

The Bridal-Quest Narratives in *Piðreks saga* and the German *Waltharius* Poem as an Extension of the Rhenish Bridal-Quest Tradition

Claudia Bornholdt

Indiana University Bloomington

Piðreks saga contains six tales which are generally assigned to the bridal-quest genre. In the order of Bertelsen's edition,¹ these tales are:

1. "Samson and Hildisvið" (I, 8-13)
2. "Ósantrix and Oda" (I, 49-56)
3. "Attila and Erka" (I, 57-73)
4. "Herburt and Hildir" (II, 47-60)
5. "Apollonius and Herborg" (II, 109-142).
6. "Íron and Bolfriana" (II, 147-157).

Additionally, the saga contains four well-known tales which do not go beyond simple wooing stories and are therefore not included in the list above:

- A. "Sigmundr and Sisibe" (I, 282-286)

¹ Henrik Bertelsen, *Piðriks saga af Bern*, 2 vols, Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur, Vol. 34 (Copenhagen: 1905-11).

- B. "Gunnar and Brynhildr" (II, 37-43)
- C. "Þiðrekr, Fasold and Þéttleifr's marriages with three of Drusian's daughters" (II, 60-63)
- D. "Attila and Grímhildr" (II, 275-279).

In brief, the bridal-quest scheme consists of the introduction of the protagonists; the hero's decision to woo for a princess, who has been recommended to him but is well-protected and difficult to obtain; the wooer's journey to the girl's country; his stay at the girl's court until he has reached such a reputable position that he is able to meet secretly with the girl; the wooer's proposal; elopement; pursuit by the girl's father and/or his army; a fight, and, finally, the wedding in the wooer's home country.

Þiðreks saga contains the largest collection of bridal-quest narratives in a single medieval work. It outnumbers even the more famous corpus of medieval German bridal-quest epics, the so-called German *Spielmannsepen* or minstrel epics.² These minstrel epics and also the bridal-quest plots contained in the German *Nibelungenlied* and *Kudrun* epic traditionally serve as the basis for studies of medieval (German and Scandinavian) bridal-quest narrative. With the exception of "Ósantrix and Oda" and its connection with *König Rother*, however, the bridal-quest stories contained in *Þiðreks saga* are often neglected in scholarly discussions of the genre.³ In more recent studies, the saga's bridal-quest and wooing tales played an important role in the discussion of the saga's transmission and structure. These studies, however, were limited to the position of the individual tales in the saga, but did not look at the tales' transmission and possible origin. In this paper, I will look at the saga's bridal-quest stories in connection with the earliest German material and show that the stories in *Þiðreks saga* stem from an old Franconian bridal-quest tradition. This study will, on the one hand, firmly place this saga's bridal-quest tales in the discussion of the bridal-quest genre, and, on the other hand, give additional support to the Northwest German heritage of the material that has been incorporated into the saga.

The first bridal-quest tale, "Samson and Hildisvið," is only contained in the later Icelandic (AB) and Swedish manuscripts (Sv). In these works the remaining bridal-quest stories are arranged in the order given above (Bertelsen's order). Ósantrix and Attila's quests, which belong to *Vilkinasaga*, are narrated fairly early in the saga, whereas "Herburt and Hildr," "Apollonius and Herborg," as well as "Íron and Bolfriana" are incorporated as a block in the middle of the work. In the Norwegian parchment manuscript Mb₃, however, *Vilkinasaga* is placed right after Herburt's quest, so that all of the bridal-quest stories are grouped together:

² The German minstrel epics are: *König Rother*, *St. Oswald*, *Ortnit*, *Orendel*, *Salman and Morolf*, and the Hugdietrich story in *Wolfdietrich B*.

³ The rather late Yiddish *Dukus Horant* must be read in connection with the Hilde and *Kudrun* tradition.

1. "Herburt and Hildir"
2. "Ósantrix and Oda"
3. "Attila and Erka"
4. "Apollonius and Herborg"
5. "Íron and Bolfriana."

