

**RECONSIDERING THE TRADITION:  
THE ODINIC HERO AS SAGA PROTAGONIST**

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## LIST OF BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ABBREVIATIONS

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The following texts are referred to extensively in this dissertation, which suggests their abbreviated use. Quotations from them refer to the following editions with page numbers in brackets, except for the first time a text is referenced when full bibliographical description is given.

- |           |  |
|-----------|--|
| Destiny   | Georges Dumézil, <i>The Destiny of the Warrior</i> , trans. by Alf Hiltebeitel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).   |
| Edd.      | <i>Eddukvæði</i> , ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, Íslensk fornrit: Eddukvæði, II vols (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 2014).  |
| GD        | Saxo Grammaticus, <i>Gesta Danorum</i> , ed. Karsten Friis-Jensen, 2 vols (Copenhagen: Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab & Gads Forlag, 2005).  |
| GD Fisher | Saxo Grammaticus, <i>The History of the Danes: Books I-IX</i> , ed. Hilda Ellis Davidson, trans. Peter Fisher (Cambridge: D.S.Brewer, 1996).   |
| Herv.     | <i>Hervarar saga / Heiðreks saga: Saga Heiðreks konungs ins vitra (The saga of King Heidrek the Wise)</i> , ed. and trans. Christopher Tolkien (London: Thomas Nelson and sons Ltd, 1960). |
| HLD       | Axel Olrik, <i>The Heroic Legends of Denmark</i> , trans. by Lee M. Hollander (New York: The American-Scandinavian Foundation, 1919).  |
| HSH       | <i>Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka</i> , ed. A. Le Roy Andrews, Altnordische Saga-Bibliothek (Halle: Verlag von Max Niemeyer, 1909).  |
| HSK       | <i>Hrólfs saga Kraka og Bjarkarímur</i> , ed. Finnur Jónsson, Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur, 32 (Copenhagen: Møller, 1904).   |

- Initiation Jens Peter Schjødt, *Initiation between Two Worlds: Structure and Symbolism in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religion* (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2008).
- QOS *Qrvar-Odds saga*, ed. R.C.Boer (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1888).
- Stakes Georges Dumézil, *The Stakes of the Warrior*, ed. Jaan Puhvel and David Weeks (Berkeley and Los Angeles: UC Press, 1983).
- VS *Volsunga saga: The Saga of the Volsungs*, ed. R.G.Flinch (London: Nelson, 1965).

## INTRODUCTION

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### 1. AIMS OF THE DISSERTATION AND ITS PLACE IN SCHOLARLY DISCUSSION

The purpose of this thesis is to evaluate and reconceive the scholarly understanding of one of Óðinn's aspects — Óðinn as a patron to a mortal hero figure. This theme runs through a number of Old Icelandic and continental Scandinavian texts, but it is most widely represented in the *fornaldarsaga* genre. One of the most important pre-Christian Scandinavian deities, Óðinn has received an enormous amount of scholarly attention throughout the history Old Norse studies, and the Odinic hero theme has been often referred to for the purposes of scholarly discussion. The precise nature of Óðinn's connection to hero figures, however, has been surprisingly rarely considered in detail. The few attempts of such analysis — most importantly, Georges Dumézil's work — have as much shed light on the material as they created pressing methodological problems, especially when the ideas of mythological criticism were being adapted to the constantly developing, increasingly more cross-disciplinary studies of Old Norse-Icelandic literature and mythology.

How the sagas in general interpret earlier mythological material, in particular material related to Óðinn, has been an important research trend of the last few years, with two staples in Annette Lassen's *Odin på kristent pergament: En teksthistorisk studie* and Merrill Kaplan's *Thou Fearful Guest: Addressing the past in four tales in Flateyjarbók*. Now that to a researcher are available both Lassen's systematic overlook of sources on Óðinn and Kaplan's discussion of the plot about Óðinn visiting a Christian king's court, a study of the typical *fornaldarsaga* Óðinn, the patron and betrayer of heroes, is a logical continuation of the scholarly discussion that this dissertation is aiming to make. *Flateyjarbók* gives a picture of Óðinn who, together with the pagan past that he embodies, suffers defeat before a Christian king. Most *fornaldarsögur* are believed to be considerably later than *Flateyjarbók*, and they tend to give the picture of an all-powerful, triumphant Óðinn, more often than not resented and even opposed by the protagonist, but always easily getting the upper hand. The *fornöld*, according to narratives like *Gautreks saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka*, is definitely Óðinn's time, and this leaves a distinctive stamp on the greatest figures of

the legendary past, such as Hrólfr kraki and Starkaðr. One could argue that this picture of Óðinn, different from that in texts like *Óláfs saga helga* and developed by a different genre, is a part of a larger gnoseological process of understanding the past and coming to terms with it. To quote Merrill Kaplan, ‘the original consumers of [the *þættir* in *Flateyjarbók*], inhabitants of the High Middle Ages, found in them a glimpse of both the age of pagan heroes and the time of the missionary kings. If these stories were *good to think with* in the Lévi-Straussian sense, they would have helped the Christian Icelanders of the fourteenth century think about the conceptual problem they faced in remembering the pagan past and reusing the intellectual goods associated with it’.<sup>1</sup> This dissertation deals with the same Medieval Icelandic anxiety concerning the pagan past and Óðinn, but it looks at different material that requires a different approach. The *fornaldarsögur* analysed in this thesis are centered around the same ‘problem of Óðinn’, but they exclude the missionary king from this system and look directly at the *fornöld*, of which texts like *Norna-Gests þáttur* give but a distant echo. In this kind of narrative, the focus inevitably shifts to the hero figure that has to deal with Óðinn in a world without Christ; to make a concrete example, the protagonist of the story is now not Ólafr helgi sympathising with Hrólfr kraki in a dialogue with Óðinn, but Hrólfr kraki himself, who is involved in an ambiguous and fatal connection to Óðinn rather than just a dialogue with a ‘fearful guest’ from the past. Such a hero that himself belongs to the *fornöld*, the Odinic hero of the *fornaldarsögur*, is for the Christian Icelander a figure that embodies both the heroic past and the problematic relationship with its pagan nature.

So, the underlying conflict that is the essence of the *fornaldarsaga* Odinic hero is deeply connected to the nature of the genre in which this character type is usually found, and a study of the Odinic hero will be predominantly a study in *fornaldarsögur*. In the scholarly discussion of today, the *fornaldarsaga* is not anymore the often overlooked and marginal genre it was a few decades ago. A sufficient body of research has accumulated to shed new light on both the literary-cultural nature of these relatively late texts and on the mythological material they contain. Of the six *fornaldarsaga* texts that are analysed in this dissertation, all have recent close-reading history, sometimes sparse, but in other cases quite extensive. Even more importantly, recent studies in *fornaldarsögur* have developed an effective

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<sup>1</sup> Merrill Kaplan, *Thou Fearful Guest: Addressing the past in four takes in Flateyjarbók* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 2011), 16.

methodological approach to this type of texts that is focused on structure and the problems of parallelism and transmission between related variants. Finally, the more theoretical works like Stephen Mitchell's *Heroic Sagas and Ballads* provide today's scholar of the *fornaldarsögur* with insights into these texts' underlying traits like their complex genre, nature and connections to other narratives like the *rímur*. The methodological apparatus and research evidence accumulated in recent years do not just allow for a study of such a fundamental *fornaldarsaga* theme as the Odinic hero — they make it a necessary step from which a few fields of research will profit. Firstly, they allow a clearer understanding of post-fourteenth-century Iceland's attitude to what Merrill Kaplan calls 'the intellectual goods of the [pre-Christian] past'.<sup>2</sup> Secondly and consequently, disciplines like history of religion and comparative mythology will gain information helping them to more accurately evaluate their *fornaldarsaga* sources on Óðinn and Óðinn-worship. Since a large body of Odinic references is contained in the relatively late saga narratives, this has been an important methodological problem for more than a century. A contribution to understanding the treatment of one specific mythological theme in the sagas will not resolve this problem, but it is a small step towards a cross-disciplinary analysis capable of overcoming such obstacles. The cross-disciplinary effect is also applied retrospectively, as this dissertation will evaluate the recent historical-religious findings from the point of view of saga criticism, which will bring new ideas into the current discussion. Thirdly and maybe most importantly, it will be shown in chapter 1 that 'Odic hero' is an extremely problematic concept that is, nevertheless, used extensively in scholarship because of the theme's importance for the current scholarly discourse overall. The discussion will therefore profit from a formal analysis of the Odinic hero theme in the sagas, and will be able to avoid scholarly misunderstandings that have been common in the last few decades.

