

## Healing hands and magical spells

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### **Sigrdrifa's invocation**

Long I slept, long was I sleeping  
long are the woes of men  
Odin brought it about that I could not break  
the spell of drowsiness

The valkyrie Sigrdrifa addresses Sigurd Fafnesbani with these words after he has wakened her from her sleep on Hindarfjell. Sigrdrifa is better known under another name, Brynhild, and her magic sleep was a punishment of Odin, her father according to the prose version of the story. She had disobeyed her father's will and he stung her with a magical thorn, which made her sleep. Odin put a shield-wall around her and stated that no one who was acquainted with fear could pass this and wake her up. Sigurd Fafnisbani heard this story from the deadly wounded dragon and headed towards Hindarfjel for the maiden. His meeting with the valkyrie is told in *Sigrdrífumál*, belonging to the Eddic poems and the cycle of the Völsungar.

After that she invokes the gods and the mighty fecund earth and beseeches them of "eloquence and native wit and healing hands", not only for herself but

also for Sigurd, the one who never was acquainted with fear and whom she now is expecting to marry. The healing hands are completed with knowledge of magical power, spells and favourable letters, good charms and joyful runes. Sigdrifa furthermore tells that the runes should be cut on the hands and marked on the nails in order to beguile a wife. Others were victory-runes cut on the sword, others to calm the sea; there were speech-runes, mind-runes and book-runes, which at the first glance would have very little to do with healing. Others are more accurate to this connection, like the helping-runes in childbirth:

Helping-runes you must know if want to assist  
and release children from women;  
they shall be cut on the palms and clasped on the joints  
and then the disir is asked for help.

The knowledge of runes is directly connected with an invocation of the disir. The disir referred to “collective” goddesses as well as to women connected with the supernatural, a form of tutelary spirits.<sup>1</sup>

### **The function of the *Dísir***

The *Dísir* were, according to the sources, objects of worship, something that is witnessed by several place-names such as Diseberg, Disin > Disavin, Disathing and Disavid > Disaui. They are also represented in personal names like Freydis, Odinsdisa and Hjördis, for example.<sup>2</sup>

The disir received a special sacrifice called *dísablót*, mentioned in the Icelandic sagas. These were performed in the autumn or in the spring and connected with fertility and the year’s crop. The great sacrifice in Uppsala, described by Adam of Bremen, could have been such a *blót* to the disir. It was held at the vernal equinox at that time and connected with an assembly, the *dishing*. After the Christianization of Uppsala, the *dishing* was moved to the month of February, according to Snorri Sturluson.

The disir were worshipped in a specific building, called the Disarsal. Disarsal must, however, be translated as “the house of the Dis” and the name intimates the existence of one goddesses, who alone represented the anonymous collective of disir. The sources hint at the great goddess Freyja, whose characteristics coincide with the disirs.

### **galder—words of magical healing**

This relation to Freyja and to Frigg, the great mother among the goddesses, are exemplified in another Eddic poem, called *Oddrún’s Lament*, also belonging to the Völsunga cycle. Here the exhausted mother, Borgny, after being delivered twins, blesses her helper Oddrún:

<sup>1</sup> de Vries II p.298.

<sup>2</sup> AnEWb s.v. *dís*, p.77.

May all the kindly beings help you  
 Frigg and Freyja and more of the gods  
 as you warded away  
 that dangerous illness from me.

Borgny's help at the problematic birth was made by certain spells called *galdrar*:

...strongly Oddrún sang, powerfully Oddrún sang  
 bitter spells for Borgny.

*Galdr* derives from the same stem as *gala* "to crow" and *galen* "mad" and was performed in a shrill voice, which must have acted suggestively. Moreover, the *galdr* had its own metre called *galdralag*, the metre of spells.

Two types of *galdr* have survived in a manuscript of Merseburg. The first tells of women, who watch the battles and who are able to tie or loose the feared war-fetter. This charm could have been recited before battle, with a view to invoking these powers to decide the outcome of the struggle.<sup>3</sup> It alludes to a recurrent topic in a martial situation, magic fetters, suddenly being thought to chain the warrior invisibly to the spot, so that he would easily fall victim to his enemies. The force of this magic fetter is demonstrated expressively in *Hárðar saga ok Hólmverja* (36), where Hárð is trying to escape from his enemies when he is hit by the war-fetter and paralysed:

The 'war fetter' came upon Hárð, but he cut himself free once and a second time. The 'war fetter' came upon him for the third time. Then the men managed to hem him in, and surrounded him with a ring of enemies, but he fought his way out of the ring and slew three men in so doing.<sup>4</sup>

The fourth time the "war fetter" falls over him, he is overwhelmed and killed, uttering the word, "a mighty troll decides in this".<sup>5</sup>

We should not think that fear, but a feeling of immobility, not unlike the kind we may experience in nightmares, when we want to run away but cannot move, caused this kind of paralysis. The *galdr* ends with the words: "Dash out of the fetters! Run from the enemies!" in order to cure the paralysis.

