will serve our present purpose well enough.

²André Jolles (1956): pp. 50-74. As Jolles studied the Family Saga, he came to the conclusion, that the essentials of the Sage (of which the Saga, according to him, is a sub-kind) have to do with ideas expressed by the words: "Family - Clan - Blood-Relationship". These ideas are still valid in some heroic sagas, e.g. the Volunga Saga, but in many others the alliance with the liege-lord has replaced the membership of a family.

for sure that the use of the gift-motif must be literary. That is, when it becomes complex and lacks the simplicity that, we think, is the mark of oral stories.

In some sagas the gift-motif has been used as a leading motif (German "Leitmotif"), that returns in different episodes. That is best explained by the wish of an author (or collator) who wanted to create something of a unity out of his heterogeneous materials and used the gift-motif as a returning idea in the story. Thus the author of Volunga Saga picked up the motif of the cursed ring Andvaranaut out of Reginismál (Edda, pp. 173-75) and linked it with the tragic fate of Sigurdr and Brynhildr (FSN I (1976), pp. 114, 177, 179). In the same way the curse of the sword Tyrfingr is worked out in some of the episodes of the Hervarar Saga (FSN II (1976), pp. 1-71). In both cases the effort is met with relatively small success, however, because they were too conscientious to change the existing materials (either oral or written) too rigorously with the result that they could not instal anything that even resembled order.

For convenience's sake we will limit ourselves to the sagas enlisted by Gudni Jónsson in the Fornaldar Sögur Nordrlanda (FSN) and the stories of Saxo Grammaticus in the Gesta Danorum. Some of our examples will come from the heroic songs of the Edda.

The people who are the subject of Lüthi's legendary tales are farmers and the things they receive are such as farmers care for. The people of the heroic sagas on the other hand are warriors and Vikings and they appreciate other things. If someone feels inclined to ask whether it would not be better, then, to look for the gift-motif in the Íslendinga Sögur, the answer is, that such an examination would have to reckon with too many divergent and complicating factors, that could not be dealt with in a paper of such limited scope. We will restrict ourselves then to the heroes and warriors of the North, and the things they care for, are things that are useful in fighting, weapons (both offensive and defensive), horses, military capabilities, and a few other things that are connected with war.

There are few magic tales without one or more gifts, and the helper or donor is one of the recurrent functions. The gifts he grants are often blatingly conspicuous and fantastic and most often meant to serve the hero in the performing of one especial task, after which they disappear out of the story without any explanation. Gifts in legendary tales are far less frequent, they are less conspicuous, but they are more permanent. A helper is often not necessary at all. Sometimes the gift comes at the end of the story and then it is, of course, just a recompense, but where it comes at the beginning or the middle of the story, it will do more than just help the hero in a single adventure, it will prove to be a permanent help. In this the saga does not differ from

the Sage.

This paper will confine itself to gifts given by supernatural givers (and they are never at the end of the story). It will be useful to divide the gifts according to by whom they have been given. Important givers are Odin and his valkyries, and the dwarfs. Some other givers can be added to the list: the Lapps and dead persons.

Odin is the lord of war and the warriors; he takes a constant interest in their actions and can be both their teacher and their testmaster. His gifts are often accompanied by some kind of test. But by granting his favourites a gift, he always keeps his own selfinterest in view. As far as Odin is concerned, the gift-motif is often used in an unobtrusive way: the gift (and there is no magic in it) simply helps the hero to be a better hero. Most heroes thus bequeathed are known to be dedicated to Odin.

To Hadingus (Saxo, book I, pp. 30/31, F/ED p. 31) as well as to Haraldr hilditonn and to Haraldr's adversary Hringr (Saxo, pp. 207/'8, 18-20. F/ED pp. 226/'27, 241-3) Odin revealed the secret of the wedge-formation in battle. When Haraldr realised that Hringr knew this secret, too, he realised that his life was at an end. Odin, who had disguised himself as Haraldr's charriot-driver Brunni, killed the old king himself.