The great number of bridal-quest tales in the saga is astonishing and seems rather unmotivated. Thomas Klein offered an interpretation of the saga that attempts to integrate these stories into the saga structure. According to Klein, the sequence of stories in Mb₃ is original and forms the middle part of a proposed tripartite saga structure that is divided into youth, marriage, and death (*Jugend—Heirat—Tod*).⁴ If this interpretation is correct, the question remains why no more than two of the bridal-quest stories in *Piðreks saga* are connected with the saga's hero Piðrekr: "Samson and Hildisvið," which is also the opening tale of the saga, and "Herburt and Hildir."⁵ The first tale gives some genealogical background information about Piðrekr's alleged grandparents, telling us about Samson's elopement with Hildisvið from her father's court. "Herburt and Hildir" is the story of Piðrekr's bridal-quest going awry, since his messenger Herburt elopes with the bride himself. With the exception of the initial set-up of the quest, Piðrekr does not intervene in the events, which are not elaborated on any further. Herburt and Hildir disappear from the saga and the failed bridal-quest does not have any consequences for Herburt or Piðrekr. On the contrary, after this quest has failed, we learn that Piðrekr marries one of King Drusian's daughters as do his two companions Fasold and Þéttleifr. If we consider the number of bridal-quest tales in the saga, it is surprising that Piðrekr's marriage is not told in a bridal-quest scheme but is merely mentioned *en passant*.

The saga's other bridal-quest stories are even more loosely connected with Piðrekr: "Ósantrix and Oda" and "Attila and Erka" are part of *Vilkinasaga*; Attila's wooing for Grímhildir and Gunnar's quest for Brynhildir, both not fully developed bridal-quest plots, belong to the Niflung/Nibelung tradition; and Sigmundur's briefly described wooing for Sisibe belongs to the tradition of stories about Siegfried/Sigurðr's youth.

The last two tales, "Apollonius and Herborg" and "Íron and Bolfriana," seem to have been independent tales that were included in the saga for no apparent reason other than their entertainment value. The former received the name of its protagonist from the Greek romance *Apollonius of Tyre* which was

⁴ Thomas Klein, "Zur Piðreks saga," *Arbeiten zur Skandinavistik: Sechste Arbeitstagung der Skandinavisten des deutschen Sprachgebietes: 26.9.-1.10. 1983 in Bonn*, Ed. Heinrich Beck (Frankfurt/Main, et.al.: Lang, 1983), pp. 521-25.

⁵ Susanne Kramarz-Bein made a similar observation in "Zum Dietrich-Bild der Piðrekssaga," *Arbeiten zur Skandinavistik: Zehnte Arbeitstagung der deutschsprachigen Skandinavistik: 22.-27.9.1991 am Weißenhäuser Strand*, Ed. Bernhard Glienke and Edith Marold (Frankfurt/Main, et.al.: Lang, 1993), p. 113.

already famous in the early Middle Ages and has, for example, influenced some of the episodes in the German *Kaiserchronik* (ca. 1150). The saga's bridal-quest tale, however, does not bear much resemblance to the romance. Since the tale is located in Franconia and shares several motifs with the German minstrel epics, it is possible that it circulated as an independent tale in Franconia before it was incorporated into the saga.

The last bridal-quest story, "Íron and Bolfriana," is linked to the saga only through the guest list at the feast during which the love-story evolves, and, secondly, through the fact that Þiðrekr finds the dead Earl Íron at the end. I have my doubts about including this tale in the list of bridal-quest stories, because it is rather a tale of adultery, deceit, and trickery.

The tale which is the focus of this paper, "Valtari and Hildigunnr," was not included in the initial list of bridal-quest stories in *Þiðreks saga* given above, but it certainly contains all the motifs inherent in this genre. Structurally, it plays the same role as the two bridal quests in *Vilkinasaga*. It follows Ósantrix and Attila's quests in all of the manuscripts, so that it appears fairly early in AB, whereas it is part of the block of bridal-quest tales in Mb₃ (where it stands between the *Vilkinasaga* and the Apollonius tale).⁶ This placement in Mb₃ might be a first indication that the tale was indeed considered bridal quest. Additional support for this hypothesis is supplied by the tradition of the tale's content.

The oldest and best-known version of the "Walter and Hildegunde" tale is the German *Waltharius* poem, whose provenance, date of composition, and transmission are still much debated.⁷ All we know with certainty is that this Latin poem was composed in a German monastery in either the ninth or tenth century and that it contains a multitude of allusions to the classical tradition, direct quotations from classical authors, as well as very early written evidence of some of the main protagonists of the Nibelung/Niflung tradition. Various hypotheses have been proposed with respect to the poem's original form and content. It has variously been interpreted as an original composition by a German monk (F. Panzer, F. Genzmer), as a translation and alternation of an old Germanic heroic lay (K. Langosch) of either Langobardic (W. Regeniter),

