

Heathen religion in Haustlǫng

Richard North

University College London

At first it seems doubtful whether there is any religion in *Haustlǫng*, either Christian or pre-Christian. While it is true that both tales in the twenty extant stanzas of *Haustlǫng* describe the adventures of Óðinn, Þórr and other Old Norwegian gods, these gods are often portrayed with a sense of humour seemingly at odds with the piety of a worshipper. The author of this work, who alludes to pictures on a shield received apparently from Þorleifr inn spaki Hǫrðu-Kárason, is usually taken to be Þjóðólfr of Hvinir, a poet from Kvinesdal in Vest Agder who flourished in Norway c. 885 - c. 920. His authorship is accepted on the basis of two named attributions by Snorri Sturluson (1178/9-1241), who paraphrased *Haustlǫng* and preserved st. 14-20 in *Skáldskaparmál* ch. 17 (Jón, ed., I, 270-8) and st. 1-13 in ch. 22 (*ibid.*, I, 304). The same Þjóðólfr *inn hvínverski* is also (other claims aside) held to be the author of *Ynglingatal*, a dynastic poem which commemorates the deaths of the kings of Uppsala and their Norwegian descendants, and which seems to have been composed c. 880-90 for King Rǫgnvaldr of Grenland, a cousin of King Haraldr hárfagri. Given that Þjóðólfr thus lived more than a century before the true Norwegian conversion in c. 1030, he might have been expected to show some commitment to heathen religion in *Haustlǫng* (the basis of Kiil, pp. 1-104), or at least his fear of the gods through ritual drama (*cf.* Holtmark, p. 40). Yet for the most part he subjects his gods to satire.

Religious satire in Haustlǫng

The first satire in *Haustlǫng* is of Óðinn, Loki and Hœnir, as these gods prepare to roast an ox in an earth-oven cooking-fire (st. 2). Nearby is the giant Þjazi disguised as an eagle. Since Þjazi is described as a thief, the 'wolf who steals a lady' (*snótar ulfr*, 2/2), it appears to be his aim as acknowledged from the start to rob the gods of Iðunn, an aspect of the goddess Freyja on whom the gods rely for their youth and fertility – and in this stanza, it seems, for their meal. Þjazi settles down in a tree nearby and waits, at first unnoticed by the Æsir. In st. 3-6 the poet shifts to the scene as viewed from the

gods' perspective. Today the Æsir are careless: 'economizing on trickery', Þjóðólfr says, although, as 'defenders of the gods', they should be vigilant (*vélsparir varnendr goða*, 4/7-8). The trickery in question is Þjazi's witchcraft, through which the ox-meat stays uncooked. Óðinn, in his role as 'gods' educator' (*hapta snyrir*, 3/3), is alert enough to say that 'something has caused this' (*hvat því valda*, 3/3-4), but it is not clear that any of them see a connection with the eagle, even when Þjazi begins to speak from the tree. In these stanzas we see Þjazi thus not with the poet's objectivity – as an eagle 'in a vulture's worn-out coat' (*f gemlis ham gømlum*, 2/3) – but through the complacent eyes of individual Æsir, whose *amour propre* influences the manner in which both they and Þjazi are described.

So, from Óðinn's point of view, the scene is swiftly transformed into a field on the eve of battle: Óðinn *hjalmfaldinn*, the 'helmeted' war-god (3/4), prepares to augur a solution to the cooking problem from the 'seagull of the surf of the slaughter-heap' (*már valkastar báru*, 3/6), as if from Huginn or Muninn, one of his ravens. Loki is reluctant to welcome the eagle (*vasat hánun hollr*, 3/7-8), perhaps because he wishes to protect his friend Hœnir. Hœnir is a minor god whose name, not to mention his heroic self-esteem as the 'stepping Meili [a son of Þórr]' (*fet-Meili*, 4/2) when he faces the eagle, suggests that he is imagined as a cockerel. As a puffed-up farmyard fowl, Hœnir might have reason to fear a bird of prey, for it is to Hœnir, not Óðinn, that Þjazi speaks when he demands 'his fill from the holy plate', probably from Hœnir's diminutive portion (*fyllar sér af helgum skutli*, 4/1-3). Loki, presumably under orders from Óðinn, must blow on the fire and so adds a new feeling of ill-will to the resentment he harbours towards the eagle for his mockery of Hœnir. But even Loki fails to realise that the eagle is a giant.

