

## Encounters with *Völur*

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Among the various kinds of encounter between gods or men on the one hand and female representatives of the Other World on the other, episodes involving *völur* occupy a rather problematic place. It is true that *völur* possess supernatural powers, and that those we meet in *Völuspá* and *Baldurs draumar* are associated with giants and the dead, but one might ask whether this is not merely a mythic version of a familiar social phenomenon, that of the human prophetess who travels from farm to farm offering prophecy about the seasons and the fates of individuals in return for food, lodging and gifts. Such figures are, after all, fairly common in *fornaldarsögur* and family sagas.

However, when we turn to contemporary sagas, there is a striking absence of women who might be considered to be *völur*. In *Sturlunga saga* there are no explicit references to them (or to *spákonur*, *seiðkonur* or *vísindakonur*), and only two episodes, so far as I have found, which might be considered to involve them. One is in *Íslendinga saga* ch. 190,<sup>1</sup> where the dead Guðrún Gjúkadóttir (who is explicitly said to be heathen) repeatedly appears in the dreams of the

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<sup>1</sup> *Sturlunga saga* I, 519-522; trans. McGrew - Thomas I, 431-4.

sixteen-year-old Jóreiðr to give information about the fates of important political figures; this is said to have happened in 1255. However, Jóreiðr is not herself a prophetess, and the whole account is contained within a dream. The other appears incidentally in *Sturlu saga* ch. 7,<sup>2</sup> where the mid-twelfth-century farmer Þóroddr Grettiðsson is said to have fathered a son (who turns out to be a criminal) on a *göngukona* ‘female vagrant’ called Þórdís *ina lygna* ‘Þórdís the Liar’<sup>3</sup> - but it is not said that she acted as a *völva*, and if she did it is clear that her prophecy commanded no respect.

This suggests that the concept of the *völva* may have been less familiar in the period when our prose texts were written than is usually assumed, and in fact there are at least four instances where they are introduced with an explanation of what a *völva* is. *Orms þáttr Stórólfssonar* ch. 5 provides a good example:

Pat var þá tízka í þær mundir, at konur þær fóru yfir land, er völuv áru kallaðar, ok sögðu mönnum fyrir örlög sín, árferð ok aðra hluti, þá er menn vildu vísir verða.<sup>4</sup>

Another may be found in *Norna-Gests þáttr* ch. 11:

Þar fóru þá um landit völuv, er kallaðar völuv spákonur ok spáðu mönnum aldr. Því buðu menn þeim ok gerðu þeim veizlur ok gáfu þeim gjafir at skilnaði.<sup>5</sup>

These authors clearly thought it necessary to explain what a *völva* was - and since no two of these passages closely resemble each other in expression, they are probably independent of each other.

The distribution of the word *völva* in Old Norse verse also suggests that it was regarded as archaic and used chiefly in mythological contexts. There are nine surviving instances of it in eddic poems of mythological content: five in *Baldrs draumar* (stt. 4, 8, 10, 12, 13), and one each in *Völuspá* (st. 22), *Hávamál* (st. 87), *Lokasenna* (st. 24) and *Hyndluljóð* (st. 33).<sup>6</sup> To this we may add only one in a heroic legendary poem - in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, st. 37, and this clearly belongs to the same tradition of mythological *senna* as *Lokasenna* 24, where Loki alleges that Óðinn has practised *seiðr* on Samsey

<sup>2</sup> *Sturlunga saga* I, 69; trans. McGrew - Thomas I, 66.

<sup>3</sup> McGrew - Thomas I 453 gloss the nickname as ‘cool liar’, ‘cool customer’.

<sup>4</sup> Íslenzk fornrit XIII, 405.

<sup>5</sup> FSN I, 186. These are merely the two clearest examples - see also the embedded definitions in *Örvar-Odds saga* ch. 2 (FSN I, 286): Hún var völuv ok seiðkona ok vissi fyrir óorðna hluti af fróðleik sínum. Hún fór á veizlur ok sagði mönnum fyrir um vetrfar ok forlög sín. Similarly, *Vilmundar saga viðutan* ch. 1 (ed. Loth, 140): en kona ein uar þar su er mest uar tignud af uisenda monnum. og letu rikar konur jafnan sækia hana at mæla jodmælvn yfer baurnum sinum. þuiat þat geck jafnan epter sem hun sagdj fyrir. after this, the woman is once called *uisenda kona* and then consistently *uöluv*.