⁶ The tale is missing in the extant parts of Mb₂. The different placement of the *Vilkinasaga* and "Valtari and Hildigunnr" has led to several theories. Bertelsen argues that the order in Mb₂ is the original order and that this order has been reintroduced in the later copies AB (*Om Didrik af Berns sagas oprindelige skikkelse, omarbejdelse og håndskrifter* [Copenhagen, 1902], p.147). D. von Kralik, on the other hand, claims that *Vilkinasaga* and "Valtari and Hildigunnr" have been added to the saga only later and that the composer moved their position from the beginning of the saga to the middle part (*Die Überlieferung und Entstehung der Thidrekssaga* [Halle/Saale, 1931], pp. 11, 89). Klein, finally, regards the order in Mb₃ as most original and intended by the saga composer. He argues that this order was no longer understood by later copyists and redactors of the work so that they moved some of the stories. (*Zur Þiðreks saga*, pp. 520-43).

⁷ The Walter story in *Þiðreks saga* is loosely connected with the saga proper through family relations that are not known in other versions of the tale: Valtari is introduced as Ermanrikr's nephew and Hildigunnr is the daughter of King Ilias of Greece.

German (K. Langosch), or as of Gothic-Mediterranean (R. Menéndez Pidal, P. Dronke, V. Millet) origin. I would like to propose, however, that the poem is an early example of bridal-quest narrative and key evidence for the existence of an early Franconian bridal-quest tradition. Additional evidence for this tradition is contained in Franconian and Langobardic chronicles. Most important are the tales about King Clovis's wooing for the Burgundian princess Clotild, which is contained in the so-called *Chronica Fredegarii* (finished ca. 640)⁸ and, in a slightly different version, also in the *Liber Historiae Francorum* (finished 727).⁹ Another early bridal-quest tale is King Authari's wooing for the Bavarian princess Theudelinda which Paul the Deacon relates in his *Historia Langobardorum* (end of eighth century).¹⁰ A brief outline of *Waltharius* in which I have focused on the main bridal-quest motifs will serve to illustrate my claim:

- The hero Waltharius and his bride Hildegunde are of noble birth.
- Waltharius lives at a foreign court where his bride lives well protected and guarded.¹¹
- At this court the hero establishes a position of high reputation and trust for himself so that he can meet with his bride without arousing any suspicion.
- At the highpoint of Waltharius' career, the couple meets alone in a chamber; the girl passes a glass of wine to the hero whereupon he touches and kisses her hand.
- The hero proposes to the girl and reveals his plan to elope from the court, but the girl hesitates and questions the seriousness of his intentions.
- After Hildegunde has been convinced, she admits her love for Waltharius and both proceed to plan their escape by means of a trick.
- During a feast, Waltharius and Hildegunde serve so much wine to the king and his retinue that they all fall asleep.
- The couple rides off during the night, taking a treasure with them.
- Waltharius has to fight and defeat twelve attackers after he has crossed the Rhine. He then returns to his home country where he marries Hildegunde.

The *Waltharius* poem clearly develops according to the bridal-quest scheme given at the beginning of this paper. However, it seems to lack two important

⁸ Fredegar, *Chronicarum quae dicuntur Fredegarii scholastici libri iv cum continuationibus*, ed. Bruno Krusch, Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum, vol. 2 (Hannover, 1888), pp. 99-100.

⁹ *Liber historiae Francorum*, ed. Bruno Krusch, Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum, vol. 2 (Hannover 1888), pp. 253-59.

¹⁰ Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum*, ed. L. Bethmann and G. Waitz, : Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Scriptores rerum Langobardicarum et Italicarum saec VI-IX (Hannover, 1878), pp. 109-10.

¹¹ In *Waltharius* Attila and his wife Ospirin take on the same function the girl's parents have in other bridal-quest narratives.

bridal-quest motifs: First of all, Walter does not travel to the girl's court in order to woo her, but rather lives as a hostage with Hildegunde to whom he had been betrothed as a child. Secondly, Walter does not fight against the girl's protector and/or his army (i.e. the Huns) who have pursued the runaways. Instead he is attacked by the Franconian King Guntharius and his former fellow-hostage and friend Haganus.