In st. 5 the mood changes to suit Óðinn's point of view, with another shift in figurative scenery to the inside of a crowded hall in which the ebullient Óðinn, lord of the land among his adoring thegns, orders Loki, now apparently a bad-tempered serving boy fostered into the Æsir's court, to serve his new guest without delay:

5. Fljótt bað foldar dróttinn Fárbauda mög vára
þekkiligr með þegnum þrymseilar hval deila,
en af breiðu bjóði bragðvíss at þat lagði
ósvífrandi ása upp þjórhloti fjóra.

[Swiftly the handsome lord of the land [Óðinn] bade Fárbauti's boy [Loki] deal out the whale of the cracking rope of spring-times [whale of the whip: ox] among the thanes, and after that the Æsir's prank-wise disobliger [Loki] served upp four bull-portions from the broad table]

In the midst of this throng, but at odds with its festive spirit, Loki obeys his master and serves up four sides of beef 'from the broad table'. Yet he is sly and even now may be seen preparing a practical joke as a revenge for the slights which he and Hœnir have received. This ox-roast has already been interpreted as a expression symbolic of social relationships (Clunies Ross, pp. 117-18). With his hall-conceit in st. 5, however, Þjóðólfr seems to mock Óðinn and the other Æsir for an ill-advised decision by comparing them with men. At the same time, Þjóðólfr does not allow us to forget the wider implications of Norse mythology. Thus he presents Óðinn also as the husband of the earth (*foldar dróttinn*, 5/1), shows that the ox is roasted in the ground (*bjóð*, 5/5), in an earth-oven from which Loki serves up the four helpings, and hints that Loki – probably as a result of the trick that he plays on Þjazi – will become the enemy of the Æsir (*ósvifrandi ása*, 5/7).

This implication of Loki's later hostility to the gods is further developed in st. 6-8. As the eagle devours his helping, the poet reveals him to be Þjazi, a giant and thus the hereditary enemy of gods, by referring to him as the father of Mǫrn (either Skaði, or a mountain torrent in Aust Agder, or both). Loki without warning strikes at this dangerous figure with a pole just as he stoops to eat. That Loki is 'deep-counselled' when he does so (*djúphugaðr*, 6/5), appears to be ironic, no less than the self-image of Loki as the 'guardian deity of war-booty' (*hirði-Týr herfangs*, 6/7-8). This heroic image recalls the battlefield conceit in which Óðinn first spies Þjazi in the tree, but proves deluded when Þjazi hoists Loki into the sky and Loki becomes a piece of booty himself (Þjazi's *fang*, in *fangsæll*, 8/2).

Loki's helpless position is illustrated in st. 7 (and perhaps was on the shield). The eagle takes off, the pole is stuck by magic to the eagle, and the hands of Loki to the end of the pole. At the same time, Loki's fate as the enemy of the Æsir is also acknowledged: in a rare glimpse of the future we see all the gods looking on, while Loki, the 'cargo of [his wife] Sigyn's arms' (*farmr Sigynjar arma*, 7/2), is bound (in

retribution for the death of Baldr, by the guts of his son beneath a serpent's dripping poison under the earth; cf. *Völuspá* 33-5). This scene in *Haustlong* is an allusion to the eve of Ragnarøk, the last war of the world. Loki wants his link with the eagle to hold, but Þjóðólfr, by referring to Loki pointedly as the father of Fenrir (*ulfs faðir*, 8/4), the wolf who will one day snap his bonds (cf. *Völuspá* 49), makes a second allusion to Ragnarøk. In this endgame of Þjóðólfr's mythology, not only the cosmic Fenrir but also Loki, his father, are destined to break free from their bonds to lead a monstrous assault against the gods. Loki's plight with Þjazi is made to seem a forestalment of this final episode. It seems thus to have been part of Þjóðólfr's aim here in *Haustlong* to give us an aetiology, an explanation or even an apology for Loki's role in the final days before Ragnarøk. The irony of Loki's long transformation, from being an erstwhile defender of the gods' war-booty to his being an embittered figure who threatens their downfall, is emphasized by Þjóðólfr's juxtaposition of Loki's present and future roles in the conceits and kennings of st. 7-8. Particularly ironic is the use of *Loptir* ('sky', i.e. 'aloft') as a name for Loki in 8/6 at a point where the meaning of this name can be vividly illustrated to its owner.