To sum up, this dissertation aims to make a twofold contribution to scholarly discourse: it aims to improve understanding of the treatment of a particular mythological theme in the *fornaldarsögur*, but its main ambition is to be methodologically useful for further research in a number of interconnected fields in saga studies.

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<sup>2</sup> Merrill Kaplan, *Thou Fearful Guest: Addressing the past in four takes in Flateyjarbók* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia, 2011), 17.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

From the methodological point of view, this thesis is mostly literary-critical in its approach to the source material, but it has numerous points of connection to other fields — most importantly to mythological criticism and history of religion. Both of these fields have studied Óðinn extensively; to quote John Lindow, ‘to understand Odin is to understand the mythology, and vice versa’.<sup>3</sup> The theme of Óðinn’s connection to mortal warriors — the Odinic heroes — is, of course, an important aspect of this god that runs through numerous sources. Most of these sources are relatively late literary texts like the *fornaldarsögur* and *Gesta Danorum*. Here emerges a methodological inconsistency which this thesis seeks to resolve: although the sources that contain information on the Odinic hero are literary, the literary-critical methodological apparatus has hardly ever been applied to them. For example, the most recent important work on the Odinic hero figures and their alleged historical-religious significance, Jens Peter Schjødt’s *Initiation between Two Worlds*, consciously ignores the problems of genre and structure in its saga sources, although the evidence of close-reading analysis could either support its argumentation or belie some of the hypotheses it brings up.

One of the problems that this thesis aims to resolve is that there is no scholarly consensus on what exactly makes a hero ‘Odic’ (even an explicit affiliation with Óðinn is not a requirement for some researchers). There are, however, surprisingly many scholarly commonplaces connected to this character type. These include statements like ‘Starkaðr is, in general, a typical Odinic hero and therefore represents essential traits of Óðinn-worship’ (see 1.1.4). When mentioned in parenthesis, presumably as a common scholarly consensus which most of such statements in fact rarely are, such references to the Odinic hero theme tend to confuse the argumentation. In an attempt to break this vicious circle, this dissertation develops a formal approach to what it calls the Odinic hero complex. This leaves out some important material that does not fit into the scheme but, since the scheme has been developed a number of concepts are introduced specifically for the internal use in this

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<sup>3</sup> John Lindow, *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals and Beliefs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 252.

thesis, limiting the material to a particular narrative structure that is present in a number of saga texts. The use of this narrative structure in different sources is the main object of consideration in this thesis, which is based on the idea that the analysis of a text's structure can provide the researcher with new insights on this text's cultural-ideological level.

To give a specific example of this approach, section 1.17 of chapter 2 in this thesis looks at the structural and stylistic features of the werewolf episode in *Völsunga saga*, and finds that it is very different from the saga's overall homogenous narrative in terms of structure and the use of folktale material. Given that the sources for most other episodes of the saga are known and well-studied, and the saga evidently has an author, chapter 2 claims there are solid reasons to believe that the shapeshifting episode was introduced by the author compiler, maybe under the influence of similar narratives in circulation. Consequently, *Völsunga saga* is not a reliable source on the *úlfhéðnar* as a cult. However, another important deduction can be made from chapter 2's analysis: the Icelandic literature of the late thirteenth century consciously associated heroes who are connected with Óðinn with the themes of initiation and bestiality, even when these themes were not present in the source material. This way, the thesis looks at the texts with an aim to both test the scholarly *status quo* and, if possible, throw new light on their significance.

### 3. STRUCTURE

The discussion of this dissertation progresses from the general to the specific, starting with theoretical and methodological considerations in chapter 1, and then moving on to the close-reading material in chapters from 2 to 7 where the ideas expressed in chapter 1 are illustrated and put to the test. The thesis can, therefore, be divided into two parts: theoretical, consisting of only chapter 1, and analytical, which includes the rest of the work. Such a structure has been chosen because the subject of the thesis is a methodologically problematic one, and it is important to establish a clear viewpoint on the methods of research before looking at the heterogeneous material of chapters 2-7.

The sequence in which the close-reading chapters 2-7 are arranged pursues, in the first place, clarity of argumentation. Starting with *Völsunga saga* (chapter 2)

allows the thesis to give an overview of its main themes, because the idea of Óðinn's patronage and eventual betrayal of his chosen heroes is presented in *Völsunga saga* in a very straightforward manner. The conclusions to chapter 2 provide a solid background for considering the Odinic theme in *Hrólfs saga kraka* (chapter 3), where this theme is introduced more subtly and with more complex implications. The analysis of *Hrólfs saga kraka* is, in a way, a staple of this thesis's discussion, because it provides the most complete and consistent development of the Odinic hero theme, where initiatory structures, *berserkir* and *berserkir*-fighting imagery, and the (bear) bestiality are closely connected to the Odinic theme of patronage and betrayal. For this reason, all the subsequent texts are often looked upon against the background of *Hrólfs saga kraka*. The short chapter 4, devoted to *Hálfs saga ok hálfsrekka*, seeks to explain this text's Odinic imagery through this text's relation to *Hrólfs saga kraka* and is, therefore, dependent on chapter 3. So is chapter 5, which reads the Battle of Sámsey episode found in *Qrvar-Odds saga* and *Hervarar saga* in the light of *Skuldarbardagi*'s imagery. Chapter 6 considers the famous sacrifice plot in *Gautreks saga* against the background of evidence derived from the previous analysis, and argues that the saga changes the traditional Starkaðr material in order to fit a prevailing scheme characteristic of the texts considered in chapters 3-5. Finally, chapter 7 considers the Odinic hero theme in learned Latin texts, which are not saga narratives and therefore can provide external evidence on the subject. After that, the results of the close-reading analysis are looked at in the general conclusion.

#### 4. NOTE ON THE TRANSLATIONS

Throughout the thesis, I am using my own translations of the quotes from sources in Old Norse, but published translations of Latin sources from the corresponding editions that are detailed in references and bibliography. Since the purpose of my analysis mostly deals with the ideological level of the texts, I have aimed in the translations to convey the atmosphere and general impression that the quotations are likely to make, at the same time keeping them as precise as possible. It should be noted, however, that these translations are provided for reference only, while the analysis is based solely on the phrasing of the original.

Occasionally, I employed a published translation of a source or scholarly work in this thesis rather than making my own one. This is usually the case with scholarly

works that have established and commonly referred to English editions, such as Dumézil's *The Stakes of the Warrior*, but I also used Peter Fisher and Cyril Wright's translations of Latin sources as indicated in the references.