These two deviations from the bridal-quest scheme, however, are only present in the *Waltharius* poem, whereas they are missing from the remaining versions of the Walter story. In "Valtari and Hildgunnr," the two Middle High German Walter fragments (Vienna 12d-13d), and in the allusions to the story that are contained in *Biterolf and Dietleib* (lines 575-8) the couple is attacked by the pursuing Huns, and only the MHG Walter fragments contain a very vague reference to an earlier betrothal of the couple, of which Walter, however, had no previous knowledge (Graz fragment).¹² Considering the outline given above and the alternate versions of the tale, it is safe to conclude that the Walter story was indeed composed according to the bridal-quest scheme and circulated in that form. The *Waltharius* poem is only one variation of the tale, which, as its extant literary witnesses from Anglo-Saxon, Germany, Scandinavia, Italy, and Poland document, circulated widely in medieval Europe. Furthermore, *Waltharius* is not necessarily the immediate source of "Valtari and Hildgunnr" in *Piðreks saga*, because the latter is in many respects much more closely related to the MHG Walter fragments and to the allusions contained in the MHG epics than to *Waltharius*, although none of these texts can be singled out as its source text. The saga version is an independent example of what I call the Walter tradition. The saga composer must have been quite familiar with this tradition, since its influence is also visible in other bridal-quest tales of the saga.

The second part of the "Herburt and Hildir" tale, for example, seems to be modeled on the Walter story as well. To develop a plan for their escape, Herburt and Hildir use a trick in which alcohol plays a major role: Hildir makes her father drunk and then obtains his promise to make Herburt her steward so that he can spend all his time close to her. Eventually, the couple rides away into the woods on two horses. Hildir's father sends his retainers after them (led by the knight Hermann) and gives orders to bring back Herburt's head (as in "Valtari and Hildgunnr"). When Herburt hears the pursuers approaching, he does not suspect any danger but rather assumes that Hildir's father has sent knights to accompany the couple on their journey. This feeling of safety, which may also be called naïvety, is familiar from *Waltharius*, where Walter initially also assumes that the approaching Franconian army won't do him any harm. In both stories it is the woman who convinces the hero of the seriousness of the events.

¹² Quotes from Marion D. Learned, *The Saga of Walther of Aquitaine* (Westport: Greenwood, 1892) and *Biterolf und Dietleib*, Ed. Oskar Jänicke, Deutsches Heldenbuch I (Berlin, Zürich: Weidmann, 1866).

Both heroes defeat twelve attackers and have their brides dress their wounds before they continue their journeys.

Motifs known from *Waltharius* also occur in “Samson and Hildisvið”: Samson lives at the girl’s court because he is one of her father’s retainers. After his daughter’s elopement, the girl’s father feels *harmar*, but is unable to react to the events (in *Waltharius* Attila is torn between sadness and anger but remains passive) and, last, but not least, Samson and Hildisvið escape into the woods on horseback with a treasure.

A comparison with the corpus of the German minstrel epics reveals that the tales in *Piðreks saga* and the Walter tradition have two main motifs in common that set them off from the German epics: the first is the importance of alcohol for the successful elopement and the second the couple’s escape on horseback. In the *Waltharius* poem, the trick that allows the couple to escape is based exclusively on overindulgence. The motif is weakened in the saga version, but here Valtari still proposes his escape plan to Hildigunnr during a banquet (*þat er i dag at veizla rik er i grasgarði attila konungs oc danz ríkr*, *Ps.*106). In “Herbert and Hildir,” Hildir drinks with her father to win Herbert as her steward and in “Attila and Erka” the girl elopes with Attila’s messenger “one night after the king and all his men had gone to sleep after drinking much wine” (*ok æitt kvælld er konongr war sofnadr ok adr miok drukkin af vini ok aller hans mænn* [*Ps.* 70]). Furthermore, the secret conversation between the two lovers Íron and Bolfriana is only possible because Íron drinks moderately, whereas all the other guests at the feast have fallen asleep from too much wine (*hann gair litt at drecka um kuellit...allir menn arir drecka oc eru katir oc um sidir legiaz allir dauð drucknir niðr næma jron jarll oc bolfriana* [*Ps.* 148]).

The second motif that is shared between the Walter story and all the bridal-quest stories in *Piðreks saga* is the couple’s escape on horseback. That motif only occurs in *Ortnit*, which is in many respects closely related to the Walter tradition and most likely of Northern heritage, but is missing from the other German epics where the couple usually escapes on ships. Possible sources for these two motifs that appear only in the saga’s bridal-quest stories and in the Walter tradition are contained in the Franconian chronicle tradition, especially in Gregory of Tours’ *Historia Francorum*.¹³ One example that has already been pointed out by Joaquín Pizarro is the Attalus tale in the *Historia Francorum* (III, 15), which is narrated according to the bridal-quest scheme. Surprisingly, this tale shows many similarities with the Walter story and some of the tales in *Piðreks saga*, as this brief summary shows:¹⁴

Attalus, the nephew of St. Gregory, lives as a hostage in the house of a

¹³ Joaquín Martínez Pizarro, “A ‘Brautwerbung’ Variant in Gregory of Tours: Attalus’ Escape from Captivity,” *Neophilologus* 62 (1978), 109-18.

