

REVIEW ARTICLE

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Prolonged Echoes. Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society

Volume I: *The Myths*

Volume II: *The Reception of Norse Myths in Medieval Iceland*

Odense University Press, Odense, 1994 and 1998

Some time ago it was suggested that the founding of the Althing in 930 constituted the first decisive step towards the making of *Njáls saga* (c.1285), which still remains one of the greatest literary masterpieces ever to be written in a Nordic language. The saga is deeply rooted in myth. Another huge stride in the same direction occurred with the smooth transition in Iceland from paganism to Christianity (c. 1000), which was achieved peacefully and without demonising Óðinn and his fellow gods, or consigning them to total oblivion. In the process, ancestral myths were secularised, liberated from pagan beliefs, and given a new lease of life by Christian poets and other custodians of native culture. Pagan visions of gods and giants in action continued to be a potent element in the imaginary world of the Icelandic people. Most importantly, the Althing created a unique form of rural democracy which in due course provided ideal conditions for the evolution of imaginative literature about the fates of farmers and other ordinary members of society.

Notwithstanding the fact that *Njáls saga* describes Icelanders who belonged to the period c. 960 – c. 1015, its author's vision of human destiny has a universal relevance. The saga is an eclectic work; the unknown artist borrowed ideas and images freely from diverse works of history, fiction and traditional lore, including the unique *Edda* of Snorri Sturluson (d. 1241). Pagan myths formed an integral part of

the fictive literature of medieval Iceland, and it is difficult to make sense of the more sophisticated sagas without taking into account the total coherence of Icelandic literary creation from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries.

Although the title hero of *Njáls saga* bore an Irish name and was one of the first members of its huge cast to be converted to Christianity, certain traits in his character are clearly modelled on Óðinn, the protean god of poetry, magic, wisdom, and war, who assumed a good many different roles and could be referred to by nearly two hundred different names. Like Óðinn, the sage Njáll had the uncanny gift of prescience, and was generous with wise counselling. Both the god and the farmer were physically flawed: Óðinn had only one eye, and Njáll couldn't grow a beard. But they were radically different in many other respects: whereas Njáll was a peace loving person and his advice was always sound and benevolent, Óðinn was a great mischief-maker who often set out to cause strife, not least between friends and kinsmen. *Njáls saga* is rich in irony, so it comes as no surprise that some of Njáll's best laid schemes lead inexorably to disaster, no less so than Óðinn's deliberate moves to create discord and conflict.

The central tragedy of *Njáls saga* is a human version of the myth of Baldr in *Snorra-Edda*, where the mischievous Loki, motivated by envy and malice, tricks the blind god Höðr into killing his half-brother, the innocent and much loved Baldr, Óðinn's favourite son. In the saga, Njáll corresponds to Óðinn, Höskuldr to Baldr, Mörðr to Loki, and the Njálssons to Höðr. In *Snorra-Edda* Óðinn is said to have taken his son's death much harder than the rest of the gods because he alone could grasp the full extent of their irreparable loss. In *Völuspá*, on the other hand, which was composed by a poetess, Baldr's principal mourner is his mother, Frigg. Njáll's innocent and popular foster son Höskuldr is killed by his own foster brothers, who act out Höðr's fratricidal role and thereby cause their father his greatest sorrow: "I would rather have lost two of my sons to have Höskuldr still alive." The Njálsson's were not physically blind like Höðr, but morally so, and it proved an easy task for the wily Mörðr, who bears a striking resemblance to Loki's character, to

persuade them to commit the heinous crime. In myth, Loki would get the Æsir into serious difficulties, and afterwards help them to put things right again. A similar thing happens to Mörður in *Njáls saga*: after Höskuldr's death he becomes the Njálsson's principal defender in court.

In this connection it is worth bearing in mind that although saga portraits of historical characters were ultimately based on real people and transmitted orally for generations in the form of *mannfræði* 'personality lore', the pagan gods served as archetypes in the fertile imagination of the anonymous saga authors right from the beginning of saga writing in the twelfth century. A remarkable scene in *Skjöldunga saga* identifies several of its characters with the gods: Hálfdan Snjalli with Baldr who was mourned by all the gods, Hrærekr with Hænir who was the most timid of all the gods, Helgi Hvassi with Hermóðr, the bravest of them all, and Guðröðr with Heimdallr who was the most stupid of the gods. It seems self-evident that in the preliterate period oral prose stories, as well as poetry, about the gods and their enemies, the giants, were told for entertainment and instruction. In this respect the continuity from heathenism to Christianity appears to have been unbroken.

