

**The end of a fantasy:  
*Sǫrla þátr* and the rewriting of the revivification myth**

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The myth produced by pre-Christian warrior cultures that a valiant fighter who was killed on the battlefield might never really die – either through magic, as in the Hildir story, or through transformation into an *einheri* in Valhöll – appears to have remained well-known in the Christian period judging by references to it in skaldic compositions and in narrative prose. A range of sources suggest that the legendary figure, Hildir, continued to be known for her power to resurrect warriors and that valkyries continued to be associated with the capacity to defer the moment of a warrior's death. The valkyrie was an important facet of the conceptualisation of life after death for men in Old Norse mythology, providing some solace to warriors facing the prospect of dying (since they were the chosen ones and were escorted to Valhöll by individually assigned valkyries) and perhaps for others, the comfort that having avoided death this time around they might have been marked out to by a valkyrie not to die yet. In this paper I will focus on the particular capacity of valkyries to resurrect warriors and the manner in which clerically-minded writers attempted to revise the tradition, to put paid to such fantasies.

Early sources such as Bragi's *Ragnarsdrápa*, which alludes to the story of Hildir in some detail, must have been orally transmitted from the ninth century down to at least the thirteenth, when it was narrated in prose by Snorri Sturluson by way of explanation of particular kennings for battle in *Skáldskaparmál*.<sup>1</sup> Familiarity with the Hildir story also lies behind learned skaldic compositions, including *Hátalykill* in the twelfth century (stanza 23a, Finnur Jónsson, 1912-15, BI 498) and *Hátatal* in the thirteenth (stanza 49, Faulkes, 1991, 23):

Hverr réð Hildi at næma?  
 hverir daglengis berjask?  
 hverir síðarla sættask?  
 hverr siklingum atti?  
 Heðinn réð Hildi at næma,  
 Hjaðningar æ berjask,  
 þeir síðarla sættask,  
 saman Hildir liði atti.

*Who contrived to abduct Hildir? Who fight each other all day long? Who are slow to be reconciled? Who incited the kings? Heðinn contrived to abduct Hildir. The Hjaðningar fight each other all day long; they are slow to be reconciled. Hildir incited the troops [to come] together.*

<sup>1</sup> Kennings invoking the relationship of the parties in the myth (Heðinn, Högni and Hildir) are also found in anonymous thirteenth-century dream verses (Finnur Jónsson, 1912-15, B II 230) and in a verse by Sturla Þórðarson (B II 112). Hildir is used as a constituent of many other kennings in the skaldic tradition, continuing into the fourteenth century.

Hjaldremmir tekur Hildi  
 (hringr brestr at gjöf) festa,  
 hnigr und Högna meyjar  
 hers valdandi tjald;  
 Heðins mála býr hvílu  
 hjálmlestanda flestum,  
 morðaukinn þiggr mæki,  
 mund Hjaðninga sprund.

The battle-strengthenener [> warrior] engages himself to Hildr: the ring is broken as a gift. The ruler of the army sinks below Högni's daughter's [Hildr's] tent [> shield]; Heðinn's lover [Hildr] prepares a bed for most helmet-harmers [> warriors]. The lady of the Hjaðningar [Hildr] receives a wedding gift, a sword made famous by killing.

The verse-form of *Háttalykill* 23a, *greppaminni* ('poets' reminder'), was designed to ensure that poets remembered the salient motifs of the tradition: the abduction of Hildr by Heðinn and Hildr's incitement of the Hjaðningar into drawn-out fighting, their fixation with inconclusive fighting presumably a result of Hildr's sustained power over them.