<sup>6</sup> See Neckel- Kuhn for all citations of poems in the *Poetic Edda*, and for *Baldrs draumar* and *Hyndluljóð*; for *Svipdagsmál*, see Sijmons -Gering.

and beaten on the drum as *völur* do. There are two instances in eddic verses embedded in *fornaldarsögur* (*Örvar-Odds saga* ch. 32, st. 4, *Orms þáttr Stórolfssonar* ch. 6, st. 2, see below - both may be older than the prose narratives round them); and three in skaldic verses attributed to the tenth or early eleventh centuries: Kormákr, *lausavísa* 48;<sup>7</sup> the anonymous *lausavísa* II B 6 (in a stanza defining a giantess);<sup>8</sup> and Höfgarða-Refr's travel verses 2 (where *Gymis völvu* refers to Rán).<sup>9</sup>

Other words for magic-working women show a similarly restricted currency. *Seiðkona* does not appear in verse at all, and *spákona* and *spámær* occur once each, both in allegedly tenth-century verses (Kormákr, *lausavísa* 53; Þorarin málhliðingr, *lausavísa* 7;<sup>10</sup> the second is part of a kenning for spears, which are said to 'sing', in a metaphor which suggests knowledge of the sort of inspired verse utterance often attributed to *völur*). The noun *seiðr* and the verb *síða* or *seiða* are also rather rare. The noun appears six times: twice in its literal sense (*Völuspá* 22, *Orms þáttr*), and four times in kennings for 'battle' - which may represent a fossilised usage;<sup>11</sup> two of these date from the twelfth century, but one of them is a direct echo from Egill Skallagrímsson and the other is by the noted antiquarian Sturla Þórðarson. The verb *síða* or *seiða* appears six times: twice in mythological eddic poems (*Völuspá* 22, *Lokasenna* 24), three times in early skaldic verses (Kormákr Ögmundarson, *Sigurðardrápa* 3, alluding to the myth of Óðinn and Rindr;<sup>12</sup> and twice in Vitgeirr seiðimaðr's verse on Rögnvaldr réttilbeini<sup>13</sup>), and once in a verse attributed to a giantess in *Gríms saga loðinkinna* ch. 1.<sup>14</sup>

We have too little evidence to be able to tell whether *völur* were a fact of social life in the heathen period, but so far as the surviving texts are concerned, they look more like a literary feature which is particularly associated with mythological sources and with stories about giants or the dead. It seems more likely that the quasi-realistic presentations of *völur* in some sagas of Icelanders are naturalised versions of mythological tales, rather than that the mythological and legendary *völur* are derived from real-life fortune-tellers. It is therefore worth asking whether the stories in which they appear use them as a free-

<sup>7</sup> See Kock, I, 48, Íslenzk fornrit VIII, 284; Einar Ólafur Sveinsson lists this verse among those which include linguistic evidence of early date ('Kormákr the Poet and his Verses', 35).

<sup>8</sup> Kock I, 92

<sup>9</sup> Kock I, 151.

<sup>10</sup> Kock I, 49, 61.

<sup>11</sup> *Fjölnis seiðr*, Eiríkr viðsjá, *lausavísa* 6 (Kock I, 105); *sverða seiðr*, Sturla Þórðarson, *Hákonarkviða* 12 (Kock II, 64); *vigra seiðr*, Egill Skallagrímsson, *lausavísa* 6 (Kock I, 28) and Guthormr Helgason kórtr, *lausavísa* (Kock II, 59).

<sup>12</sup> Kock I, 42; Einar Ólafur Sveinsson lists this among the verses which he considers to be 'old' on linguistic grounds ('Kormákr the Poet and his Verses', 35).

<sup>13</sup> Kock I, 18.

<sup>14</sup> Kock II, 164; *FSN* I, 271

standing motif, or whether they typically feature within patterns which have something in common that is not dictated by the mere presence of the *völva* and her predictions or magic.

The term *völva* is not used consistently to refer only to those who predict a pre-determined future, nor are all such women called *völur*. The word is used of workers of effective magic (e.g. curses or antidotes to them) in *Ynglinga saga* ch. 14<sup>15</sup> and *Gull-Þóris saga* chs. 18-19.<sup>16</sup> Women who make magical predictions but are not called *völur* appear in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* ch. 50 in *Flateyjarbók*,<sup>17</sup> *Hauks þáttur hábrókar*<sup>18</sup> and *Víga-Glúms saga* ch. 12.<sup>19</sup>