The second *galdr* is more related to the healing hands combined with the magic spells, although the patient in this case is a horse:

Phol and Wodan went to the forest  
 Then Baldr's (or the lord's) horse sprained its foot.

The invocation goes to the goddesses and the gods:

then Sinhtgunt, the sister of Sunna charmed it,

<sup>3</sup> F. Ström, 1954, p.71.

<sup>4</sup> *Harðar Saga*, trans. from H. Davidson 1964, pp.63-64.

<sup>5</sup> There are other examples of the "war fetter" in *Sverri's saga*, 1920, ed. G. Indrebø, Oslo, *Sturlunga Saga*, 1988, ed. Örnólfur Þorsson, Reykjavík, II, 57.

then Frija, the sister of Volla charmed it.  
then Wodan charmed it, as he was well able to do.

Sunna is the old goddess Sól, the sun, and therefore Singunt has been identified as the moon, although there is no other evidence for such an interpretation. Frija is probably Frigg, derived from *frjá* “to love” and her sister Volla appears in the Icelandic literature as Frigg’s *eskimey* “servant”, although she is—as her name reveals—a goddess of abundance, with relatives in Classical Antiquity as Ops and Abundantia.

Finally, Wodan or Odin is the Great Magician among the gods, the master of *galdr*, *galdrsfaðir*. According to *Hávamál* he once learnt nine wise songs and he masters eighteen spells, corresponding to the secret wisdom as earlier mentioned, which was special for the kings.<sup>6</sup>

It is probably Wodan who utters the very essence of the *galdr*:

Be it sprain of the bone,  
be it sprain of blood,  
be it sprain of the limb:  
bone to bone,  
blood to blood  
sinew to sinew  
limb to limb,  
thus be they fitted together.

These lines are most interesting and scholars have earlier drawn attention to the fact that they appear in several charms in Old Irish stories and moreover in *Kalevala*, where Lemminkäinen’s mother joined her son’s severed limbs together, restoring him to life, a formula derived from the Finnish neighbours. The oldest known expression goes back to the Vedic poem *Atarva-Veda* and it as a medium in the healing process as far as we know from *Sigrdrifumál*. This *galdr* is considered to have its roots in an Indo-European tradition of healing. It survived in folklore with the change to Christ’s horse broken, and there are many variants of the charms in this version.

We do not know what kind of *galdr* Oddrún sang to ease Borgny’s pains, but after the change of religion in the North the women in labour invoked the Virgin Mary. She had the certain key to lock up their loins, as these spells say literally. Holy relics were also used to deliver the baby, but there was a striking difference between the Old Norse customs and the Christian. The pain should not be eased, since this was a result of Eve’s sin, but the help still was there to bring the child into this world and to holy baptism. To ease the pain resulted, according to folk belief, in the birth of a were-wolf or a mare. Oddrún’s bitter, strong *galdr* therefore might continue as a secret.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Näsström 1996, 236

<sup>7</sup> Women were forbidden to use Galium Verum to ease the pain at a council 734.<sup>7</sup> In the Old Norse this flower was known as Freyja’s weed, another connection to the goddess’ assistance at childbirth. Somehow the use of Galium Verum seem to survive all prohibitions, but it was now said that the Virgin Mary had made the bed for her child of this flower and the name was changed

### Healing hand at childbirth

In *The Lament of Oddrún* some glimpses of the customs of childbirth are revealed. When she had arrived, she had also loosened the saddles like other knots in the house to ease the childbirth. The woman in labour is kneeling, supported by the midwives, except the one sitting in front of her, expecting to deliver the baby. This is Oddrún's role in the poem: she sits at the lady's knees and during the hard labour she spells her special *galdrar* to help the children on their way. "a girl and a boy were able to kick on earth/cheerful children for the slayer of Hogni"( 8) .

Oddrún had probably those healing hands, which was necessary at childbirth. Returning to *Sigrdrifumál* we notice that not only Sigrdrifa herself was gifted with them but also Sigurd Fáfnisbane, something that should imply that a man could be able to assist at childbirth with his healing hands. The Eddic poem of Rig says that the king should help at childbirth (44). Gånge Rolf assists at the queen's childbirth and it is expressly told that he laid his hand upon her, which effected a quick birth. This concept of the healing hands was connected with the qualities of a king and it is told of St. Olaf of Norway that he had healing hands.<sup>8</sup>

King's qualities are specialised in other Eddic songs like *Hávamál*, where Odin, the great Magician among the gods, enumerates his knowledge. In *Rigsthula* the god Rig instructs the young Kon, the future king, in the similar knowledge and this appears again in Sigrdrifa's speech to Sigurd. Besides healing a king should know how to destroy an enemy's weapon, calm the sea and even raise men from death through his magical knowledge. Still, the healing power of the king was an old and almost universal concept, connected to the sacral kingship, regarded as a gift from the gods. This is the reason why Sigurd's and the other kings-to-be had to learn how to ease the pain of a woman in labour. This is also the meaning behind Gripi's prophecy to Sigurd about his future meeting with Sigrdrifa:

She will teach you powerful runes  
all those which men wish to know  
and how to speak every single human tongue  
medicine with healing knowledge: may you live blessed king!