The five stanzas of Bragi's *Ragnarsdrápa* preserved in *Skáldskaparmál* which deal with the Hildr legend offer more detail: Hildr is described as getting her own way (*nam ráða* st. 252); of inciting enmity (*þá svall heipt í Högna* st. 252; *reiðr* st. 254); and of pretending to be against battle while inciting kings to die (*Svá lét ey ... sem orrostu letti ... þótt etti ... jǫfrum úlfs at sinna með algjǫfris lifru* st. 251), the last description syntactically reinforcing the paradoxical behaviour of one who could only promote life for the battle-dead. Further allusions to the story are carried in the kennings for Hildr, though they are similarly oblique: Hildr is a 'victory-preventing witch among women' (*fengeyðandi forðæða þjóða* st. 254); a 'bloody wound-curing goddess' (*sú bæti-Þrúðr dreyrugra benja* st. 251); and 'a goddess who wishes too great drying of veins' (*ofþerris æða ósk-Rán* st. 250). Hildr, it seems, lured men towards death in battle, but being more interested in battle than death, she revived them so that they could keep fighting. She cured wounds only that warriors might be wounded again; she incited men into enmity but ensured that battle could not be decisive, could not serve the purpose for which it was socially designed, to resolve disputes by the exercise of co-ordinated martial power. Hildr is also a common noun for 'battle' and we might see in this legend the underside of a social trust in fighting as a means of resolving conflict: battle perpetuates battle as long as there are fighting men to be lured into it; and they are lured into fighting by the thrill of battle – and with that the prospect of fame and glory – as much as by what they are contesting with the other side. Hildr's goal is definitively self-interested: that *hildr* should continue forever.

When Snorri took up this legend within a stanza of *Háttatal* he seems to have been rather more interested in the seductive nature of Hildr; that aspect of battle that drew the male psyche into danger and somehow made the allure erotic. To express the point that a warrior taking up the fight is by definition always in mortal danger, Snorri

describes Heðinn's lover preparing a bed for most warriors.<sup>2</sup> The mythological context creates an image of Hildr inciting warriors to fight by enticing them into her bed, even though it is in fact their death-bed. Snorri's line *Heðins mála býr hvílu* captures the sweetness the legend of Hildr must have offered fighting men – perhaps even in the thirteenth century – where death by gross wounding was somehow transfigured as an erotic surrendering to a female personification of battle. In an earlier age when such an idea had mythological force, it must have served to encourage men into the otherwise discouraging arena of mortal combat: dying of horrendous wounds might sometimes have seemed justified by particular social, dynastic or ethical circumstances, but when it did not, it must have helped to picture being routed and gored as collapsing into bed with a divine woman. At the same time, the virility so important to a warrior was reasserted at the moment of death, as martial defeat was parlayed into sexual conquest, fantastic though that might seem.

Hildr is also a name for a valkyrie (*Vǫluspá* 30, *Grimnismál* 36), around whom there is a complex mythological tradition (see Damico 1984; Quinn, 2006a). The 'choosers of the slain' of Old Norse mythological tradition are figured differently across extant sources, sometimes serving Óðinn in obediently collecting the best warriors to die in battle and join the ranks of *einherjar* in Valhøll, and sometimes following their own desires in selecting warriors to remain alive. In both expressions of the tradition, there is the potential of erotic frisson: the warrior chosen by the valkyrie not to die is seduced into becoming her lover or husband (in the Helgi poems of the Codex Regius collection of eddic poems, for example), just as the valkyrie cruising the battlefield looking for talent can, like Hildr, be dangerously attractive (*Haraldskvæði* 1-2, Finnur Jónsson, 1912-15, BI 22).

In the Helgi poems of eddic tradition the valkyrie leads a double life as valkyrie and dynastic princess, her wilfulness in defying her own father's choice of a prospective husband paralleling the disobedience to Óðinn on the battlefield of a valkyrie such as Brynhildr. On each plane it seems the stay of execution a valkyrie princess could offer her chosen one was short-lived and brought in its wake conflict between kin groups and the eventual death of the chosen warrior. The fantasy that a valkyrie might choose a warrior not to die was clearly a potent one, though it is only in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* that the defiant pair are imagined as successfully living beyond their appointed time. Still the power to arrange even a temporary reprieve from death is likely to have attracted admirers. The same vectors of father, daughter and lover provide the tension in the Hildr story where, according to Snorri's prose account, Hildr draws both her father's and lover's armies into battle and perpetuates the battle day after day by resurrecting the dead each night (*En Hildr gekk of nóttina til valsins ok vakði upp með fjǫlkyngi alla þá er dauðir váru*, Faulkes, 1998, I 72). The mythological dimension also appears to have been integral to the Hildr tradition as Snorri understood it, since her revivification of the fighting Hjaðningar works in parallel with the daily combat of the *einherjar* in Valhøll who return unscathed to the hall each evening to feast: *Svá er sagt í kvæðum at Hjaðningar skulu svá biða ragnaröks* (Faulkes, 1998, I 72). In both cases, the lot of the fighting man is