## 5. NOTE ON THE FORMS AND VARIANTS OF PROPER NOUNS

Due to the comparative nature of this dissertation, many of the proper nouns in it exist in more than one form, which may vary from source to source. This especially applies to the characters' names; for example, Bǫðvarr bjarki from *Hrólfs saga kraka* is called Bjarki in *Bjarkarímur* and Biarco in the Latin *Gesta Danorum*. In such cases, proper nouns are used in the same form as they appear in the text that is currently being considered. When more than one variant is referred to at the same time, solidus is used (e.g. Bǫðvarr bjarki/Bjarki/Bjarco when the protagonist of all the three sources is discussed as a complex unity belonging to the narrative tradition). Old Icelandic names are not anglicised, and names from sources in other languages are typically given in the same form as in the edition that is referred to (e.g. Starkatherus, Othinus).

Many of the scholarly works quoted in this thesis, however, use adapted forms of Old Icelandic and other proper names. In particular, in earlier scholarship the name Óðinn is commonly given as Odin or Othin. Proper names in quotations are left in the form used by the authors, but unadapted variants are used in the discussion or translations of quotations. It should be particularly noted that Peter Fisher's English translation of *Gesta Danorum*, which is quoted throughout this thesis, tends to anglicise the Latin forms of proper names, but these forms are not used outside quotations.

## CHAPTER 1

### PREVIOUS SCHOLARSHIP AND THE ODINIC HERO COMPLEX

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This dissertation revolves around the idea of reinterpretation and reconsideration, and it does so on more than one level. Firstly, as it is suggested by the title of the thesis, the representation of Óðinn and his connection to mortal heroes in the ‘mythical-heroic’ *fornaldarsögur* is a reconsideration of a much earlier, pre-Christian tradition. Another level of ‘reconsidering the tradition’, however, is necessitated by the complicated history of scholarship on Óðinn, Óðinn worship and its representation in surviving sources. In particular, the concept of the Odinic hero — a mortal hero with a special connection to Óðinn — has been complicated by its many interpretations, which are diverse methodologically as well as chronologically. Although ‘Óðinn determines a mortal warrior’s career’ is clearly a prominent theme in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, running through a number of sources, it is impossible to approach this theme without first establishing what exactly today’s researcher understands as an ‘Odic hero’ — and, for that matter, what makes anything ‘Odic’.

The first section of this chapter will, therefore, consider and reconsider the history of scholarly approaches to Óðinn’s heroes, who tend to be either his protégés or his enemies, and often become a mixture of both. Once the scholarly *status quo* on this complicated subject is clarified, section two of this chapter will make a step further by enunciating the ‘Odic hero complex’, a set of criteria that determines the choice of material for this thesis and helps its comparative analysis. As it will be shown, the Odinic hero complex is essentially a plot structure accompanied by a group of typical motifs. This complex manifests itself in a number of saga narratives, and therefore allows to consider some of the established tendencies in treating the ‘Óðinn’s protégé’ theme in the sagas.

#### 1. THE ODINIC HERO THEME IN SCHOLARSHIP

##### 1.1. The variants of the term

Before the term ‘Odic hero’ and its use in scholarship are discussed in more detail, it should be noted that the terms ‘Odic hero’ and ‘Óðinn-hero’ are used

interchangeably by the scholars, with no difference between them.<sup>4</sup> The term ‘Odinic hero’ is used throughout this dissertation when its own methodology is discussed and analysis of the sources is performed; however, in the discussion of previous scholarship ‘Óðinn-hero’ may be used when the author has used this term in his or her work.<sup>5</sup> ‘Odinic hero’ is also used to refer to the use of all these forms in scholarship.

In languages other than English and French, the term is usually a calque of *héros odinique* / *Odinic hero*, and is generally used in the same context as the English term, as will be shown below. The following forms may be considered as equivalents of the English ‘Óðinn-hero’ and ‘Odinic hero’:

- French: *héros odinique*, as in Dumézil’s works<sup>6</sup>
- Icelandic: *Óðinshetja*<sup>7</sup>
- Swedish: *Odinshälte*, *Óðins-hjälte*<sup>8</sup>
- Danish: *Odinshelt*, *Odins helt*, occasionally *Óðinnshelt*<sup>9</sup>
- German: *Odinsheld*, *Odins Held*<sup>10</sup>
- Italian: *eroe odinico*<sup>11</sup>
- Spanish: *héroe odinico*<sup>12</sup>
- Russian: *одинический герой*<sup>13</sup>
- Ukrainian: *одінічний герой*<sup>14</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Occasionally, the forms ‘Ódinic’ and ‘Óðinnic’ are used, including ‘Ódinic hero’ and ‘Óðinnic hero’.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Óðinn-hero’ is also used either with or without a hyphen; in this thesis a hyphen is always used for the sake of uniformity.

<sup>6</sup> Patrick Guelpa, *Dieux & mythes nordiques* (Villeneuve-d’Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2009), 67. This work is an example of using the term without any reference to Dumézil, but confidently labelling Starkaðr as ‘héros odinique’; see sections 1.3 and 1.4 below.

<sup>7</sup> Svanfríður Óskarsdóttir, ‘Hrafnistusögur: af bændum og hálftröllum’ (unpublished master’s thesis, Háskóli Íslands, 2008), 49.

<sup>8</sup> Andreas Nordberg, *Krigarna i Odins sal* (Stockholm: 2:a upplagan, 2004), 270, Olof Sundqvist, ‘Gårdarna Hauge och Tu i Klepp: En kultplats med kvinnliga kultledare?’, *AmS-Varia* 55, 101.

<sup>9</sup> Jens Kristian Lindhardt Boll, ‘Starkad og Egil Skallagrimsson som Odinshelte’, *Religionsvidenskabeligt Tidsskrift* 9 (1986), 33-47.

<sup>10</sup> Jan de Vries, ‘Heldensage’, in *Kleine Schriften zur Literatur- und Geistesgeschichte* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1965), 27.

<sup>11</sup> Carla del Zotto, ‘Seiðr e seiðkonur nelle saghe islandesi’, in *Contextos Mágicos. Contesti magici. Conferencia internacional*, ed. Marina Piranomonte, Francisco Marco (Rome: De Luca editore, 2009), 352.

<sup>12</sup> Eduardo Peralta Labrador, *Los cántabros antes de Roma* (Madrid: Real Academia de la Historia, 2003), 160.

<sup>13</sup> The Roots of Yggdrasil: The Edda. Skaldic poetry. The Sagas, ed. Olga Smirnitckaya (Moscow: Terra, 1997), 227 [Корни Иггдрасиля: Эдда. Скальдья. Саги, ред. Ольга Смирницкая (Москва: Терра, 1997), 227], Igor Filosofov, ‘The toils of Starkaðr: An episode in *Þórsteins þáttr skelks* and its interpretation in the heroic tradition’, *Social Science* 7 (2011), 350-351. [И. Философов, Адовы муки Старкада: Эпизод ‘Пряди о Торстейне Морозе’ и героическая интерпретирующая традиция, *Общественные науки/Social Science* 7 (2011), с. 350-351.]