The sophisticated author of *Njáls saga* made two significant changes to the archetypal mythic pattern. First, Mörður is not only the sole plotter of Höskuldr's killing but also one of its perpetrators. The other meaningful innovation in the saga was to make Njáll implicitly responsible for the tragedy. Years before it happened, the Njálssons had slain Höskuldr's father, and Njáll wanted to compensate the orphaned boy for his loss by taking him into fosterage and thus create a fraternal bond between him and his father's killers. Ironically, Njáll's kind and generous gesture to safeguard Höskuldr's future is later ruthlessly exploited as a means to arouse his sons' envy and jealousy and so to poison their love for their young foster-brother. Similarly in *Snorra-Edda* the precautionary measures taken by the gods for Baldr's protection prove utterly futile against Loki's trickery. In *Snorra-Edda*, the death of Baldur precedes *Ragnarökkr* 'the Twilight of the Gods' when Óðinn and the rest of the

pantheon perish, and the black giant Surtr burns up the whole world. In *Njáls saga* the corresponding event is the burning of Njáll's farm-house at Bergþórshvöll where he and his family are destroyed by the flames.

In her massive and comprehensive study under review, Margaret Clunies Ross (hereafter abbreviated MCR) devotes Volume I to a detailed, thematic and systematic analysis of many of the extant Old Norse myths, exploring them from anthropological and sociological points of view. Towards the beginning of the volume she adumbrates the scope of her research declaring that a "new analysis of Old Norse myth requires us to move away from the study of individual myths and individual texts as discrete entities without much connection with the rest of the mythic system, towards a kind of analysis that respects individual myths but sees their meanings in a larger textual and contextual frame [...] We need to ask, further, how this pattern fits into the general social structure attributed to the supernatural world of gods and giants and what general semiotic significance of various categories of beings and their actions carry in the Norse mythic corpus as a whole." Most of the first volume under review is concerned with this immense task. MCR's wide-ranging and thorough investigation of the meanings, functions and origins of diverse myths is an outstanding piece of scholarship and a significant contribution to Norse mythography. It is a pleasure to note that she does not confine her splendid work to the pagan gods (the *Æsir* and the *Vanir*); her extensive field of study includes the darker worlds of dwarves and giants.

The second volume of MCR's *Prolonged Echoes* is a different kind of contribution to scholarship. It includes thoughtful evaluations of previous studies in the field and a good many relevant observations on life and letters in early Iceland. But readers of a book subtitled "The reception of Norse myths in medieval Iceland" will probably find its treatment of mythical elements in the Icelandic sagas somewhat inadequate. The book tells us little about the spirit of the old myths which permeates the fictive literature of medieval Iceland. In particular, various manifestations of magic,

humour, irony and satire in the sagas derive from myth. Significantly, MCR does not even hint at the striking and well known similarities between Baldr's tragedy and *Njáls saga*, nor has she anything significant to say about other features in that great saga which are redolent of pagan myths.

One of the themes MCR discusses at length relates to the so-called *ergi*. On p. 69 she declares that back in 1973 she "first drew attention to the notion that the feminine counterpart to male sexual unnaturalness or *ergi*, which is usually interpreted as 'passive' homosexuality or cowardice, is a condition akin to what modern psychologists would call nymphomania." MCR is undoubtedly right here as elsewhere; her discovery echoes the candid admission of the giantess Arinnefja in the fourteenth century *Egils saga og Ásmundar* describing how she felt after spending a night in bed with Þórr: "Ever since I've been driven by an *ergi* so strong that I don't seem to be able to live without a man."

MCR's use of *Þrymskviða* to exemplify this kind of feminine *ergi* is dubious. In this comic poem Þórr's hammer is stolen one night by the giant Þrymr when its owner is asleep. After the gods learn that the thief is willing to give back the stolen hammer, provided he gets Freyja as his wife, the goddess is curtly told to put on a bridal outfit and come to Jötunheimar. Not surprisingly she abhors the notion of marrying a giant and says angrily that she would be considered extremely *vergjörn* 'desperate to get a husband' if she agreed to go to there. Erroneously, MCR translates the term *vergjörn* as 'man-crazy', ignoring the fact that *ver-* as the first element in a compound normally denotes 'a husband', such as in *verfang* 'taking a husband, marrying', *verfaðir* 'a husband's father', and *verbróðir* 'a husband's brother'. It is true, of course, that the noun *verr* can have the meaning 'a male, man', but the context here makes it clear that the sense 'husband' is intended. In a later scene in *Þrymskviða* describing the wedding feast in Giantland where Þórr is dressed up as a bride and Þrymr believes that this is Freyja herself, the meticulous poet refers to Þórr as *Sifjar verr* 'Sif's husband'. MCR's casual treatment of Freyja's reply serves to render the poem a much cruder composition than it actually is.