<sup>2</sup> Snorri's use of the Hildr story is the subject of more detailed analysis in a forthcoming article (Quinn 2006b); for an investigation of the possible meaning of the ring motif in Bragi's stanzas see Clunies Ross (1973).

positively portrayed: the sporting imperative of rest and refreshments between sessions is provided by diurnal rhythm (in Valhöll there is drinking and feasting each night) even if full-time never arrives and a result can never be declared.

Saxo too relates a version of the Hildir story in Book V of *Gesta Danorum*, but there it is Hithinius' reputed seduction of Hilda before their betrothal that triggers war between the two sides: *quasi filiam eius ante sponsalium sacra stupri illecebris temerasset* (Friis-Jensen, 2005, I 340). Although Hilda is not ascribed the role of battle-inciter as she is in the other traditions, she is credited with the magical power of revivification fired by individuated desire that Hithinius not die:

*Ferunt Hildam tanta mariti cupiditate flagrasse, ut noctu interfectorum manes redintegrandi belli gratia carminibus excitasse credatur* (342).

At a fundamental level, both Hildir in all these manifestations and the valkyrie in all hers are attributed with the power to countermand death, either temporarily or cyclically, for the purpose of keeping warriors at war. The ideology of endless fighting had sound mythological underpinnings when its purpose was to enhance preparedness for *ragnarök* – either in the protected meadows around Valhöll or in the charmed fields that Hildir controlled – but once *ragnarök* had been replaced by the Christian last judgement the notion must have generated more dubious cultural meanings, even in poetry and stories about the ancient past. And so it is hardly surprising that in the context of the accreted narrative tradition surrounding King Óláfr Tryggvason and his work to convert pagans to Christianity preserved in Flateyjarbók and elsewhere, traditions were reconfigured to counter any surviving notions that magic could resurrect mortals, or that valkyries might have control over the timing of a man's death (see Harris, 1980 and Rowe, 2002).

In *Norna-Gests þáttur*, debunking the heathen belief that figures like norms and valkyries might have had power over death is the aim of the evangelising narrative in which Gestr joyfully relinquishes his unnatural (and heathen) life-span under the influence of King Óláfr's guiding counsel (see Harris and Hill, 1989 and Würth, 1993). The artificial extension granted to Gestr is presented as a capricious act of the norms, though in his own explanation of events Gestr first introduces the perpetrators as *'uolnur er kalladar uoru spakonur'* (Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Unger, 1860-8, I 358). It quickly becomes clear, however, that they are not simply mediums or prophets, but supernatural beings who have the power to decide men's fates and in particular, the length of their lives. The narrative soon admits their identity as *nornir* (358) and it is anyway anticipated within the cultural frame of Gestr's story by his explanation that while keeping company with Sigurðr and Reginn *kolludu þeir mig þa Normagest* (350). According to the narrative, the youngest of the norms was peeved by the attention granted to her companions – perhaps a misogynist (and presumably clerical) reflex which stands in sharp contrast to all the mythological evidence that norms, like valkyries, worked effectively in concert – and malevolently declared Gestr's fate foreshortened to the burning life of a candle:

*'þuiat ek skapa honum þat at hann skal æigi lifa leingr en kerti þat brennr er upp er tendrat hea sæcinimum'* (358).

Marking out the role of the youngest member of the company is a feature which also surfaces in Snorri's account of mythology, where the youngest norm is aligned with valkyries and ascribed the role of designating who among warriors shall die and when:

... ok norn in yngsta er Skuld heitir riða jafnan at kjósa val ok ráða vígum (Faulkes, 1988, 30). Valkyries, like norns, had power over the length of a man's life; indeed Helgi, the name of a valkyrie's warrior-lover in a number of eddic poems, might well be dubbed *valkyrja-gestr* since his life beyond its appointed hour was a function of their extended hospitality.