Odin advised Sigurdr to choose the horse Grani, a descendant of his own horse Sleipnir. (Volunga Saga, FSN I, p. 147). Before that he showed his preference for Sigmundr by thrusting a sword into a tree that stood at the centre of the hall, that nobody but Sigmundr could pull out. (FSN I, pp. 114-'5). Just as in the case of Haraldr Odin decided when to withdraw his gift. During Sigmundr's last battle he quite unexpectedly sees the god appear in front of him and smash his sword with his own spear. Soon afterwards he was wounded fatally.

Later on, when Sigurdr became the son of Sigmundr, he inherited the fragments of this sword. It was reforged for him by the smith Reginn and then came to bear the name Gramr (See Volunga Saga, FSN I, pp. 145-6, and Reginnsmal; Edda, p. 177).

When the Danish king Hrólfr kraki and his heroes were on their way to Uppsala to meet the Swedish king Adils, they were severely tested by Odin under the disguise of the farmer Hrani. (FSN I, pp. 74-76). Through this test they were enabled to overcome the ordeals that Adils had in store for them. On his way back they met Hrani/Odin again, who now offered weapons to him, which they were stupid enough to refuse. From this time on Hrólfr's luck was at an end. In cases like these the gift-motif is important enough.

Odin also gave a foster-brother to his favourite Hadingus, the pirate Liserus. (Saxo, p. 23, F/ED, p. 24). This

foster-brother must originally have played a very important part in the story. He probably brought Hadingus back out of the underworld, but this part of the story has been lost.³

As we have seen so far, although it is surely an extraordinary thing to receive something from a supernatural being, the gifts themselves, though very good and useful, show no supernatural properties at all. Yet things change when we come to the Qrvar-Odds Saga.

Considering the fact that the Afidrápa of Qrvar-Oddr testifies to the fact that he took part in the famous battle of Brávellir, one might guess that he originally also was an Odin warrior. Yet in the saga as it has come down to us (FSN II, pp. 199-363), Oddr becomes a Christian and the two episodes in which Odin does play a part must be younger additions.⁴ In one of them Odin (in the disguise of the farmer Jólkr accepts a gift from Oddr and presents him in his turn with some arrows which will prove to be better than the magic arrows that Oddr's grandfather Ketill hæng took from the dead Finnakonungr Gusir (FSN II, pp. 298-9). There must also be magic in Odin's gift then and Oddr needs the gift to overcome some very malignant monsters, who have got quite a bit of magic of their own. In the other episode Odin (calling himself Raudgrani) presents the hero not with one but with no less than two foster-brothers (FSN II, p. 280). This seems to be somewhat exaggerated but Oddr will need them very badly in his struggle with two monsters, who have been sent to him by the Bjarmians and endowed with very powerful magic. Odin informs Oddr of the monsters. Again the gift-motif does not seem authentic here.

Odin gives a son to king Reri and his wife, by letting them eat an apple, and of course he can then lay a claim on the child. He also claims the child of a mother to whom he has learned the secret of making the best beer in a brewing contest (FSN II, pp. 95-96). These motifs are also known from magic tales. However, the sons of the Nordic tales are destined to be Odin-heroes, due to the claim he can now lay to them.

We will end this survey by mentioning the gifts of Odin to the famous warrior Starkadr. As is well-known these gifts are counter-set by curses from the god Thor. As both the gifts and the curses seem to shape the entire life of Starkadr, one might well think of a literary effort to put the warrior's life in a frame: Starkadr's life can be divided in three main episodes. This corresponds with the three spans

³See my: "One Hadingus -- two Haddingjar (1987).

⁴See the stemma of R.C. Boer in the Introduction to the Qrvar-Odds Saga (1888).

of human life that Odin has granted him. On the other hand Thor has ordained that he will commit a heinous deed during each life-time. The difficulty is, that this initial scene is to be found in the Gautreks Saga and the greater part of Starkadr's life in Saxo's Gesta Danorum. It seems rather presumptuous to think of the possibility, that both stories perhaps share a common (perhaps written) source?