Freyja was the goddess of love, and her nymphomania manifested elsewhere in myth should not be allowed to distort our critical appreciation of *Þrymskviða*. The integrity of individual myths should always be properly observed.

MCR deals fully with the bizarre myth of Loki's transmutation into a mare and his (her?) subsequent sexual intercourse with the stallion Svaðilfari; in due course Loki gave birth a foal, which later became Óðinn's favourite horse, Sleipnir. Strangely enough, MRC has nothing to tell us about echoes from this myth in the Icelandic sagas. It would have been instructive to see a fuller account of hippophilia in the sagas as a whole. Perhaps the most striking case in point is Hrólfr's abusive speech in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* when he accuses the berserk Hrossþjófr of being the son of a fawn-coloured mare, alleging that his father Hrosskell had fallen in love with the beast and killed her equine companion out of jealousy. Hrólfr concludes the famous calumny with the following words: "I don't know whether he gave that mare any more sons, but I'm told he had another son called Hesthöfði, sprung from horses too. You're all of you very like one another, so vile and inhuman you must all have been conceived in the same way." When Broddi in *Ölkofra saga* reminds Eyjólfur Þórðarson of his abortive attempt to rustle cattle from another farmer he declares "You were so scared you turned yourself into a mare, a pretty outrageous thing to do," he is not only alluding to the myth of Loki and Svaðilfari but also implying Eyjólfur's moral affinity to Loki. No less sinister is Broddi's vilification of Þorkell Trefill in the same saga: "You didn't notice the fat stallion that Steingrímur had till it was up your backside. That skinny mare you were on faltered under you, didn't she, and I've never been able to make up my mind whether it was you or the mare that got it."

MCR makes several references to imputations of sexual perversion, and such innuendoes tend to derive from myth. It would be a mistake to maintain that defamatory remarks of the kind in the sagas were intended as allusions to actual practices. Let us briefly consider one particular case. In *Njáls saga* Skarp-Heðinn hurls the insult at Flosi that he is said to be "the mistress of the Svínafell Troll, and that he uses you as

a woman every ninth night." A significant element in the calumny is the insinuation that Flosi resembles Loki in more ways than in sexual aberration alone. This particular form of insult is mentioned in the ancient laws of Norway and Iceland and must have been a legacy from pagan times.

Taking a lead from earlier mythographers, MCR refers to the dwarves as 'an all-male society who reproduce themselves by pseudo-creative means' (p 165). This assumption rests on very shaky foundations indeed. While it is true that the dwarves were associated with the earth, there is no real evidence that they did not have their female counterparts and were thus incapable to procreate in the same manner as humans, gods, elves, and giants. The term *dyrgja* 'a female dwarf' occurs in a fourteenth century text and is undoubtedly much older, but MCR dismisses its significance out of hand. In various other tales dwarves are associated with females in no uncertain terms. The myth of *Alvíss* who wanted to become *Þórr*'s son-in-law certainly indicates that this particular dwarf appreciated female company, and it seems reasonable to assume that *Alvíss* intended his future wife to bear his children. Then there is *Snorri*'s assertion that some of the *norns* were descended from dwarves (*dverga ættar*), whereas other *norns* were either divine (*goðkunnugar*) or elfin (*álfa ættar*) in origin. *Snorri*'s source, *Fáfnismál*, refers to certain *norns* as 'daughters of *Dvalinn*', and there is nothing to support the notion that this outstanding leader of dwarves begat his female offspring by unnatural means. Those who are in doubt about the sexual propensities of the ancient dwarves should consult the myth of the promiscuous *Freyja* and the four dwarves from whom she bought a gold necklace and paid for the precious object with her love, sleeping one night with each of them in turn. When *Snorri* states that certain dwarves, the sons of *Ívaldi*, made the ship *Skíðblaðnir* are we to assume that Old *Ívaldi* had the boys by some 'pseudo-creative means'? What are we to make of the *dvergabörn* 'dwarf children' figuring in *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar* and *Þorsteins þáttur bæjarmagns*? In *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, *Möndull*, who describes himself with the words "I'm a dwarf, an earth-dweller", drugs and rapes a married woman, and later

confesses that he had intended to abduct another lady; such incidents suggest that the sexual inclinations of dwarves did not differ significantly from those of other races. Furthermore, the dwarf Reginn is said to have had two brothers and two sisters, but there is no indication that their father produced his five children by pseudo-creative means.