The narrative of *Norna-Gests þáttur* can be seen to brush against the role of valkyries on another occasion as well. The longest quotation of an eddic poem *Gestr* treats Óláfr and his men to is of a poem we otherwise know from the Codex Regius anthology as *Helreið Brynhildar* (untitled in the manuscript, but prefaced by the heading *Brynhildr reið helveg*). In it Brynhildr recalls her days as a valkyrie when she caused the death of a warrior Óðinn had intended to have victory and instead granted life and victory to another warrior of her own choice. She later committed suicide in order to be reunited with the lover of her choice, Sigurðr, who through the deception of the Gjúkungar was denied to her in life: 'vit skulum okkrum allðri slita Sigurðr saman . . . ' (Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Unger, 1860-8, I 356). Such attention to Brynhildr underlines the proximate relevance of valkyries to a narrative about the power of norns. Experienced in choosing warriors' deaths according to her own inclinations, Brynhildr ultimately chose her own in order to engineer a reunion with her (unrevivable) warrior-lover. The deeply un-Christian notion that the life of the body continued after death – that ill-fated lovers might choose another fate beyond the grave and be corporally reunited – is offensive to Óláfr who asks not to hear such things ('ægi er nauðsyn at segja flæira fra þuilikum hlutum') although the men of the court enjoy the story enormously (*þa sögðu hirdmenn konungs gaman er þetta ok segðu enn flæira*, 357).<sup>3</sup> Christian dogma must necessarily have set itself against any vestige of a heathen belief in reincarnation too. Flateyjarbók records Saint Óláfr rejecting the very possibility (Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Unger, 1860-8, II, 135) and the compiler of the Codex Regius collection of eddic poems (or one of his editorial predecessors) also disavows the notion as *kerlingavilla* when he records the apparently rife custom of reincarnation among valkyries and their chosen princes:

Þat var trúa í fornescio, at menn væri endrbornir, enn þat er nú kǫlluð kerlingavilla. Helgi oc Sigrún er kallat at væri endrborin. Hét hann þá Helgi Haddingiascaði, enn hon Kára, Hálfðanar dóttir, svá sem qveðit er í Káraliððom, oc var hon valkyria' (Neckel rev. Kuhn, 1962, 161).

As this aside makes clear, poems about reincarnated valkyries and legendary heroes were a popular genre, even if their theological implications caused some discomfort to Christian scribes.

That the power to resurrect the dead was a definitive act of God is an article of Christian faith and one that could not admit another tradition that accorded the power to valkyries. And so in *Sǫrla þáttur's* retelling of the story of the battle of the Hjaðningar, the potency of Hildr is thoroughly undone (Damico, 1993). While she still figures as the object of both guardianship and desire and serves as the pivotal point between two arrayed armies, she has lost the power to either incite or resurrect

<sup>3</sup> The narrative is not explicit about the reasons for Óláfr's disapproval, or the men's boisterous approval; possibly they enjoy it as much for the gothic scene of the valkyrie's beating of the ogress as anything else (*þa æpti gygr ogurligri roddu ok hliop inn j biargit*, 357).

them. Instead she sits on the sidelines as a passive observer: . . . *þa stodu þeir upp sem adr ok borduzst. Hilldr sat j æinum lundt ok sa upp a þenna læik.* (Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Unger, 1860-8, I 281-2) and . . . *bæde nætr ok daga ok hefir þessu gengit marga mannzalldra. en Hilldr Hognadottir sitr ok ser upp a* (282). No doubt her more decorous role was created with a courtly lady watching a joust in mind, yet the deeper indigenous connection between women and prophecy surfaces to provide the retelling with an interlude of rather implausible dialogue between the ill-fated lovers. Having been led away from home with her mother, Hildr takes the opportunity to ask Heðinn what his intentions might be. Having told her what in fact he has just been told by a disguised Freyja would be his course of action (another wheel to the plot to which I shall return), Hildr enjoins him not to take it. She explains that abducting her would be unnecessary since her father is likely to agree to their marriage if asked and even if she were to be abducted her father could be persuaded to be reconciled with Heðinn afterwards. No makings for a perennial feud there then. Such consummate mollification of the bellicose attitude of Hildr created the narrative possibility of averting battle altogether, a turn that might destroy the purpose of a new parable to counter the traditional Hildr story for all but the most devout of listeners. Just as the *gygr* in *Helreið Brynhildar* gives voice to a sound Christian judgement of the social role appropriate to women – *betr sæmði þer borda at rekia* (355) – the audience's reaction to Gestr's performance of her encounter with Brynhildr makes clear such piety might not always be as compelling as the spirited self assertion of a valkyrie.