When Þjazi asks him to bring the goddess Iðunn to the giants, Loki is compelled to accept his life in exchange for that of all the Æsir. Once Iðunn is kidnapped, her name is revealed in st. 10 as a compound split into two elements *ið-* and *-unnr*. This is probably a clue to a riddle in the stanza before, for Iðunn's name also appears to be present in the otherwise baffling kenning by which Þjóðólfr defines her in st. 9/5-8:

brunnakrs of kom bekkjar Brfsings goða dísi
girðipjór í garða grjót-Níðaðar síðan.

[the thief of the gods' Brfsing-girdle [Loki] later got the gods' lady of the brook
of the well-spring's cornfield [wave of the eddy: *-unnr ið[u]*] into the
courtyards of the rock-Níðaðr [Þjazi]]

This kenning, *brunnakrs bekkjar dísi goða*, appears to mean 'god's lady of the well-spring's cornfield'; hence 'the goddess of the bubbling water's jet'; hence 'the goddess eddy's wave': *iðu unnr*. The effect of st. 9-10, of having to pause at *ið-* and *-unnr* in st. 10 and then go back and use these elements to unlock the riddle for this goddess in st.

9, appears to imitate the delayed shock with which the Æsir perceive Iðunn's disappearance.

The pace of Þjóðólfr's narrative suddenly accelerates in st. 11-12, in which Loki, threatened with death for the second time, manages to steal the goddess back. In st. 12 both Loki and Þjazi are suddenly seen airborne once more, although this time Loki is flying as a hawk or falcon (with Iðunn transformed into a nut in his claws, according to Snorri); here the focus is on Loki in the first *helmingr* and on Þjazi in the second, in hot pursuit and closing on Loki with seconds to spare. In the midst of the second *helmingr*, Loki is portrayed as a fledgling (*þglis barn*, 12/7), while Þjazi, in contrast, is loaded with epithets which express his loon-like shrieking (and possibly his reputation for deceit, in *lómhugaðr*, 12/5), the vast and deliberate sweep of his wings (*leikblaðs reginn fjaðrar*, 12/6), the swift rush of air in his eagle's flight (*ern arnsúg*, 12/7-8) and his gigantic size and kindred (*faðir Mörnar*, 12/8). With Þjazi moving in for the kill, it is likely that these images to do with his size and power are meant to arouse our sympathy for Loki as the unlikely hero of this tale.

After alluding to Þjazi's death by burning in a bonfire set alight by the Æsir, Þjóðólfr tells the tale of Þórr's duel with Hrungrnir in the second part of *Haustrǫng*. Þórr, now named the 'son of earth' (*Jarðar sunr*, 14/6) and characterized as swelling up with rage (*móðr svall Meila blóða*, 14/7), speeds towards Hrungrnir:

15. Knáttu ǫll (en Ullar endilág fyr mági
grund vas grápi hrundin) ginnunga vé brinna,
þás hofregin hafrar hógreiðar fram drógu
(seðr gekk Svǫlnis ekkja sundr) at Hrungrnis fundi.

[All the sanctuaries of falcons (/ of the abyss) did burn, while down below, thanks to Ullr's father-in-law [Þórr], the ground was kicked with hail, when the bucks drew the temple-deity of the easy-riding-chariot forward (at the same time Svǫlnir's widow [Óðinn's widow: Earth] split asunder) to meet Hrungrnir]

These variously respectful and irreverent turns of phrase afford us a glimpse of Þórr as a temple-deity (*hofregin*, 15/5), drawn forward in his easy-riding chariot as if in a procession (*hógreiðar fram drógu*, 15/6); yet they also give him the tearaway aspect of a young man who sets fire to birds' nests or makes a racket loud enough to bring his

old mother out of doors (cf. Peer's tale to Åse, his widowed mother, in the opening scene of *Peer Gynt*).