The term *völva* often seems to be synonymous with *spákona* and *vísindakona*, and all three terms are sometimes used of the same woman (*Óláfs saga Helga* ch. 25 in *Flateyjarbók*,<sup>20</sup> *Eiríks saga rauða* ch. 4<sup>21</sup>). However, the same woman is also sometimes referred to indiscriminately as *völva* and *seiðkona*, which implies that prediction and effective magic were not regarded as clearly distinct abilities (see Hulð in *Ynglinga saga* chs. 13-14,<sup>22</sup> Heiðr in *Hrólfs saga kraka* ch. 3,<sup>23</sup> Heiðr in *Örvar-Odds saga* ch. 2<sup>24</sup>); and in legendary sources a *völva* is sometimes also referred to by terms which imply non-human origins (Hulð is also *vitta véttir* ‘creature of spells’ and *trollkund liðs grím-Hildir* ‘the people’s troll-born woman of night’ in *Ynglingatal* 3; Busla in *Bósa saga* is not called *völva*, but is both *kerling* ‘old woman’ and *vánd vættir* ‘evil creature’;<sup>25</sup> Heiðr in *Hauks þáttur* is both *kerling* and *hin mikla tröll*).

As in the verse sources, the term *völva* is used in prose mainly of women from the far past, and many sagas of Icelanders seem to avoid it - thus Oddbjörg in *Víga-Glúms saga* is simply *kona...fróð ok framsýn* ‘a wise woman who could see the future’; Gríma in *Fóstbræðra saga* ch. 9 attracts the muted comment *þat tóluðu menn, at hon væri fjölkunnig* ‘people reckoned that she was skilled in magic’, though her enemy Bersi later calls her a troll;<sup>26</sup> her namesake in *Fóstbræðra saga* ch. 23 is *nökkut fornfróð* ‘rather skilled in ancient things’;<sup>27</sup> Þórdís in *Kormáks saga* ch. 22 is called *spákona* in the prose, but *völva* in

<sup>15</sup> Íslenzk fornrit XXVI, 31.

<sup>16</sup> Íslenzk fornrit XIII, 220-222.

<sup>17</sup> Flateyjarbók I, 81-2.

<sup>18</sup> Flateyjarbók II, 66-9.

<sup>19</sup> Íslenzk fornrit IX, 40-41.

<sup>20</sup> Flateyjarbók II, 98-9.

<sup>21</sup> Íslenzk fornrit IV, 206-9.

<sup>22</sup> Íslenzk fornrit XXVI, 28-31.

<sup>23</sup> FSN II, 9-11.

<sup>24</sup> FSN I, 286-9.

<sup>25</sup> FSN II, 472-5.

<sup>26</sup> Íslenzk fornrit VI, 161, 165.

<sup>27</sup> Íslenzk fornrit VI, 242.

Kormákr's (probably much older) skaldic verse (see st. 69).<sup>28</sup>

The easiest way of categorising the many accounts of *völur* is according to the nature of those affected by their prophecies or magic, and when this is done they fall into five types:

1. The unjust patriarch.
2. The hostile young man.
3. The young protégé of the *völva*.<sup>29</sup>
4. The female opponent.<sup>30</sup>
5. The new-born infant.<sup>31</sup>

The new-born infant stories form a separate group of the 'good and bad fairy' type, but are not relevant to my concerns here. The examples I have found of the 'protégé' and 'female opponent' types are so various that the *völva* in these tales is probably best regarded as a motif that could be inserted into stories that otherwise have little or nothing in common.<sup>32</sup> But the surviving examples of the 'unjust patriarch' and 'hostile youth' types do seem to share some features which are not dictated by the mere presence of the *völva*, and they may each reflect a common story-pattern. For the moment, I shall not include *Völuspá* or *Baldur's draumar* in either group.

### A. The Unjust Patriarch

I would place the following narratives in this group:

<sup>28</sup> Íslenzk fornrit VIII, 284.

<sup>29</sup> See *Svipdagsmál* 1-16 (= *Gróugaldur*) (Sijmons and Gering I, 196-200); *Gull-Þóris saga* (also called *Þorskfirðinga saga*) chs. 18-19 (Íslenzk fornrit XIII, 220-2); *Fóstbræðra saga* chs. 9-10 (Íslenzk fornrit VI, 161-9); *Fóstbræðra saga* ch. 23 (Íslenzk fornrit VI, 242-8); *Hauks þáttur hábrókar* (in *Flateyjarbók, Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* chs. 467-8, *Flateyjarbók* II, 66-9); Saxo, *Gesta Danorum* I.vi.4-6 (Olrík - Ræder I, 22-3; Fisher-Davidson I, 23-4). Other stories which might more generally be included in this group appear in *Kormáks saga* chs. 9, 22 (Íslenzk fornrit VIII, 233, 282-5) and *Eiríks saga rauða* ch. 4 (Íslenzk fornrit IV, 206-9).