Healing in Old Norse religion was, as these examples have shown, combined with magical power and knowledge of efficacious *galdr*.<sup>9</sup> This quality was not necessarily given by nature but, according to the sources, by the gods, as

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into the bedstraw of the Virgin Mary in most of the Germanic languages.

<sup>8</sup> NKS II.s 289

<sup>9</sup> There existed a doctor among the Gods called Eir. She is mentioned in Snorre's enumeration of the goddesses in his Edda. Little is known of her character, though she is mentioned in a number of kenningar, merely describing a beautiful woman.

demonstrated in Sigrdrifa's invocation to the Æsir and the goddesses:

With gracious eyes may you look upon us  
and give victory to those sitting here

### Runes as healing signs

The powerful runes of Sigrdrifa are an expression of the letter as holy in itself. The very word *rúna* meant “secret” and the letters were thought as originating from the gods to special persons, who were said to *ráða rúnom* “to rule and to master the secret letters). The word *ráða* thus implies a special knowledge, which means that the runes had to be understood by the magician or the healer. One famous example of this occurs in *Egils saga Skalla-grimsonar*. Egil Skalla-Grimson is visiting a peasant in Edskog in Sweden, who worries for his sick daughter Helga. She suffers from an unknown illness, never sleeps and seems to have lost her wits. Egil asks the peasant what they had done to cure her and gets the answer that a young man had carved runes in order to cure her, but this made it even worse. He investigates the bed and finds whalebone with runes under it. He reads them and cuts them away and burns the bone. The he makes a poem about this event:

No one should cut runes that did not know them (*ráða*) Many are lost of darkness of the runes. I saw ten secret runes cut on the bone, which caused the pain of the woman for a long time.

Then Egil cut other runes and put them under the pillow of the sick woman, She awakened from her sleep, saying that she felt much better but that she still was very weak.

This story can be associated with an archaeological find, a *lyfstav* “a medicine wand”, from Ribe, a spell to help those who suffer from “the shivering disease”, i.e. malaria, depicted in runes. The spell starts by calling on the earth, the heavens, the Virgin Mary and God the King in a stanza built on the metre of *fornyrðislag* to lend the evoking one healing hands and the tongue of life, after which the charm turns into a conjuration by which the disease is to be exorcised. The feeling of a pre-Christian belief in these lines, where both heaven and earth are invoked together with the holiest powers of Christianity, is stressed by an obscure sentence about *ni : nouðr*, “nine misfortunes” or, more plausibly, nine coercive powers. They lie on a stone, designated as black and standing in the sea, and they will neither sleep well nor waken warmly until the patient has recovered from his illness.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> E. Moltke, 1976, *Runerne i Danmark og deres oprindelse*, Copenhagen, pp.396-400. A. Hultgård, 1992, “Religiös förändring, kontinuitet och ackulturation/synkretism i vikingatidens och medeltidens skandinaviska religion.” *Kontinuitet i kult och tro från vikingatid till medeltid*, ed. B. Nilsson, Uppsala, pp.29-30.

### The norns and the *nauð*

These nine *nouðr* takes us back to the *Lay of Sigdrifa*, where the rune *nauð* denotes “necessity, anxiety, suffering.”

...on a horn they should be cut and on the back of the hand  
and mark your nail with “nauð”.

They should be marked at the nails as protection and were obviously connected with the norns, something still existing in folk belief, where small white dots under the nails are called “marks of the norns”. The norns were a third group of collective goddesses, connected with fate and the borders of life and death. Their appearance at childbirth is noticed in *The Lay of Fafnir* in a stanza, usually translated as “those who choose children from the mothers”. The literal translation says, however, that “they choose the mothers from their sons”, which must be interpreted as meaning that they could appear as death goddesses for the women. This stanza is usually translated as meaning who should survive or not. If mother and child survived, they received a sacrifice of porridge called *norne-grautar*, something that resisted the change of religions for many centuries.

The disir and the norns were thus deities invoked in spells and through runic magic; still the art of healing had to be learnt. The interaction between healing and magic is conspicuous, but not as the distinction made by Frazer where magic was a means to subdue even the divine. The gods, who ultimately decided fate of man, gave the healing hands and the magic *galdr*.