<sup>14</sup> A. Visotskiy, ‘The Odinic theme in Droplaugarsona saga’, *Proceedings of the H.S. Skovoroda*

In some cases, the form stems from a translation of Dumézil's *The Stakes of the Warrior* (originally published in French as a chapter in the second volume of *Mythe et épopée*) or *The Saga of Hadingus*, but below references will be made only to the works where the term is used in the context of original research on Óðinn and the nature of his connection to mortal heroes.<sup>15</sup> Occasionally, this term is borrowed from one language to the other without being translated, e.g. *Odinsheld* may be used in Spanish when German criticism is being discussed, but it hardly ever affects the meaning because, as will be shown, the use of this term tends to be vague in almost every context.<sup>16</sup>

In Icelandic, *Óðinshetja* is used in the same context as the Dumézilean *héros odinique* concerning Hadingus and the mythological background of his career.<sup>17</sup> The term, however, does not seem to be in wide use in Icelandic scholarship. In Swedish, *Odinshjälte* is sometimes presented as an immediate parallel to *héros odinique*, as in Andreas Nordberg's discussion of the Dumézilean analysis of Hadingus and Starkaðr. However, Olof Sundqvist used *Óðins-hjälte* in a wider, mythological context, arguing that Sigurðr's affiliation with Óðinn could point at Guðrún's implied identity as an Odinic *dís*. The established Danish term is *Odinshelt* or *Odins helt*; Jens Kristian Lindhart Boll discusses this term in the mythological context that underlies saga literature. In German the Odinic hero is, similarly, *Odinsheld* or *Odins Held* (e.g. Jan de Vries: 'Starkad in der Vikarsage als typischer Odinsheld auftritt'). The Russian *одиноческий герой* is identical to the other variants, e.g. in the commentary to a recent edition of *Völsunga saga*.<sup>18</sup>

This thesis uses its own definition of the Odinic hero, according to which a protagonist is classified as an Odinic hero if he is found in the centre of a specific narrative pattern that is described in detail below, but can be reduced to the

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<sup>15</sup> For an overview of Dumézil's works on the Odinic hero, see section 1.3. For the use of the term in Dumézil's works translated into other languages, see e.g. Georges Dumézil, *La saga di Hadingus. Dal mito al romanzo*, trans. by Elena Iacoboni (Roma: Edizioni Mediterranee, 2001), 53, Georges Dumézil, *El destino del guerrero: aspectos míticos de la función guerrera entre los indoeuropeos*, trans. by Juan Almela (Mexico: Siglo veintiuno editores, 2003), 104.

<sup>16</sup> See e.g. Georges Dumézil, *La saga di Hadingus. Dal mito al romanzo*, trans. by Elena Iacoboni (Roma: Edizioni Mediterranee, 2001), 53.

<sup>17</sup> Svanfríður Óskarsdóttir, 'Hrafnistusögur: af bændum og hálftröllum' (unpublished master's thesis, Háskóli Íslands, 2008), 49.

<sup>18</sup> The Roots of Yggdrasil: The Edda. Skaldic poetry. The Sagas, ed. Olga Smirnitckaya (Moscow: Terra, 1997), 227 [*Корни Иггдрасиля: Эдда. Скальды. Саги*, ред. Ольга Смирницкая (Москва: Терра, 1997), 227].

protagonist first becoming Óðinn's protégé and then being betrayed by him.

A brief history of the term's use will be given below, focusing on Georges Dumézil's influence; the controversy of subsequent wide application of the label 'Odinic hero' without determining this term outside Dumézilean framework; and finally the concepts of Odinic hero developed in the last decade by John McKinnell and Jens Peter Schjødt.

## 1.2. Early considerations

The idea that particular characters in Old Norse-Icelandic tradition appear to have a specific and close relation to Óðinn has been expressed since it first received substantial scholarly attention. This observation is immediately suggested by the material itself as the theme of Óðinn's peculiar relationship to mortal heroes pervades the Icelandic sagas, especially *fornaldarsögur* and *konungasögur*. This theme is also apparent throughout Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum*, which has always been considered an important source on Old Norse mythology, and the theme is occasionally referred to in relation to other sources like the Eddic poems (*Reginsmál*, *Hyndluljóð*). Early scholarship looked at this subject in the framework of its attempts to shed light on the mythological image of Óðinn and to boost understanding of pre-Christian Óðinn worship. Óðinn's tendency to interfere in the lives of mortal heroes, not so characteristic of other gods, has been recognised as this deity's characteristic trait since the turn of the twentieth century, when Elard Hugo Meyer described the connection between Óðinn and a mortal hero as specific for Old Norse-Icelandic tradition as contrasted to continental Germanic:

In den nordischen Fehden und Kriegen spielt das Schützverhältnis des Gottes auch zu einem einzelnen Helden, das in Deutschland nicht nachweisbar ist, eine große Rolle. Es endet häufig herbe überraschend damit, dass Odin plötzlich seinen Günstling ins Verderben stürzt, wie wenn er dessen Einkehr in Walhall nicht länger abwarten könne.<sup>19</sup>

In the Nordic [Scandinavian] feuds and wars, the god's [Óðinn's] protection of individual heroes plays a major role, which is not the case in Germany [continental Germanic sources]. This often ends with a bitter surprise when Óðinn plunges his favourite into ruin, as if he could no longer wait for his arrival to Valhöll.

Three features mentioned by Meyer are of importance here because they are characteristic of the majority of figures that later are described as Odinic heroes (compare the outline in 1.2):

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<sup>19</sup> Elard Hugo Meyer, *Mythologie der Germanen* (Strasburg: Verlag von Karl J. Trübner, 1903), 372.

1. The connection between the hero and Óðinn is individual, focusing on the hero figure rather than establishing a general connection between the transcendent and human worlds;
2. Óðinn's influence on the hero is intrinsically twofold, apt to switch from benevolent to malevolent;
3. The two aspects of Óðinn's influence reflect his complex mythological character that includes the interconnected roles of a victory-god and a death-god, and is connected to the myth of Valhøll and the *einherjar*.

This picture of the Odinic hero as intimately connected to the myth of Valhøll is peculiar in that, identified in 1903, it can be traced through the whole century, up to the work of Torfi Tulinius and Jens Peter Schjødt where this theme received a more detailed interpretation.<sup>20</sup> After making the observation, Meyer illustrates it with the accounts of Hadingus in *Gesta Danorum* and Sigmundr and Sigurðr in *Völsunga saga*, whose Odinic connections, along with those of Starkaðr, later received most scholarly attention.<sup>21</sup> Óðinn's consistent presence in *Völsunga saga* and the detailed account of an Odinic sacrifice in *Gautreks saga* attracted early scholarly attention, which led to the interpretation of figures like Sigmundr, Sigurðr and Starkaðr in a mythical-religious framework. As early as in 1899, Hector Munro Chadwick observed Starkaðr's connection to Óðinn as a reflection of actual Óðinn worship:

Starkaðr has usually been regarded as the typical Northern warrior of old time. This is true; but in reality he is far more. He is also the chief of the legendary Northern poets. If I am not mistaken, he was regarded in early times as the typical worshipper of Othin.<sup>22</sup>

A decade later, Óðinn's status as a 'heroic' deity was well-recognised in scholarship; however, it was also stressed by Hector Munro Chadwick that Óðinn's tendency to affiliate himself with mortal heroes is of essentially different origin than in other major deities like Zeus, Óðinn being similar in this respect 'rather with Hades — not

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<sup>20</sup> For Torfi Tulinius' explanation of the Odinic hero based on *Völsunga saga*'s material, see Torfi H. Tulinius, *The Matter of the North: The rise of literary fiction in thirteenth-century Iceland*, trans. by Randi C. Eldevik (Odense: Odense University Press, 2002), 150-150.

<sup>21</sup> Elard Hugo Meyer, *Mythologie der Germanen* (Straszburg: Verlag von Karl J. Trübner, 1903), 373-374.