<sup>30</sup> See *Hyndluljóð*; *Helreið Brynhildar*, perhaps also *Víga-Glúms saga* ch. 12 (Íslenzk fornrit IX, 40-41); and possibly *Laxdæla saga* ch. 76 (Íslenzk fornrit V, 223-4) and *Vilmundar saga viðutan* ch. 1 (*Late Medieval Icelandic Romances IV*, ed. Loth, 140-1).

<sup>31</sup> See *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, 2-4, and the same story in *Völsunga saga* ch. 8 (*FSN* I, 19); *Nornagests þáttur* ch. 11 (*FSN* I, 186-7); Saxo, *Gesta Danorum* VI.iv.12 (Olrík - Ræder I, 150; Fisher - Davidson I, 169); and perhaps *Vilmundar saga viðutan* ch. 1 (ed. Loth, 141). However, in the majority of these, the prophetess figures are called norns.

<sup>32</sup> For the protégé stories, this may be best illustrated by the sheer variety of magical tasks accomplished by the *völva* on the protagonist's behalf: informing him of the magical spells he needs (*Svipdagsmál*), or of his opponent's movements (*Gull-Þóris saga*); raising a storm to make the opponent vulnerable to the hero (*Gull-Þóris saga*); making her protégé invulnerable to weapons (*Fóstbræðra saga* 9-10); making him invisible to pursuers after he has carried out a wounding (*Fóstbræðra saga* 9-10) or a killing (*Fóstbræðra saga* 23); reciting a poem to give him a fair wind (*Fóstbræðra saga* 10); healing his wounds (*Fóstbræðra saga* 23, *Hauks þáttur*); travelling with *gandar* in her sleep in order to discover a danger threatening him (*Fóstbræðra saga* 23); supplying him with a magic weapon (*Hauks þáttur*); raising up a dead man to discover the future (Saxo).

*Ynglinga saga* ch. 13 (and *Ynglingatal* 3, narrative verse, fornyrðislag).<sup>33</sup>

*Ynglinga saga* ch. 14 (and *Ynglingatal* 4, narrative verse, fornyrðislag, though this does not mention the *völva*).<sup>34</sup>

*Hrólfs saga kraka* ch. 3 (including 4 short stanzas of monologue verse, part of an underlying fornyrðislag poem).<sup>35</sup>

Saxo, *Gesta Danorum* V.xvi.1-2 (no verse).<sup>36</sup>

*Bósa saga* ch. 5 (including 9 stanzas of monologue verse, apparently part of an older fornyrðislag poem).<sup>37</sup>

The main features of the pattern are as follows:

1. The *völva* (so-called except in *Bósa saga*: [*kerling*] and Saxo [*matrona magicæ rei perita*]) is either nameless or has a traditional single-element name (*Hulð* in *Ynglinga saga* 13, 14; *Heiðr* in *Hrólfs saga*, *Busla* in *Bósa saga*). In *Ynglinga saga* she lives in Finnmark.

2. The patriarch is a king descended from a god (Vanlandi, Vísburr in *Ynglingatal*, *Ynglinga saga*, both descended from Freyr; Hringr in *Bósa saga*, the grandson of Óðinn, but with a name suggesting links with the Vanir), or a king with a traditionally ‘Vanir’ name (Fróði in *Hrólfs saga*, Frotho in Saxo).

3. The patriarch does something unjust (breaks his promise, *Ynglinga saga* 13; denies his ex-wife the gold necklace which is her *mund*, *Ynglinga saga* 14; kills his brother, usurps his kingdom and seeks to kill his brother’s sons, *Hrólfs saga*; wants to exile his son and kill his son’s foster-brother, *Bósa saga*). Saxo reacts against this, making Frotho conspicuous as an upholder of justice.<sup>38</sup>

4. The patriarch has two sons (*Ynglinga saga* 14), nephews (*Hrólfs saga*), or a son with a foster-brother (*Bósa saga*), with whom he is in conflict; in Saxo there is only one son, who becomes that of the *matrona* (perhaps it would have undermined his view of Frotho’s idealised *imperium* to present treachery and murder within the royal family).

5. The *völva* is provoked by the patriarch’s injustice (*Ynglinga saga* 14, *Bósa saga*), or is paid to act against him (*Ynglinga saga* 13, *Hrólfs saga*), or is paid to prophesy for him, but does so in a hostile manner (*Hrólfs saga*), or is inspired by greed to act against him (Saxo).