Odin is not a generous giver. He seldom gives anything for nothing. Of Starkadr he asked that he would sacrifice the life of his master, king Vikarr to him. Also the vengeance that Dagr (in the second Lay of Helgi Hundingsbani (Edda, p. 157.) performed on his brother-in-law Helgi with the spear borrowed from Odin must be seen as a kind of sacrifice and therefore something that Odin asked in return.

The valkyries serve as a link between the warriors and the god of war and sometimes they are the lovers of Odin-heroes. Their gifts to these heroes can be extremely useful.

In the Lay of Helgi Hjorvardsson Helgi receives a sword from the valkyrie Sigrún, who afterwards becomes his lover. Edda, pp. 142-'3. This is also what the valkyrie Svanhvita did to the young Regnerus (Saxo, p. 41, F/ED, p. 45). In both cases it is understood that the gift is essential to the hero's career. Yet there seems to be no magic in it.

The hero Helgi Haddingjaskati, referred to at the end of the second Lay of Helgi Hundingsbani (Edda, p. 161) is known only from the Old-Icelandic Gríplarímur and the late Hrómundar Saga Gripssonar (FSN II, pp. 405-'22). His beloved is the valkyrie Kára. As Helgi as the antagonist of the hero Hrómundr has become the villain of the piece, it is clear that the original story has become parodied here. What is told about him, should be treated with great circumspection. Yet the fact that this Helgi too received a sword from his valkyrie need not be doubted.

In Saxo's book VI, pp. 147/'8 (F/ED, pp. 166-7), we meet king Fridlevus. Whilst on his ship he listens to the crying of three swans that are probably valkyries. A girdle is dropped from the air with writing on it which reveals that Hithinus, son of the king of Telemark is imprisoned by a giant. Fridlevus liberates the boy.

On the whole we can say that the valkyries' gifts like those of Odin have a function in the story. Although the givers are supernatural, there seems to be no magic present in the gift themselves. The way the gifts are used, seems very natural and the idea that the motif could have belonged to oral tradition, seems to have some credibility.

Orvar-Oddr also meets a supernatural woman, who might remind us of a valkyrie (FSN II, pp. 239-'44), but Orvar is more like a Celtic fairy, and therefore the fact that the meeting takes place in Ireland is very appropriate. The gift consists of a magic shirt that will make him invincible as

long as he does not take flight. In our eyes this magic detracts from his heroic stature and it looks like a younger embellishment on the part of an author who no longer fully understood what heroic nature is like.

The dwarfs were dwellers of the earth (and also of the rocks and stones). This was also the place of the mines with their precious metals, out of which weapons and other artifacts could be forged. No wonder then that dwarfs were famous as forgers and that a weapon or piece of adornment thought to be forged by dwarfs was an object highly valued. (All the artifacts used by the gods to rule the world, were also made by the dwarfs.) As a rule, however, dwarfs did not give things out of their own free will. Sometimes they gave them as a reward for services rendered. On other occasions, however, warriors forced them to make a weapon for them by using some trick. Then the dwarfs grew very angry, and then added some unpleasant condition to the use of such a weapon. That there is magic attached to such a gift is in this case rather the rule than the exception. The motif could well have belonged to oral tradition, but the way it is used seems to point in the direction of literature.

The ring Andvaranaut (Volunga Saga) and the sword Tyr-fingr (Hervarar Saga), both cursed objects, have already been mentioned. Án boggsveigir is an exception. (FSN II, pp. 365-403. He bars a dwarf's entry into his home and thus forces him to forge a bow and five arrows for him, with which he will always hit his target. The dwarf keeps his promise and gives him the precious objects, "med engum álogum", which must be something extraordinary then. Again the magic detracts from Án's herodotom in our eyes, but the author seems bent on making a kind of trickster-figure out of this outlaw. There is nothing tragic about Án boggsveigir. This is surely literature.

In the Ásmundar Saga kappabana (FSN I, pp. 383-408) the dwarf-motif is again used to provide a frame for the story. Because the dwarfs are angry at the way the king maltreats the swords they have forged for him, they promise him that these weapons will cause the death of the two sons of his daughter.