An unforgiveable act – from any cultural point of view – needed to be injected into the story to make Heðinn's behaviour reprehensible and the ensuing battle a travesty of fighting men's values. And so it was devised that Heðinn should also abduct Hildr's mother and subject her to a brutal ritual murder beneath his ship's prow, an act that does indeed bring about battle between Hildr's father and abductor.<sup>4</sup> Hildr is such an obliging mouthpiece for the revisionist author that she disavows the role of reviver of warriors which long poetic tradition had accorded her, a role which she must of narrative necessity only know about through dreams (280):

ok þessliga hafa mer draumar gengit sem þit munit beriazst ok drepozst  
nidr ok þo muni þar annat þyngra a koma. ok mun mer þat mikill harmr ef  
ek skal horfua upp a fodur minn at hann skuli standa undir meingerdum  
ok myklum alogum. en mer er þo einge glede j at sia þig j illendum ok  
erfuidismunum.

Hildr's prescient fear that Heðinn and her father will kill one another seems to be eclipsed by the more terrible knowledge that her father will be oppressed by magical spells. Her thorough-going eschewal of the role traditionally assigned to Hildr is completed by the statement that watching spell-bound men at war will bring her no joy and that their fighting is nothing but evil toil.

Indeed far from the utopian vision of an endless cycle of sportive combat followed by bacchanalian feasting that is described in *Grímnismál* and *Gylfaginning*, *Sörla þátr* fashions a picture of everlasting battle as ghastly and mawkish spectacle – without, it seems, either time on the sidelines or refreshments. On the island of Hoy, they fight night and day and, understandably, after a hundred and forty three years of

<sup>4</sup> The role of the dragon ship in the *þátr* is discussed by Rowe (2002, 40-4).

killing one another only to be resurrected each time, each combatant is bloodied and anxious (*bludugr með myklum ahyggju* 282). They also kill any local watchmen who cross their path – perhaps for the reassurance of watching a man die and stay dead – and it is this twist in the plot which brings them to the attention of King Óláfr and his men. Desperate to be released from the spell of chronic resurrection, which is described as *þessi armæða ok anaud* and *aumlígt afelli ok skadlig skapraun* (282),<sup>5</sup> Heðinn explains to Óláfr's watchman Ívarr that their only hope of release is for a Christian man to fight them ('*ok ekki annat til undanlausnar en nokkurr kristinn maðr berizst við oss*', 282); like Hildir he now knows the legendary tradition he is caught within and the reconstructed role he is meant to play. Ívarr obligingly offers battle and *fellr Hogni þa dauðr ok stod allðri upp sidan* (282-3), with Heðinn following the same way. Christianity offers the legendary warriors a reprieve into peaceful death, a release from the heathen tradition of resurrection that is described by Heðinn as *slys* and the result of *uondar spar ok ill alog* (281), which it might well seem after more than fifty thousand days without the boiled pork and copious mead to follow each night. Like Norna-Gestr, Heðinn is more than willing to relinquish graciously what heathen tradition had foisted on him, strengthened in his resolve by the influence of King Óláfr.

The author of *Sörla þáttur* transposes the power to resurrect warriors after death in battle from the reconstructed and thoroughly demure Hildir onto Freyja, herself a member of the euhemerised and morally bankrupt royal family of ancient times. Christian texts worked to establish in place of traditional mythology (see Clunies Ross, 1992). The cultural imperative of preparedness for a mass attack of human and Æsir forces at *ragnarök* is replaced by decadent gaming between King Óðinn and his mistress Freyja, with the king assisted in his conniving by a sly boy of lowly stock named Loki (Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Unger, 1860-8, I 275). The mythological scale of the clash between chthonic forces and the Æsir in which Loki figured as the embodiment of unresolvable tension is reduced to a one-dimensional tale in which Loki finds himself to be a simple servant of the King, without intrigue of any kind between them (*sagde hann ok allt Odni þat er hann uisse*, 275). The wager made by Óðinn with Freyja to contrive an endless battle between two kings balances her prostitution and covetousness with his taste for stirring up fighting between warriors – which, devoid of a mythological dimension, levels an interest in recruiting the best warriors over time to mere caprice. Like some of the other players of the *þáttur* who are known from long tradition, Óðinn too is ventriloquist's doll to the narrator in his refashioning of both plot and cultural meaning: explaining the detail of the wager to Freyja, Óðinn proleptically acknowledges both the pointlessness of endless battle and the inevitable extinguishing of heathenism by Christianity:

'ytan nokkurr maðr kristinn verðe sua roskr . . . at hann þori at ganga til bardaga þessa ok uega með uopnum þessa men. þa hit fysta skal þeirra þraut lyktazst. hverium hofðingia sem þat verðr lagit at leysa þa suo or anaud ok erfuiðe sinna farligrá framferða' (276).

Once she is on assignment, Freyja calls herself *Göndul*, a well-known valkyrie name, though that depth of cultural knowledge is denied Heðinn, who falls in love

<sup>5</sup> The manner in which the *þáttur* resolves into a kind of harrowing of hell is argued persuasively by Rowe (2002, 62-3).

with what he takes to be a beautiful woman without a history whom he happens upon in a forest on three occasions (278, 279 and 280). Drinking her potions and following the advice she gives him, however, he gains none of the beneficial powers bestowed in the parallel relationship of the valkyrie Sigdrífa and the young hero Sigurðr; indeed it is while dozing on her lap after one such draught that Gøndul casts the spell of sequential resurrection on him and Högni ('*nu uige ek þik vndir oll þau atkuæde ok skildaga sem Odinn fyrir mæltti ok ykk Hogna bada . . .*', 280), after which she disappears, though not before Heðinn catches a glimpse of what appears to be a huge, dark form. Morphing into some kind of ogress as she leaves the plot, it is perhaps not surprising that Gøndul was given no edifying words to mouth nor was any kind of reconstructed role found for the valkyrie to play.

In the campaign to discredit the fantasy that valkyries or women with magic powers might resurrect men, or empower them to continue fighting after they had been declared dead, it was presumably not enough to demonise the power as belonging to the old religion and the crafty wiles of Óðinn and Freyja, and Hildir herself had to be 'converted' into a peace-loving daughter whose primary sense of duty was to her father (and mother) and whose head was not turned by the dashing warrior. That the focus is on reconstructing Hildir (Freyja not to any extent and Óðinn only in the most narratively pragmatic manner) suggests that what she represented was the target: the continued popularity of stories about valkyries with power over death. While some aspects of pre-Christian belief that had continued to contribute to the formation of cultural identity might perhaps have been tolerantly overlooked, the representation of women who could resurrect the dead or grant a man extra years of life wrenched at the tenets of Christian theology. It seems as if the authors of both *Sörla þáttur* and *Norna-Gests þáttur* regarded the valkyrie tradition itself as too long-lived a reflex of pagan belief and in need of extinguishing, or in the idiom of the valkyrie fantasy, of being put finally to bed.

Like the elf in *Norna-gests þáttur* who was invited into the Christian domain by the presence of a not fully-Christianised figure (the prime-signed but unbaptised Gestr), the valkyrie – still abroad in poetry and in retellings of myths and legends in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries – might slip back into people's thinking about death in battle and the after-life of fighting men if vigilance in reinterpreting ancient traditions was not maintained. Until he asked him, King Óláfr himself was unaware that Gestr had only been prime-signed: despite the strong bolt on the door – the semblance of Christian practices among the household – heathen beliefs were present: *En þú hafði alfrinn suo til orðs tekit um lasinn at Gestr signade sig um kuelldit sem adrir menn en uar þó reyndar hæðinn* (Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Unger, 1860-8, I 346). The authors of these two *þættir* seem to have felt that, like elves who could slip through bolted doors (or like Loki, who in *Sörla þáttur* turned himself into a fly to pass through the locked door to Freyja's chamber), figures from the heathen past might insinuate themselves back into society if they sensed there were those present who still entertained fantasies about valkyries and their power over death, even all those centuries later.

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