6. A gold ring or necklace is involved, either in the quarrel with the son (*Ynglinga saga* 14, Saxo), or in a payment (in *Hrólfs saga*, a payment to break off the prophecy). In *Bósa saga* the king is called Hringr, and the quarrel involves two chests of gold.

7. The *völva* directs her attack against the patriarch and/or his family (*Ynglinga saga* 14). It may be either a curse (*Ynglinga saga* 13, 14, *Bósa saga*),

<sup>33</sup> Íslenzk fornrit XXVI, 28-9; Kock, I, 4.

<sup>34</sup> Íslenzk fornrit XXVI, 30-1; Kock, I, 4-5.

<sup>35</sup> *FSN* II, 9-11.

<sup>36</sup> Olrik - Ræder I, 142; Fisher-Davidson I, 157.

<sup>37</sup> *FSN* II, 472-5.

<sup>38</sup> See Friis-Jensen (especially p. 74) for the importance of the *imperium Frothonis*, and of Frotho as the idealised law-giver, to Saxo’s overall view of the Danish kingdom.

or a prophecy (*Hrólfs saga*, *Völuspá*, *Baldurs draumar*), but the distinction between the two is weak, for in *Ynglinga saga* 13 and *Bósa saga* the curse is a conditional prophecy - this *will* happen if the patriarch does not act as the *völva* wishes him to. In Saxo this is changed: the *matrona* changes herself into a sea-cow and gores Frotho in a direct attack.

8. The *völva*'s curse or prophecy includes the death of the patriarch (*Ynglinga saga* 13, 14, *Hrólfs saga*, *Bósa saga*); in *Ynglinga saga* 14 she adds that members of the family will always kill each other.

9. The *völva* may speak in fornyrðislag of her own role and the reliability of what she says (*Bósa saga*; in *Hrólfs saga* this is only preserved in the prose, but may have been in the lost parts of the poem on which the story seems to be based). She may refer to herself in the first person (*Hrólfs saga*) or in first and third persons (*Bósa saga*). Prophetic verse may come to her from elsewhere ('*ok varð henni þá ljóð á munni*'), and she may refer to 'seeing' in a vatic way (*Hrólfs saga*).

10. The patriarch dies, or will die, sometimes by fire (killed by the curse and then cremated, *Ynglinga saga* 13; burned in his hall by his sons or nephews, *Ynglinga saga* 14, *Hrólfs saga*; in *Bósa saga* he is threatened with having his hall burned, but is eventually killed in battle by two other brothers.<sup>39</sup> Again, Saxo may have reacted against this, possibly because of the Christian prejudice against cremation for a figure who is otherwise idealised - Frotho is gored to death, his courtiers try to conceal his death by parading his body in his waggon, but eventually bury him when the body rots.

This story type can be summarised as follows:

The *völva* has a traditional name (in the case of Heiðr, it is one associated with giants); she may come from the far north. The protagonist is a king descended from a god (usually from Freyr). The protagonist commits an injustice against his two sons/nephews/son and son's foster-brother, and the *völva* takes their side against him; either the injustice or the magic involves the payment of a gold ring. The *völva* curses the king or prophesies against him, and her words, expressed in fornyrðislag, come to her from elsewhere. The sons kill their father, possibly by burning. (Saxo's version differs from the others in a number of respects, but all of these can be explained by his political need to idealise King Frotho).

## B. The Hostile Young Man

This group includes the following:

*Örvar-Odds saga* ch. 2 (including 3 stanzas of monologue, fornyrðislag, apparently part of a pre-existing poem.<sup>40</sup> At the end of the saga (ch. 32), the dying Oddr recites what is probably a

<sup>39</sup> See *Bósa saga* ch. 10, *FSN* II, 484.

<sup>40</sup> *FSN* I, 286-9; for ch. 32, v. 4, see I, 391.

separate poem of 71 stanzas, in st. 4 of which he acknowledges the truth of the *völva*'s prophecy).

*Orms þáttur Stórolfssonar* ch. 5 (including one stanza of monologue, fornyrðislag, apparently part of a pre-existing poem.<sup>41</sup> In chs. 6-7 there are 11 further stanzas recited by Ásmundr, all but the first when he is dying; in st. 2 he refers to the *völva* and his intention to defy her prophecy).