MCR writes extensively and in many ways intelligently about the functions of giants and their relationships to the gods, but oddly enough she fails to give a clear idea of the terminology involved. In addition to the nouns *jötunn*, *þurs*, *gýgr*, and *flagð* which she mentions briefly (p. 49) though without explaining their full semantic range, the following should also be taken into account: *troll*, *risi*, *bergrisi*, and *gífr*. Some of these terms had more than one meaning. Thus the neuter term *troll* denoted both 'a witch' and 'a Sami woman', as well as 'a giant, demon'. This sense of the noun is supported by the compound *hálf-troll* which meant someone who had a Norwegian father and a Sami mother. In early texts we also find that *hálf-risi*, *hálf-bergrisi*, and *hálf-Finnr* had the same meaning. The title hero of *Ketils saga hængs* travelled from his home in Namdalen north to Finnmark where he happily married a Sami girl. But when he brought his young bride home, his father, Hallbjörn *hálf-troll* angrily asked: "Why did you invite this *troll* to stay here?" It must have escaped Hallbjörn's memory for a moment that he himself had a Sami mother, as his nickname clearly shows.

One of the most prominent giantesses in myth is Skaði who married the god Njörður, but they proved incompatible and split up. Then she went back to her place in the mountains where she would travel on skis and shoot deer with a bow. "She is called a ski-goddess or a ski-deity" (*Snorra-Edda*). There can be no doubt that Skaði was associated with the Sami, who were famous skiers and hunters. In *Ynglinga saga*, Snorri states that Skaði didn't want to live with Njörðr; later she married Óðinn and had many sons by him. One of them was called Sæmingr (the name derives from the stem ethnic stem of the term Sami), and he is supposed to be an ancestor of Earl Håkon the Mighty (d. 995). Here as elsewhere, mythical giants are equated with the Sami and linked with the

legendary history of Norwegian rulers.

It has also been recognised that the relationship between the Æsir and the giants in myth is remarkably similar to that between the Norwegians and the Sami in the sagas. The mythical world of the giants, Jötunheimr (or Jötunheimar) was supposed to be located in the north. When Freyr was in the mythical Hliðskjálf from which he could look over all worlds he happened to look to the *north*, and that was the moment when he caught sight of and fell instantly in love with the beautiful Gerðr in Jötunheimar. This region had a counterpart on earth which also lay in the north. After the goddess Gefjun had entertained King Gylfi of Sweden, she travelled from there *north* to Jötunheimar to fetch four oxen, her sons by a certain giant. In several texts a region called Jötunheimur was said to be located near Finnmark. In one version of *Heiðreks saga* the geographical situation in the north is described in the following terms. "It is written in ancient books that a certain region in the north on the White Sea was called Jötunheimar, and south of that lies Ýmisland. Before the Turks and the Men of Asia arrived in Scandinavia, the northern world was inhabited by *risar* and partly by *hálfrisar*. Then the races got mixed together, as the *risar* got wives from Mannheimar 'the human world' and some people there gave their daughters away in marriage to the *risar*."

The term 'Norse myths' is not entirely applicable to all the myths under discussion, as some of them are supposed to be of Celtic origin, including the tales of Þórr and Útgarða-Loki, Freyr and Gerðr, etc. Early Irish literature includes several stories describing the conception (Irish *compert*) of a hero. In some of them the conceiver is a god who travels to the human world and impregnates a married woman of his own choice. In due course the woman gives birth to a boy who grows up to become an outstanding hero. In spite of his divine origin the lad is usually called the son of his mother's mortal husband. The outstanding Icelandic example of this motif is *Rígsþula*, in which the god Heimdallr travelling under the assumed name *Rígr* (from Irish *rí* (gen. *ríg*) 'a king') visits three married couples, as the result of which each of the three

successive hostesses gives birth to a baby boy nine months after entertaining the roving stranger. By the one called *Edda* 'Great-grandmother', Rígr begets *Þræll* 'slave', who beomes the progenitor of the class of unfree men. By *Amma* 'Grandmother' Rígr has a son called *Karl* 'man', from whom farmers are descended, and on *Móðir* 'Mother' Rígr sires *Jarl* 'earl' the progenitor of kings. Following the Irish convention, both *Þræll* and *Karl* get their patronymics from their step-fathers, but Rígrur acknowledges his son *Jarl*. In early Icelandic literature we find that the convention varies; in some instances, the son takes his patronymic from the biological father, and in others from his mother's cuckolded husband. MRC makes some pertinent observations on *Rígsþula*, but does not mention its non-Norse background.

Hermann Pálsson