Þjóðólfr next refers to Þórr as Baldr's bosom brother (*Baldrs of barmi*, 16/1), presumably in order to hint at Þórr's unwitting part in the missile attacks that lead to Baldr's death (cf. *Gylf*, ch. 49). If Þórr is involved in his brother's death, what hope is there for Hrungnir, his enemy? The effect of this kenning is not to present Þórr as a blunderer, rather to mock Hrungnir as his hapless victim. Þórr's moral reason for fighting the giant also becomes clearer. Given Hrungnir's epithet as the gorged enemy of mankind (*solginn dolgr manna*, 16/2-4), it seems that the rocks with which he is associated are understood as forces of infertility that swallow up men's harvest. A symbolic permutation of this meaning may be found in Snorri's tale of Hrungnir's excess in the hall of the gods (Jón, ed., I, 270-2). In this part of *Haustlǫng* it is thus Þórr's mission to safeguard mankind. Hrungnir in this sequence is characterized as a dolt with an impulse to suicide; Þórr, in contrast, is now presented seriously. Þjóðólfr thus reserves his mockery for Hrungnir and takes leave of Þórr in dignified fashion, by presenting his lineage as the son of earth (*Grundar sveinn*, 19/4) and Óðinn (*Óðins burr*, 19/5-6). In keeping with Þórr's status as the son of gods, his head is next shown in massive close-up as a curving hillside from which, like water from a rock in the earth, blood seeps from the sherd from Hrungnir's whetstone that has lodged in Þórr's head. The sherd will stay embedded, says Þjóðólfr in the last stanza of the surviving poem, until such time as a 'Gefjun who nurses wounds' (*ǫl-Gefjun sára*, 20/2) 'might chant a spell to remove the red horrific prospect of rust's abode', i.e. the red whetstone (*et rauða ryðs hœlibǫl gæli*, 20/3-4). Þjóðólfr further alludes to Þórr's titanic size by typifying his physician as the goddess Gefjun dragging land out of Sweden to settle it down as an island in the Kattegat (Sjælland). With this varied but mostly respectful combination of attitudes in the second part of *Haustlǫng* towards Þórr, a heathen god, it would be hard to justify these stanzas as the work of a Norwegian or Icelander after the pagan period in Scandinavia. It is unlikely that a recently converted Christian would have understood the respect, or a later antiquarian the occasional irreverence of a believer towards a living cult. Evidently Þjóðólfr in his own day expressed an affection for Þórr, Iðunn and the other gods through a satirical sense of humour of which the only limit was set by his respect for their power as phenomena. Understated natural

process, rather than mythological personification, was probably the basis of Þjóðólfr's religion in *Haustrǫng*.

Natural religion in Haustrǫng

'Harvest-long', the title of this poem (as in *haustrǫng drápa*) implies that Þjóðólfr took about a month over his work (c. 15 September to c. 14 October), and that he may have declaimed the poem at a *hausblót*, a 'harvest feast' which marked the end of the farming year (Olrík and Ellekilde, pp. 593-4; Hastrup, pp. 35-8). Each of the two extant episodes of *Haustrǫng*, Loki's theft of Iðunn and Þórr's duel with Hrungnir, contains a story which celebrates seasonal occupations. The first season is late autumn, winter and spring; the second, summer. In the first tale, the Æsir's roasted ox probably reflects the custom of slaughtering excess livestock before winter (c. 14 October). This ox is also the subject of kennings which refer to different times of year (Williams, p. 166). Þjóðólfr calls the ox a horse of harvest-Gefn (*ár-Gefnar mar*, 2/6); a reindeer of the dung which was raked out of the cowbyres after winter to spread on the fields (*ta[ð]lhreinn*, 3/2); a whale of the cracking rope of spring-times, or an ox behind which a whip cracks as it ploughs a field (*vára þrymseilar hval*, 5/2-4); and a yoke-bear (*okbjörn*, 6/4), an image which embodies his previous three efforts to make a connection between an ox and the plough, between the Æsir's meal and the efforts of men to send it to them. The seasonal occupations thus revealed in these ox-kennings are summer harvest (2/6), winter cattle-feeding in the byre (3/2) and spring dunging and ploughing in the fields (3/2, 5/2-4 and 6/4; Simpson, pp. 58-61).