*Vatnsdæla saga* ch. 10, and the same story in *Landnámabók*, S179, H145 (no verse).<sup>42</sup>

Two other narratives look like Christian adaptations of the same pattern:

Oddr Snorrason, *Saga Óláfs Tryggvasonar* ch. 6, and the same story in *Flateyjarbók*, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* ch. 50 (which I shall call *Flateyjarbók I*).<sup>43</sup>

*Flateyjarbók*, *Óláfs saga Helga* ch. 25 (which I shall call *Flateyjarbók II*).<sup>44</sup>

The main features of this pattern are:

1. The *völva* (so-called except in Oddr [*spákona*], *Flateyjarbók I* [*kerling... framsýn af fítonsanda*]), is either nameless or is called *Heiðr* (*Örvar-Odds saga*, *Landnámabók*). She is Lappish (*Vatnsdæla saga*), is so decrepit with age that she has to be carried on a bed, and is the patriarch's mother (Oddr and *Flateyjarbók I*).

2. The patriarch is usually the head of a household (*Örvar-Odds saga*, *Vatnsdæla saga* and *Landnámabók*, *Orms þáttur*); in Oddr and *Flateyjarbók I* he is King Valdimarr of Garðaríki (Russia); in *Flateyjarbók II* there is no patriarch figure, and the *völva* is consulted by St. Óláfr's men.

3. The patriarch does nothing unjust except to invite the *völva* to prophesy, but this causes disapproval from the young protagonist (*Örvar-Odds saga*, *Orms þáttur*, *Vatnsdæla saga*, *Flateyjarbók II*) or from the patriarch's wife (Oddr and *Flateyjarbók I*).

4. The patriarch has a son, who is the foster-brother of the hero (*Örvar-Odds saga*, *Orms þáttur*, *Vatnsdæla saga* and *Landnámabók*, where there are two sons), or the patriarch later becomes foster-father to the hero (Oddr and *Flateyjarbók I*). The relationship between patriarch and hero is good, but is strained by the patriarch's invitation to the *völva* (*Örvar-Odds saga*, *Orms þáttur*, *Vatnsdæla saga* and *Landnámabók*; in Oddr and *Flateyjarbók I* the king's heathen practices cause tension between him and his queen).

5-6. The *völva* is sometimes paid for her prophecies (with gifts, *Örvar-Odds saga*, *Orms þáttur*).

7. The *völva* prophesies that the patriarch will live successfully in the same place *til elli* (*Örvar-Odds saga*, *Orms þáttur*; that nothing will threaten his kingdom - Oddr and *Flateyjarbók I*); she may also make a favourable prophecy for the hero's foster-brother(s) (*Örvar-Odds saga*, *Vatnsdæla saga*). She insists

<sup>41</sup> Íslenzk fornrit XIII, 404-6.

<sup>42</sup> Íslenzk fornrit VIII, 28-30; Íslenzk fornrit I, 217.

<sup>43</sup> ed. Finnur Jónsson, 20-1; *Flateyjarbók I*, 81-2.

<sup>44</sup> *Flateyjarbók II*, 98-9.



on making a prophecy about the hero, despite his reluctance to listen to it (*Örvar-Odds saga*, *Vatnsdæla saga* and *Landnámabók*; in *Orms þáttr* the whole episode is about the foster-brother Ásbjörn, who becomes its protagonist; in *Flateyjarbók* II the prophecy is made with the permission but disapproval of Óláfr helgi, who is not present). The *völva* says that the prophecy will come true whether the hero likes it or not (*Örvar-Odds saga*, *Orms þáttr*, *Vatnsdæla saga* and *Landnámabók*).

8. The prophecy predicts glory for the hero, but also his death (he will live gloriously for three hundred years, but will die on this farm - *Örvar-Odds saga*; he will live gloriously and die of old age, provided he does not go to Norð-Mœrr - *Orms þáttr*; he will rule Norway gloriously, but not for long - Oddr and *Flateyjarbók* I; his brightness makes it difficult for the *völva* to see clearly, but he will make one slip of the tongue in his whole life, and will die that same day - *Flateyjarbók* II).

9. In *Örvar-Odds saga* and *Orms þáttr*, the *völva* speaks in *fornyrðislag*; she refers to her own reliability, and uses both the first and the third person (*Örvar-Odds saga* only); the verse comes to her from elsewhere (*‘Þá / ok varð henni þá ljóð á munni’* introduces it in both, and in *Örvar-Odds saga* she claims: *Öll veit hún manna / örlög fyrir*).<sup>45</sup>

9a. The hero reacts with resentment (*Örvar-Odds saga*, *Vatnsdæla saga*, *Orms þáttr*); in *Örvar-Odds saga* he attacks the *völva* with a *sproti* which he has ready.<sup>46</sup> In *Vatnsdæla saga* Ingimundr would attack the *völva* were it not for his obligation to his foster-father. In *Örvar-Odds saga* and *Vatnsdæla saga*, the hero takes measures to thwart the prediction; in *Orms þáttr* he tempts its fulfillment in an attempt to prove the *völva* wrong.