<sup>22</sup> Hector Munro Chadwick, *The Cult of Othin: An Essay in the Ancient Religion of the North* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1899), 71.

as a chthonic being, properly speaking, but as a lord of the spirit world'.<sup>23</sup>

At around the same time, volumes of Axel Olrik's *Danmarks Heltedigtning* started to appear in print, the first of which was in 1919 translated into English and entered wide scholarly discussion.<sup>24</sup> Olrik's work was the first fundamental monograph on what he himself identifies as 'the Hrolf cycle': the corpus of very differently dated texts, one of them lost, connected to *Hrólfs saga kraka* in terms of theme and material. In chapter 7 of Olrik's book, 'Hrolf's berserkers', Hrólf's encounter with Óðinn receives an amount of attention only the hanging sacrifice in *Gautreks saga* had received up to that point — from Chadwick. Olrik notes how *Hrólfs saga kraka* puts Hrólf and his warband in the same framework with Harald Wartooth, Starkaðr and Sigmundur. He specifically notes the motif of Óðinn's gift to Hrólf:

This nightly figure of Othin, one-eyed, but otherwise human in appearance, is usual in the sagas. The offer of arms as a pledge of victory likewise is a well-known device. (Cf. Hyndluljóð 'To Hermoth he gave helmet and byrnie, but to Sigmund a sword'). The omen of impending ruin occurs frequently in Saxo's Norwegian sagas as well as in Icelandic literature. Just as in this saga Hrolf's career is mysteriously guided by Othin, likewise the lives of other Danish heroes such as Harold Wartooth and Starkath also come under his influence when transplanted in Norn soil — the only difference being that in the case of Hrolf the god becomes his enemy.  
(HLD 355)

Olrik's work is important not only in that it secures Hrólf kraki's place in the row of Óðinn's chosen heroes as early as 1903. After this *Hrólfs saga kraka*'s Odinic theme did not receive focused scholarly attention for more than a century, until being considered in detail in Jens Peter Schjødt's *Initiation between Two Words*. Behind Olrik's now hardly reliable thesis that a number of 'Norn' (Old Norse-Icelandic) narratives may be traced back to a Danish original, there is a consistent methodology and chronological framework. Olrik makes a balanced distinction between the indefinitely old oral tradition connected to actual pagan practices and what Stephen Mitchell will later call 'the literary uses of Óðinn'.<sup>25</sup> According to Olrik, the 'Óðinn's protégé' paradigm is at least as old as the second part of the tenth century, based on his dating of *Hyndluljóð* (HLD 355-356). When *Hrólfs saga kraka* as we know it was

<sup>23</sup> Hector Munro Chadwick, *The Heroic Age* (Cambridge: at the University Press, 1912), 424.

<sup>24</sup> Axel Olrik, *The Heroic Legends of Denmark*, trans. by Lee M. Hollander (New York: The American-Scandinavian Foundation, 1919), x.

<sup>25</sup> Stephen A. Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas and Ballads* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 61.

being composed or written, this traditional, arguably pre-Christian paradigm ‘furnished the model for Othin’s appearance in the Hrolf legend, where his presence was not essential at first’ (HLD 355). What Olrik refers to as the ‘not essential’ presence of Óðinn in the tradition preceding *Hrólfs saga kraka* is Bǫðvarr bjarki/Bjarki/Bjarco’s hostile remark towards Óðinn, which was probably present in the poem *Bjarkamál* (probably composed earlier than 1030).<sup>26</sup> *Bjarkamál* survives only in fragments, but there is a retelling in *Gesta Danorum*, in which Biarco considers Óðinn his enemy, exactly as Bǫðvarr bjarki does in *Hrólfs saga kraka*. Olrik’s conclusion is that the Odinic theme in *Hrólfs saga kraka* is a product of literary consciousness that worked with traditional material, developed and reconsidered its imagery to bind the individual parts of the narrative together. Hrólfir’s connection with Óðinn is convincingly shown to be a ‘cleverly thought out’ literary device that helps *Hrólfs saga kraka* achieve narrative integrity (HLD 356).

To sum up, Axel Olrik is the first scholar to put into literary-historical framework the narrative complex around Óðinn’s connection to his human protégé — or, as this thesis denotes it, the Odinic hero complex. This, of course, constituted only a minor part of his large-scale work that was in many aspects innovatory, combining a methodical study of oral and written narrative with a structuralist approach that was unusual in Olrik’s time.<sup>27</sup> Recognised today as a classic of folklore studies, mostly famous for the concept of ‘epic laws’ formulated in his *Principles for Oral Narrative Research*, Olrik is better known for his theoretical works than for his contribution to the research in material on which he developed his methodological principles. It is unclear why his work on *Hrólfs saga* and *Starkaðr* was nearly forgotten, despite having received praise from Lee M. Hollander and Georges Dumézil. One could bring up as possible reasons Olrik’s controversial division of narratives into Danish and Old Norse, which soon became dated, or, on the contrary, Olrik’s early-structuralist methodology that went ahead of his time and was for that reason underappreciated. In the same wake as the efforts of the team from Indiana State University that translated and published some of Olrik’s theoretical work, this thesis builds on some of Olrik’s work on the Odinic theme in the sagas, developing some of his arguments and challenging others.

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<sup>26</sup> See 3.2 for the discussion of *Bjarkamál* as the source of the Odinic theme in *Hrólfs saga kraka*.

<sup>27</sup> See e.g. *International Folkloristics: Classic Contributions by the Founders of Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 85.

In the 1920s and 1930s, scholarly attention in the field of Old Norse religion, myth and legendary tradition swayed towards historical-religious studies. Before Dumézil, little research was carried out into the literary and thematic connections between Óðinn and individual characters; the discussion was rather focused on the Germanic *Männerbünde* and historical pre-Conversion Óðinn worship. The findings of this scholarship are important for this thesis because it looks at the connection between Óðinn worship and the *berserkir*.

### 1.3. The Odinic hero in Georges Dumézil's works

Georges Dumézil should be credited as the scholar who coined the term 'Odic hero' (French *héros odinique*) and introduced it into wide scholarly use. More importantly, he focused significant attention on the complexity and ambiguity of Óðinn's connection to war and mortal warriors. Dumézil looked at this theme in detail, with his character-specific work on Hadingus and Starkaðr becoming most influential in later scholarship.<sup>28</sup> The essential part of Dumézil's contribution to the understanding of the theme is his overview of the 'Óðinn — warrior' relationship in a more general monograph on Old Norse mythology:

One is struck immediately... by the number of ties between Odin and battles, or warriors, in this world and in the next. He is rarely a warrior himself, except in the historisation of *Ynglinga saga*... where he is called *hermaðr mikill* 'great warrior', and marches from one context to the next. He is present in battles, grants victory on the spot, expresses his decision with precise gestures, and aims at the enemy army — at it alone, it seems — the paralysing 'fetter' he has in common with Varuna. From the frenetic type of the *berserkir* to the elegant type of a Sigurd, the distinguished combatants belong to him, participating according to their diverse natures.<sup>29</sup>

As can be seen, Dumézil stresses that, because Óðinn himself does not demonstrate pronounced warlike qualities, his connection to the warrior-figures is usually not that of simple resemblance. In other words, a character does not have to demonstrate Óðinn-like qualities in order to be 'Odic'. It is the connection that matters, not any specific quality.<sup>30</sup> A warrior's connection to Óðinn is for Dumézil not only a

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<sup>28</sup> Georges Dumézil, *From Myth to Fiction: The saga of Hadingus* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973).

<sup>29</sup> Georges Dumézil, *Gods of the Ancient Northmen* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 41.