¹⁴ Gregory of Tours, *Historiarum Libri Decem*, 2 vol., Ed. Bruno Krusch, 7th rev. ed. By Rudolf Buchner, Tr. W. Giesebrecht (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1988).

noble Frank in Trier. His uncle's retainer Leo disguises himself as a cook and is taken in by the Frank whose trust he slowly gains. After a year has passed, Leo approaches Attalus in a secret conversation during which both men lie with their backs to each other in a meadow. After a banquet they use the excuse of alcohol to fetch Attalus' sword and weapons and ride away on two horses. They are attacked while they are trying to cross the Moselle, but escape successfully and eventually return home to Gregory.

The *Historia Francorum* also contains several examples of stories that recall the use of alcohol in *Waltharius* and in the bridal-quest tales in *Piðreks saga*: the slaying of the Frank Andarchius after he and his men have fallen asleep from drinking too much wine (*Hist. Franc.* IV, 46), Queen Fredegunde's order to kill three Franks who have fallen asleep after a feast, and, finally, the killing of Lupus (*Hist. Franc.* X, 27), a citizen of Tours, whom his wife murders after he has fallen asleep drunk and who is then burned in the hall she ignited (*Hist. Franc.* VI, 13). This last tale recalls the most famous slaying after a feast and burning of a hall, namely, Guðrun's revenge on Atli in *Atlakviða*. The similarities between the eddic poem and *Waltharius* have in fact been frequently pointed out, but, to the best of my knowledge, a connection between *Waltharius* and the tales in the *Historia Francorum* has never been established.

Gregory of Tours was familiar with most of the short tales he integrated into his chronicle through hearsay, and it is safe to assume therefore that there existed a very lively oral tradition of these tales in the sixth but also in subsequent centuries. That this oral tradition also comprised bridal-quest tales is indicated by the Attalus tale, which is clearly structured according to the bridal-quest scheme. Interestingly, the story is one of the few tales in the *Historia Francorum* which is set in Austrasia, more specifically in Trier. It might be mere coincidence that this oldest example of German bridal-quest narrative comes from the city that produced at least two of the thirteenth-century German bridal-quest epics, namely *Orendel* and *Wolfdietrich*, but it is also possible that these later works are the products of an old bridal-quest tradition in that region. The transmission of the "Clovis and Clotild" tale gives additional evidence for the existence of such a Franconian tradition. The two versions of the tale in the *Chronica Fredegarii* and in the *Liber Historiae Francorum*, which contain various contextual discrepancies, have been entered into the chronicles independently of one another in two different parts of the Franconian realm so that it is generally assumed that the writers knew the tale from oral sources.

To sum up: bridal-quest narrative was known in Franconia as early as the sixth century because the tales that were told and written down at that time already contained most of the stereotyped motifs and structural elements of bridal-quest narrative. The composition and circulation of the *Waltharius* poem and the Walter story in general must be seen in the light of this oral, and partly also written, bridal-quest tradition. Furthermore, the bridal-quest tales in *Piðreks saga* are closely connected with this tradition. The Walter tradition is

doubtlessly the source for “Valtari and Hildigunnr” but further motific similarities, especially the importance alcohol plays in the tales and the couple’s elopement on horseback, connect the saga’s bridal-quest tales with the Walter story and, subsequently, with the Franconian bridal-quest tradition.

Scholars generally agree that *Piðreks saga* is a compilation of material from Northwest Germany which is otherwise only transmitted in Southern German and Austrian manuscripts. This observation holds true for the bridal-quest tales as well. The majority of the tales incorporated in the saga originated in the Rhenish regions, or at the very least, circulated widely in that area. Further support for this claim comes from *König Rother*, the oldest and “purest” German bridal-quest epic. Though in its complete form extant only in a Bavarian manuscript, the epic most likely is of Franconian or, as Klein claims, even Low German origin.¹⁵ *König Rother* has a relative in *Piðreks saga* in the “Ósantrix and Oda” tale. Because neither of the two works could have served as the immediate source for the other, their connection can best be explained on the basis of a Rhenish bridal-quest tradition which extended from the Franconian to the Low German regions.

¹⁵ Klein, pp. 499-507.