10. All the prophecies are fulfilled. Oddr is killed by the bite of a snake which crawls out of the skull of a horse killed in an attempt to prevent the fulfillment of the prophecy. Ásbjörn goes to Norð-Mœrr and is tortured to death by the giant Brúsi. Ingimundr and his foster-brothers settle in Iceland (though here no death has been predicted).<sup>47</sup> Óláfr Tryggvason returns to Garðaríki and converts King Valdimarr and his queen,<sup>48</sup> but his reign in Norway is short. Óláfr inn helgi makes a slip of the tongue just before the Battle of Stiklastaðir, in which he is killed.<sup>49</sup>

The story-type can be summarise as follows:

<sup>45</sup> The formula *þá varð henni/honum/Oddi/Hjálmari ljóð á munni* also introduces a number of non-prophetic verses later in *Örvar-Odds saga* (see *FSN* I, 314, 316, 317,324, 326, 330, 370, 382), but these may be copied from its first use, for the verses given to the *völva*.

<sup>46</sup> Is it a symbolic spear? cf. *Gautreks saga* ch. 7, *FSN* III, 25-8, where Starkaðr uses a *sproti* which suddenly becomes a spear, in the sacrifice of King Víkarr to Óðinn.

<sup>47</sup> *Vatnsdæla saga* ch. 15, *Íslenzk fornrit* VIII, 42; *Landnámabók*, *Íslenzk fornrit* I, 217. This story also involves the hero losing his silver miniature idol of Freyr, and not regaining it until the moment when the prophecy has been fulfilled.

<sup>48</sup> *Flateyjarbók* ch. 90, I, 126-9.

<sup>49</sup> see the end of ch. 277, *Flateyjarbók* II, 458.

The *völva* is called *Heiðr* (a name with giant associations); she may come from the far north, or be extremely old. The patriarch is the sympathetic head of a household. He has a son and a foster-son, the latter being usually the protagonist. There is antipathy between patriarch and foster-son, but it is caused only by the presence of the *völva*. The protagonist resents the *völva*'s prophecy and sometimes also her presence, and he may attack her physically. The *völva* prophesies glory for the hero, but also his death; when she uses verse, it is fornyrðislag, and she is mysteriously inspired with it. The prophecy is usually absolute (not in *Orms þáttr*), and always comes true.

### C. *Völuspá* and *Baldrs draumar*

Most of the stories on which I have based the reconstruction of these two story-patterns are, of course, much later in date than *Völuspá* and *Baldrs draumar*, in which *völur* also play a central part. However, there is one clear exception, in *Ynglingatal* stt. 3 and 4, which show that some features of the 'unjust patriarch' story already existed by c.900 - certainly the confrontation between a king descended from Freyr and a prophetic of giant- or troll- origins (st. 3), the consequent death of the king (both stanzas), and in st. 4 his destruction by fire; it is not explicitly stated that his sons kill him, but there is no reason to suppose that the underlying stories known to Þjóðólfr differed from those told in *Ynglinga saga*. There is even a coincidence between two similar fire-kennings in *Ynglingatal* 4 (*meiþjóf markar* 'harmful thief of woodland') and *Völuspá* 52 (*með sviga lævi* 'with the harm of brushwood'), though this might be pure coincidence. At all events, it seems probable that some version of the 'unjust patriarch' pattern already existed by the time *Völuspá* was composed.

It is fairly obvious that the narratives in *Völuspá* and *Baldrs draumar* resemble these two patterns in some respects, but that they do not altogether fit into them. In *Völuspá* st. 22 we encounter another *völva* called *Heiðr*, who is usually supposed to be a transformation of a figure called *Gullveig* (apparently one of the *Vanir*). I think this is a mistaken interpretation, and that *Heiðr* is more probably the narrating *völva* of the poem. The name also appears at the end of *Hyndluljóð* 32, among a list of giants of both sexes, where it is immediately followed by a line about the mythological ancestry of *völur*. This poem (or at least this section of it) is referred to by *Snorri* as *Völuspá in skamma*, and it shows clear textual echoes of the longer *Völuspá*; for its poet, *Heiðr* was clearly a giantess (like the narrating *völva* of *Völuspá*) whose name prompted a line about *völur* in general.