<sup>30</sup> The argument of an 'Odic hero' bearing similarity to Óðinn himself is most often given concerning Egill Skallagrímson and occasionally Starkaðr. It is clear that, in this case, different concepts are defined by the same phrase; see 1.1.3 for the discussion of a noble and illustrious Odinic hero as opposed to Starkaðr.

fundamental theme in Scandinavian mythology, but also a particular case of a pan-Indo-European phenomenon. According to Dumézil, there are three specific functions or ‘modes of action’ to which all major Indo-European deities can be assigned. In this trifunctional system, Óðinn is a clear example of a deity of the first function, which is connected to sovereignty and priesthood. Dumézil argues that a first-function god that has few or no warrior traits himself, but demonstrates a specific connection to mortal warriors, is an Indo-European archetype. Óðinn has, as Dumézil notes elsewhere, ‘the double value — sovereign and warrior’ (Destiny xi). Outside Scandinavia this situation is also reflected, among other examples, in the Rigvedic Mitrá and Hindu Varuna. Other figures Dumézil argues to be typologically connected with Óðinn are the Rigveric Rudra and the Hindu Śiva, who relates to Śísupāla in a similar way as Óðinn relates to Starkaðr.

Besides *Gods of the Ancient Northmen*, Dumézil published two works focused on specific hero figures closely related to Óðinn; it may be argued that these two works established the image of an Odinic hero in the next few decades of scholarly discussion. The first of them, published in English as *The Stakes of the Warrior*, was initially written as a part of a larger work *Mythe et Épopée*, and looks into the parallelism between the Old Norse Starkaðr and the Hindu Śísupāla. Dumézil’s trifunctional hypothesis had reached the highest degree of elaboration by the time he was working on *Mythe et Épopée*, and he uses it as the primary instrument of analysis with the Starkaðr and Śísupāla material. The main thesis is that there is an archetypal warrior figure in Indo-European culture that is defined through its complex relationship with a first-function deity, and the story of Starkaðr’s three crimes is a reflection of that archetype.

A later work by Dumézil, *The Saga of Hadingus: From Myth to Fiction*, is a close-reading analysis and interpretation of the Hadingus narrative in Book I of Saxo Grammaticus’ *Gesta Danorum*.<sup>31</sup> In that monograph Dumézil famously shows that the Hadingus narrative is, in fact, a transposition of the myth of the Æsir-Vanir war into the realities of Danish legendary history. Hadingus, according to this theory, is a reflexion of the god Njǫrðr. Because in *Gesta Danorum* he is presented as a mortal hero, the transition into the realm of the Æsir from the realm of the Vanir makes Hadingus an Odinic hero with such features as an old, one-eyed magician helping him

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<sup>31</sup> Georges Dumézil, *From Myth to Fiction: The saga of Hadingus* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973).

in war, as well as his allegedly ritual death by hanging. *The Saga of Hadingus* made an important contribution to Saxo studies because it gave an insight into Saxo's principles in treating his sources, ways of transforming 'myth' into 'fiction'. For our understanding of the Odinic hero in Medieval Scandinavian literature, Dumézil's analysis is equally important, and allows for more concrete conclusions than his work on Starkaðr because it has a more definite historical framework. Dumézil's work shows that Saxo (or probably his source, where Njǫrðr had already been reworked into a mortal hero) had a ready paradigm to work with, which defined a warrior character connected to Óðinn. This paradigm clearly did not apply to the mythological source, because Óðinn's help in war and death by hanging are motifs very unlikely to be associated with Njǫrðr in any way. Therefore, they were most likely borrowed from other Odinic hero narratives that were in circulation at the time. Chapter 6 of this thesis (6.1) will demonstrate that the paradigm applied to Hadingus in *Gesta Danorum* is a complex one, and has numerous points of connection with similar narratives in the Old Norse-Icelandic saga literature. At the time when Dumézil was writing, however, the scholarly work on identifying and defining this paradigm had not yet been undertaken (most importantly the work of Mitchell and Schjødtt; see section 1.1.6). Even in *The Saga of Hadingus*, which is distinctly more on the literary-critical side compared to the predominantly mythocritical *The Destiny of the Warrior* and *The Stakes of the Warrior*, Dumézil builds his argument predominantly on the idea of the first function when he defines the Odinic hero. He is therefore dependent on non-Scandinavian parallels to develop his argument.

This comparative-mythological aspect of Dumézil's methodology is clear from his change of mind in categorising Starkaðr between *The Destiny of the Warrior* (originally published as *Heur at malheur du guerrier: Aspects mythiques de la fonction guerrière chez les Indo-Européens* in 1968) and *The Stakes of the Warrior* (originally published as a part of *Mythe et Épopée* in 1969).<sup>32</sup> Both works are focused on the hero Starkaðr, who, according to a number of sources, has a conflicted connection both to Óðinn and Þórr. *Gesta Danorum* and *Gautreks saga* agree in that Starkaðr, doing Óðinn's bidding, betrayed his king Víkarr and sacrificed him to Óðinn. The names in *Gesta Danorum* are, correspondingly, Starkatherus, Othinus and Wikarus. The difference between Saxo's account and *Gautreks saga* is that they

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<sup>32</sup> Georges Dumézil, *The Stakes of the Warrior*, ed. Jaan Puhvel and David Weeks (Berkeley and Los Angeles: UC Press, 1983).

portray the relationship between Starkaðr and the gods quite differently. In *Gesta Danorum*, Othinus influences Starkatherus's life in both positive and negative ways: he gives Starkatherus three lifetimes and dooms him to commit three terrible crimes in each lifetime, one of which is the betrayal and sacrifice of Wicarus. In *Gautreks saga*, Óðinn also manipulates Starkaðr into sacrificing Víkarr to him. However, in other aspects Óðinn's influence on the life of Starkaðr is benevolent: Óðinn predicts that Starkaðr will have an unnaturally long life, victory in battles, the gift of poetry, respect of nobles and other awards that are easily associated with Óðinn as victory-god, god of poetry, god of the military aristocracy etc. Þórr, who hates Starkaðr for his giant origin, subverts Óðinn's gifts from good into evil: Starkaðr will live three lifetimes but will commit three crimes; he will win battles but will always be gravely wounded; he will forget his poems immediately after composing them; he will be hated by common people while being respected by the nobles. The accounts of Óðinn's role in *Gesta Danorum* and *Gautreks saga* clearly conflict with each other, and Dumézil seeks to explain this contradiction in two works, first *The Destiny of the Warrior* and a year later *The Stakes of the Warrior*.

In *The Destiny of the Warrior* Dumézil argues that Saxo's account reflects the core element of the myth much better than *Gautreks saga*. Starkaðr, according to his discussion, is a second-function hero, a hero of the warrior type, similar to the classical Heracles and Bhīma of the Hindu epic *Mahābhārata*. Being a second-function hero, Starkaðr is closely associated with Þórr.

Within Dumézil's Indo-European framework, *héros odinique* is a reasonably strict term because it is derived from Dumézil's trifunctional hypothesis, where Óðinn, together with Týr, is a first-function deity connected with sovereignty, aristocracy, magic and priesthood. A human character defined through this function can be called an Óðinn-hero or Odinic hero, like Hadingus. Likewise, a character connected with the second military function may be also called in Dumézil's discussion a Þórr-hero. In Starkaðr's case, for example, Dumézil over time changed his opinion about this character and decided that he had wrongly classified him as a Þórr-hero; Starkaðr, he argued, is an Odinic hero instead because he is a hero of the first, sovereign-aristocratic function (Stakes 5).