The quite young Dorsteins Þáttr þeijarmagns (FSN IV, pp. 319-45) is an amusing parody on some of the adventures of Thor. The dwarf-motif in the beginning is probably also meant as a parody: Þorsteinn saves a dwarf's child out of the claws of an eagle and in return gets overloaded with presents, precisely those things to which his great success in the world of the giants, which forms the main subject of the þáttr, will be due. This is the way the gift-motif is used in magic tales.

In some quite young stories, such as the Dorsteins Saga Vfkingssonar (FSN III, pp. 1-73) and the Göngu-Hrólfs Saga

(FSN III, pp. 161-280) , which need not be taken very seriously, the dwarfs become real actors in the story and with their magic they act in a very complicated way. Here outlandish (Celtic!) influences seem quite certain.

Even more than the dwarfs the Finns (or Lapps as they are called nowadays) have a reputation of being masters in the magic arts. Whenever they enter the story, we can be sure that we shall hear something about magic. This must be a reflection of the superstitious feelings with which the Germanic peoples of Scandinavia regarded those small dark men, whose behaviour was so strange to them. It will not make a great difference, whether dwarfs or Finns are the makers of weapons that are possessed by heroes. Ketill hœng was in the possession of some magic arrows that he took of Gusir, king of the Finns, whom he had killed. (FSN II, pp. 163-'4). They seem to be not very important to him. When Orvar-Oddr became Ketill's grandson, he inherited those arrows. There is an arrow in the nickname of Oddr, but the singular seems to point to an older story, which may have been suppressed when the genealogical link was forged.

Many heroes have spent some time amongst the giants, most often in their youth. We might therefore expect that those friendly giants would be amongst the givers. This is not true, however. The giants as givers are only to be found in younger fornaldarsögur, where they become actors in the story, in just as fantastic a way as the dwarfs. Instances of this are the Sturlaug's Saga starfsama, the Egils Saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana, and the Sorla Saga sterka.

We will finish by saying something about the haugbúar. Episodes in which a hero fights with a "grave dweller" occur in many sagas and such stories must have at one time been very popular; they have even penetrated into the realistic Íslendinga Sögur. The harsh reality will have been that of grave robbery: the dead warrior leaders who were buried attracted thieves, who must have had a very bad conscience about their acts, however, because they added sacrilege to theft. When they had overcome their fears, they will must have bragged about their herodome afterwards and have portrayed the haugbúar as terrible monsters!

The story of the waking of the dead Angantýr by his daughter in the Hervarar Saga is famous (FSN II, pp. 10-23). It is the theme of a magnificent piece of poetry with some prose interludes, included in the saga. Angantýr must, quite against his will, give up the sword Týrfingr to Hervor. The scene is pictured in dark romantic colours. The motif of the curse on the sword is used in a literary way in the saga, but this scene could well have been a story on its own. The poetry, although probably not so old as the so called Hlódskvída will be older than the prose that mentions the curse and describes its effects.

In the Hrómunds Saga Gripssonar Hrómundr takes away from the haugbúi Dráinn the sword Mistilteinn together with a ring and a necklace. The last two objects disappear immediately from the story, and are therefore quite functionless. The sword serves Hrómundr quite well, however. The Göngu-Hrólfs Saga again uses the haugbúi motif in a quite fantastic way.

We must come to an end. We have seen (especially in connection to Odin) that the gift-motif can be very important, but that, although the giver is supernatural, there is nothing fantastic in the gift itself. It fits itself quite naturally in the story, and it is easy to believe, that it has been there from the beginning, and that some old material has been employed, although the story (as in the case of the Hrólfs Saga kraka) is quite young.

However, later on people lose the feeling of what a hero really is. They want him to overcome his enemy in a magic way, they even want him to lose his human vulnerability. Then magic gifts are given to him and we have ascribed these gift-motifs to literature. And of course, the use of a magic object with a curse on it, in order to bind the different elements of a story together, must surely be literature!

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