Later, when Iðunn arrives in giant-land 'from the south' (*sunnan*, st. 10), both the mountains and their inhabitants become bright with the new sunlight while the valleys below, it may be inferred, begin to suffer the growing darkness of the winter months. Iðunn herself is characterized diffusely throughout this section of *Haustrǫng*, and appears to embody things as various as female beauty (*snótar ulfr*, 2/2), the harvest (*ár-Gefnar...*), the beasts which help men to provide it (*...mar*, 2/6), the rejuvenation of gods (*ellilyf*, 9/3) and of men and all living things (*allar áttir Ing[*v*]ifreys*, 10/5-6), wealth and the creation of treasure (*Brísings goða girði- í garða grjóti-Niðaðar*, 9/6-8), nourishment (*pl-Gefnar*, 11/2), the generation of love or life-force (*mæra mun stærandi mey*, 11/7-8), sexual pleasure (*ása leiku*, 12/2) and the abundance of corn and eddying

water. As regards the lighting of a fire in order to safeguard Iðunn's return by killing Þjazi, Olrik and Ellekilde show that midsummer bonfires were a standard item on the Norwegian calendar in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as they were throughout Europe (p. 668). This festival, known as *Jonsvaka* or *Jonsok* ('St John's eve') in Norway, observes both the feast of St John and the summer solstice (21 June), yet had probably been brought forward from the date of a heathen festival celebrated closer to the midpoint of summer in the non-solar calendar (c. 14 July; Olrik and Ellekilde, p. 619). According to *Ágrip* (ch. 19), it was Óláfr Tryggvason (ruled c. 995-1000) who first adjusted the heathen calendar and 'abolished sacrifices and drinking bouts at sacrifices and put in their place as an appeasement to the people the ceremonial feasts of Yule and Easter, St John's ale and the autumn ale-feast at Michaelmas' (Bjarni, ed., p. 22). Another bonfire in Scandinavia, known as the *Majbål* and held in Jutland and Sweden, probably replaced a similar festival which welcomed the beginning of summer earlier in the year (c. 14 April; Olrik and Ellekilde, pp. 618-19). Although the *Majbål* bonfire-festival is not recorded widely in Norway, Olrik and Ellekilde believed that it dated from as early as the bronze age (*ibid.*, pp. 619 and 668). It is possible, therefore, that the Æsir's fire in *Haustlong* 13 represents an aetiology for a custom known to Þjóðólfr's contemporaries in Norway, whereby summer's return was symbolized by the burning of a straw or wooden effigy, such as that which was recorded in midsummer bonfires in Denmark and Norway (*ibid.*, p. 671).

Þórr's destruction of Hrungrnir probably reflects two types of phenomena: the play of thunder and lightning over the mountain-tops; and the breaking of stones and rocks and their removal from the turf prior to the ploughing of a new field. As M. W. Williams says (p. 165), 'only the best land was cultivated, and even this in the rock-bound Scandinavian peninsular, and to some degrees the remainder of the north, had usually to be cleared of stones before it could be ploughed'. The giant Hrungrnir is thus characterized not only as an enemy of the gods, but also as a 'gorged enemy of men' (*solginn dolgr manna*, 15/2-4), i.e. as a rock which devours men's harvest by keeping their ploughland infertile. There are about three months between this land-clearing and the autumn month of mid-September to mid-October in which it is supposed that Þjóðólfr composed his poem in exchange for a shield. So there may be one or more other similar aetiological stories in *Haustlong* which have fallen out of this poem in its

transmission. Given the close connection between Þjóðólfr's stories and the work of the farming year, plus the likelihood that he wished to present this work to Þorleifr at a *haustblót* (c. 900), the term 'shield-poem' for *Haustlǫng* now seems to be in need of revision.

Genre of Haustlǫng

Þjóðólfr was as skilled a poet as any when he wished to allude to his mythology. Yet many of his kennings for gods and giants are unparalleled and in his case, more than in that of other Scalds, his mythology is satirically drawn, down to earth and celebrates the everyday: not only gods and giants, but also lords, thegns and feasting, plough-oxen and spring-fields, witches, temples, the weather, the seasons and seasonal occupations of Norway in the late ninth century. Though he tells us that his tales happened 'long ago' (*ó- fyr -skömmu 2/4, fyr lǫngu 6/2*), Þjóðólfr still lets us see that they are reenacted each year, and that to him the mundane and sacred are the same. *Haustlǫng* may thus be read as a rare work of 'northern pastoral' analogous to Vergil's 'Georgics' or Hesiod's 'Works and Days'.

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