A product of work in comparative mythology, Dumézil's categorisation has often been challenged by specialists in Old Norse-Icelandic literature who criticised the French scholar's insufficient attention to the historical-cultural background of his

sources. Much critical attention was focused on Dumézil's work on Starkaðr, whose connection with both Óðinn and Þórr continues to spark controversy.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, Dumézil may be the most influential scholar who ever wrote about Starkaðr in particular and Odinic heroes in general; he is definitely the most referred to. He coined the term, he drew scholarly attention to the theme, and he in many ways defined future understanding of Odinic heroes. The reason for this may be that, despite the many questionable parts of Dumézil's overall conception, there are clear criteria for defining an Odinic hero in his discussion. In Georges Dumézil's work, an Odinic hero is a first-function hero from Scandinavian material who, because of his first-function nature, is also connected to Óðinn. The scarcity of material on Týr makes 'first-function' and 'Odic' nearly synonymous in Dumézil, as long as Scandinavian sources are discussed. As long as Dumézil demonstrates Starkaðr's first-function nature, which is exactly what he does in the first chapters of *The Stakes of the Warrior*, it is appropriate to denote Starkaðr as an Odinic hero in the framework of Dumézilean interpretation.

This broadness of interpretation leads to an underlying problem, however: from the described above point of view, most heroes are 'Odic' in a Dumézilean way because, naturally, most 'heroic' characters belong to the aristocratic, first-function military elite. Symptomatic of this justified but methodologically dangerous broadness is a passage from *The Destiny of the Warrior* that opens Dumézil's discussion of Starkaðr:

Scandinavian epic is rich in heroes. And the most illustrious betray a family likeness: all are beautiful, brilliant, young, sociable, beloved, of princely birth and eager for power, devoted to their homeland whether it be large or small. *Sigurðr, Helgi, Haraldr; and the rest are certainly not interchangeable, but knowledge of one is the knowledge of them all. There is nothing surprising about this, and the designation given them by modern criticism provides an adequate explanation: they belong to the common type of the 'Odic hero'* [emphasis mine]. (Destiny 82)

It can be seen how Dumézil, either intuitively or relying on tradition, lists as 'Odic heroes' the same characters as Axel Olrik referred to as having Odinic connections, and which will be grouped together and labelled as Odinic heroes in later scholarship (see section 1.4). The exception is, of course, Starkaðr, looked at in the Odinic context by Chadwick, Meyer and Olrik, and, thanks to Dumézil himself, considered a 'typical

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<sup>33</sup> See e.g. James Milroy, 'Starkaðr: An Essay in Interpretation', in *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* 19 (1975–76), 118–138, see especially 129–130.

Odinic hero' throughout the next decades. However, in *The Destiny of the Warrior*, the figure of Starkaðr is directly opposed to the illustrious Odinic hero, and the argument is built in such a way that the opposition is evident from Starkaðr's characteristic traits:

Over against them, set apart, is Starkaðr, the Starkatherus of *Gesta Danorum*. Monstrous at birth, descended from giants, disfigured by horrible wounds, old before his time and of prolonged old age, surly, brutal, errant, solitary, with neither love or indulgence for the weakness of love, hardened by suffering, austere and frugal, with no other ambition than to fight at the service of frequently changing masters... such is the strange figure, intriguing rather than appealing, for whom Saxo Grammaticus hardly conceals his predilection. (Destiny 82)

This opposition was not a problem for Dumézil himself later in *The Stakes of the Warrior*, where Starkaðr's connection to Óðinn is described through the Indo-European framework. There are different Odinic heroes, he notes, and Starkaðr is of a 'rare' type.<sup>34</sup> It will be seen, however, that in scholarship after Dumézil the Odinic hero will be understood, and even defined, in the light of all of Dumézil's ideas even when they contradict each other.

#### **1.4. The problems of application of the label 'Odinic hero' in scholarship after Dumézil**

Dumézil's huge influence on subsequent mythological criticism had led to excessive use and occasional misapplication of his concepts, which led to Dumézil himself noting the misuse of the label 'Odinic hero' in scholarship (Destiny 82-83). What makes the term 'Odinic hero' most problematic, however, is its close connection with Dumézil's trifunctional hypothesis, which established a connection between, e.g., the Norse Óðinn, the Rigveric Rudra and the Hindu Śiva, as well as between Starkaðr and the Hindu hero Śiśupāla — in other words, the discussion within Indo-European background. Without the Indo-European parallels and therefore the clear concept of the first function of a deity, Dumézil's notion of 'Odinism' becomes groundless. By using the term 'Odinic hero' after Dumézil, a scholar may be expected to either closely follow Dumézil's views on Scandinavian mythology (and then take them into account); or develop a new concept of an Odinic hero, whether related to the Dumézilean one or not (and then discuss it). The third option would be to use 'Óðinn-hero' and 'Odinic hero' descriptively, rather than as a precise definition, referring

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<sup>34</sup> See Stakes 139 for Dumézil's development of the opposition between the 'noble' hero (e.g. Sigurðr) and the 'dark' hero (e.g. Starkaðr), but this time classifying Starkaðr as Odinic as well. In the same section Dumézil discusses his own 'mistake' of linking Starkaðr with the second function and Þórr.

simply to any hero that has a connection to Óðinn.<sup>35</sup>

Since Dumézil it has been in wide scholarly circulation for a few decades, but it has proven to be rather vague, denoting, basically, any character that has undertaken significant military exploits and has some connection with Óðinn. It is only through indirect reservations that concrete traits of an ‘Óðinn-hero’ can be observed. For example, Gabriel Turville-Petre mentions that Hadingus in *Gesta Danorum* demonstrates ‘standard qualities of an Óðinn-hero’, but he never elaborates on what exactly these qualities are, ascribing them either to common scholarly knowledge or assuming that they are intuitively clear.<sup>36</sup> Elsewhere, analysing the figure of Starkaðr, Turville-Petre says that Starkaðr differs from other Óðinn-heroes, and as examples of these he lists ‘Sigurd, Harald Wartooth and, if we may count him, Helgi Hundingsbani’.<sup>37</sup> It can be assumed from this list that receiving Óðinn’s help at some point in his heroic career is for Turville-Petre a fundamental trait of an Óðinn-hero, since it is shared by Saxo’s Hadungus and Haraldus, Sigurðr both in *Reginismál* and *Völsunga saga*, and Starkaðr according to *Gautreks saga*. Helgi is helped by a *valkyrja* rather than personally by Óðinn, which makes the last example questionable: does a contact with a *valkyrja* or *valkyrja*-like figure make a protagonist an ‘Óðinn-hero’? The reference to Óðinn’s unreliability in *Helgakviða II* could also be the reason for this categorisation — but this motif is found elsewhere, e.g. in *Hákonarmál*, which is not mentioned.<sup>38</sup> One could also argue that Helgi’s labelling as ‘Odinic’ is perhaps a borrowing from Dumézil who mentioned him in passing in *Destiny of the Warrior* (Destiny 82). It has been shown above, however, that outside

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<sup>35</sup> An example when such use is justified is, e.g., Heather O’Donoghue’s description of Egill Skallagrímsson as ‘an Icelandic Viking poet whose pagan beliefs, expressed vividly in his poetry, quoted copiously in the saga prose, mark him as a distinctively Odinic hero’. In a monograph dedicated to the reception of Old Norse mythological themes, the description above is simply a way to note that Egill is thematically connected to Óðinn, without any methodological association with the long and confused discussion of the Odinic hero as a specific phenomenon, whether in relation to Egill or not. Since O’Donoghue does not use the concept of Odinic hero for her analysis, this usage does not lead to methodological problems discussed in sections 1.4 and 1.5. See Heather O’Donoghue, *English Poetry and Old Norse Myth: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 9.