Whether we give the narrator of *Völuspá* a name or not, she was brought up (or brought forth) by giants and remembers nine worlds (st. 2) - probably the nine worlds of the dead, into which human beings die out of *Hel*, according to *Vafþrúðnismál* 43. She is paid for her prophecy with *hringa ok men* (st. 29). Her magic is performed in a trance (*leikin*, st. 22) and her prophecy is delivered in

vatic fornyrðislag verse to a patriarchal figure, in this case Óðinn; it represents a truth which she ‘sees’ (the verb is also used by the *völur* called Heiðr in *Hrólfs saga* and *Örvar Odds saga*), and one of her refrains - *vituð ér enn, eða hvat?* - is echoed several times by the giantess Heiðr in *Hyndluljóð* (*viltu enn lengra?*)<sup>50</sup> and once by the enchantress Busla in *Bósa saga* (*eða viltu þulu lengri?*). The patriarch has three sons (by different mothers, so that they are half-brothers to each other) who figure in a central episode of the action (the killing of Baldr and the revenge for it). The *völva*’s prophecy includes the death of the patriarch figure (though not at the hands of his sons), and fire is involved, although it is not the actual cause of his death.

On the other hand, there are several features of the ‘unjust patriarch’ pattern which are contradicted in *Völuspá*. Most importantly, there is no hostility between the patriarch and his sons, and they do not kill him (though they do kill each other). The deity with whom the unjust patriarch figures are associated is usually Freyr rather than Óðinn (Hringr in *Bósa saga* is the only exception, since he is said to be the grandson of Óðinn, but his name is easier to connect with the Freyr tradition). Nor is it clear that Óðinn is to be regarded as unjust in the same specific way as in the other stories, though he is the head of a family of gods who are presented by the poet as guilty of oathbreaking and murder (in the killing of the Giant Builder, st. 26) and probably of absorbing the sexual immorality of the Vanir - vices which they then appear to punish in human beings in a futile attempt to arrest the moral decline of the world (st. 39). But most importantly, the prophesied death of the patriarch is not the main point either of the prophecy or of the poem as a whole - the *Völuspá* poet has a larger vision than that, and although the ‘unjust patriarch’ story-type may have been used to construct the narrative framework of the poem, the purpose for which this has been done is strikingly new.

*Baldrs draumar* shows some features in common with the ‘hostile young man’ pattern. The *völva* has been long dead (st. 5), and in her final confrontation with Óðinn is said to be *þriggia þursa móðir* (st. 13). She is summoned and required to prophesy by the patriarch (Óðinn), whose three sons (Baldr, Höðr and Váli) are the subject of the prophecies; the prophecy includes the death of the implied protagonist (Baldr), though in this case at the hands of his brother.<sup>51</sup> A powerful hostility remains between the *völva* and her questioner, though in this case he is the patriarch rather than the young man, he compels the prophecy rather than trying to refuse it, and there is no mention of any payment for the prophecy. If the poet of *Baldrs draumar* used a traditional story-pattern, it was, again, probably adopted in a strongly modified form, and the near-identity of text between *Baldrs draumar* 11,3-8 and *Völuspá* 32,7-8

<sup>50</sup> *Hyndluljóð* stt. 17, 18, 34, 36, 39.

<sup>51</sup> This is, however, another ancient story-pattern, see *Ynglinga saga*, chs. 20, 21 and *Ynglingatal* 11-13.

and 33,1-4 suggests a close relationship between the two poems. This influence could have been in either direction or from a third source which is now lost, but it seems to me more likely that *Völuspá* influenced *Baldurs draumar* than vice-versa.

I should like to finish with a few tentative and provisional conclusions:

1. The many stories about *völur* in Old Norse literature more probably reflect a literary type than a social fact of the authors' own times, and their most likely origin is in mythological tales about prophetesses connected with giants and/or the dead.

2. The stories in which *völur* confront unjust patriarchs or hostile young men show narrative patterns in common that are not required by the mere presence and function of the *völva*; they probably reflect traditional story patterns, and at least some features of one of these can be seen as early as Þjóðólfr's *Ynglingatal* (c. 900).

3. Most of these stories of *völur* have nothing to do with Óðinn; the two exceptions, *Völuspá* and *Baldurs draumar*, probably represent an original re-working of the traditional patterns, and the *Völuspá* poet may be responsible for this development. Certainly, a traditional assumption of an element of injustice in the figure who questions the *völva* would fit the moral scheme of that poem, which uses it to introduce a new world-view, one which was influenced but not dominated by Christian ideas. I hope this study may have contributed towards the understanding of this startling and profound achievement.

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