<sup>36</sup> Gabriel Turville-Petre, *Myth and religion of the North: the religion of ancient Scandinavia* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964), 217

<sup>37</sup> Turville-Petre 207.

<sup>38</sup> The idea that Helgi is, whatever the meaning behind it, an ‘Odinic hero’, has been relatively widespread in scholarship at least since the 1940s. However, as is usually the case with the Odinic hero theme, this notion was hardly ever explained. For example, in his commentary to the Dutch translation of the *Poetic Edda*, Jan de Vries suggests that the mention of Óðinn in stanza 12 in *Helgakviða II* demonstrates ‘dat Helgi een Odinsheld was’, but, understandably, the nature of a popular edition does not give an opportunity to elaborate on this thesis. See *Edda*, ed. and trans. Jan de Vries (Amsterdam: N.V. Uitgevers-Maatschappij Elsevier, 1944), 159.

the trifunctional hypothesis, which Turville-Petre does not use, Dumézil's notion of Odinic hero becomes too generously applied.<sup>39</sup>

Turville-Petre is clearly aware of this uncertainty, and that is why he makes the reservation in parenthesis. In point of fact, his monograph is not focused on this specific problem: its aim is to provide a general picture of pre-Conversion Scandinavian beliefs, of which Óðinn's connection to particular heroes is only a minor aspect. From Dumézil and up to the 1990s, and occasionally up to today, the status of the Odinic hero theme is that of a minor aspect, brought around as a part of supporting argument rather than as directly analysed material, and vaguely defined through references to previous scholarship like Dumézil.

Because of this situation it is often not clear what exactly constitutes an Óðinn-hero or Odinic hero in most scholarly works after Dumézil. Since Turville-Petre's *Myth and Religion of the North*, first published in 1964 and relatively often referring to 'Óðinn-heroes', there is often a delusive impression that the Odinic hero is a well-studied phenomenon in Old Norse-Icelandic scholarship. This impression is reinforced by the tendency, bordering on a scholarly commonplace, to note in passing that a particular trait is essential for the Odinic hero figure — or belongs, as Turville-Petre put it, to its 'standard qualities'. This is especially characteristic of scholarship focused primarily on other subjects than the representation of Óðinn and his relationship with human protagonists. So, Jan de Vries in his study of Starkaðr narratives is mainly focused on the questions of transmission, but mentions, in order to support his argumentation, that 'Starkad in der Vikarsage als typischer Odinsheld auftritt' ('Starkaðr appears in the Saga of Víkarr [*Víkars þáttr* in *Gautreks saga* — E.M.] as a typical Odinic hero').<sup>40</sup> In a more recent French work, Starkaðr is even called an epitome of this phenomenon, the Odinic hero 'par excellence'.<sup>41</sup> The same expression, 'Odic hero par excellence', is used in Todd Compton's work, and again there is a substitution of notions: in Compton's view, Starkaðr is primarily Odinic because of his poetic gift; however, this feature is characteristic of Starkaðr and Egill

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<sup>39</sup> Another common trait behind some of Turville-Petre's examples is a death that is connected to Óðinn; for example, Haraldus is killed personally by disguised Óðinn, and Hadingus hangs himself, which allegedly has ritual implications. However, other examples do not meet this criterion.

<sup>40</sup> Jan de Vries, 'Heldensage', in *Kleine Schriften zur Literatur- und Geistesgeschichte* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1965), 27.

<sup>41</sup> Jean-Marie Maillefer, 'Essai sur Vǫlundr-Weland: La religion Scandinave ancien a-t-elle connu un dieu forgeron?' in *Hugur*, ed. Claude Lecouteaux (Paris: Presses de l'université Paris-Sorbonne, 1997), 351.

Skallagrímsson only, so it is hardly possible for Starkaðr to be the best example of a character type when this type consists of just two examples.<sup>42</sup> In a similar way, Hadingus is called ‘typischer Odin-held’ (‘typical Óðinn-hero’) in Hermann Reichert’s lexicon entry, ‘dæmigerð Óðinnshetja’ (‘typical Odinic hero’) in Svanfríður Óskarsdóttir’s work.<sup>43</sup> Sigurðr also tends to be looked at in this respect — that is, as being the typical and foremost Odinic hero, the Odinic hero par excellence.<sup>44</sup> However, perhaps because the Sigurðr material is not so prominently featured in Dumézil’s works, references to Sigurðr are not so prominent as to Starkaðr and Hadingus. This is ironic because it is Sigurðr that Dumézil referred to as ‘typical’ Odinic hero at some point (see 1.1.3).

One could argue that the notion ‘Hadingus or Starkaðr or Sigurðr is a typical Odinic hero’ has its roots in misinterpretation of George Dumézil’s work. There is nothing in Dumézil’s *The Saga of Hadingus* to characterise Hadingus as typical: he is, in fact, presented as a unique figure that is the result of reworking the mythical life of the god Njǫrðr into heroic imagery. His connection to Óðinn is, therefore, defined by the myth of Njǫrðr’s transmission from the world of the Vanir into the world of the Æsir, to which there hardly are other analogues. In Starkaðr’s case, it has been shown in section 1.3 that Dumézil not only never defined him as a typical Odinic hero, but, on the contrary, consistently stressed that Starkaðr’s relation to Óðinn is problematic and untypical, arguing that ‘Starkaðr himself is an Odinic hero, but of a rare type (in fact he is the only example), linked to the dark aspects of this complex god’ (Stakes 139). Tellingly, the only time Dumézil attempted to describe the Odinic hero as a type, his classification excluded Starkaðr, did not mention Hadingus, and was dismissed by Dumézil himself a few years later (see section 1.3).

Yet, the ‘typical Odinic hero’ myth has never been argued against, and therefore lives on. Characteristic of this scholarly confusion is a recent article, which claims that

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<sup>42</sup> Todd Compton, *Victim of the Muses: Poet as Scapegoat, Warrior and Hero in Greco-Roman and Indo-European Myth and History* (Washington, DC: Harvard University Press, 2006), 253.

<sup>43</sup> Hermann Reichert, ‘Hadingus’, in *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde*, ed. Johannes Hoops, v.13 (Walter de Gruyter, 1999), 266; Svanfríður Óskarsdóttir, ‘Hrafnistusögur: af bændum og hálftröllum’ (unpublished master’s thesis, Háskóli Íslands, 2008), 49.

<sup>44</sup> See, e.g., *The Roots of Yggdrasill: The Edda. Skaldic poetry. The Sagas*, ed. Olga Smirnitckaya (Moscow: Terra, 1997), 227 [*Корни Иггдрасиля: Эдда. Скальды. Саги*, ред. Ольга Смирницкая (Москва: Терра, 1997), 227], where Olga Smirnitckaya describes Sigurðr as ‘the greatest Odinic hero’ and finds it a striking detail of *Helreið Brynhildar* that he goes to Hel in his afterlife rather than to Valhöll, which is closely associated with Óðinn. See also the analysis of Adam Oberlin’s article below.

Sigurðr, in the beginning strophes of *Fáfnismál*, represents a fully formed Odinic hero, who has received not only the patronage of the god but aspects of his persona as well —

somewhat anachronistically basing that opinion on the evidence of *Vǫlsunga saga* and Hermann Pálsson's work on the possible Odinic traits in *Gísla saga*.<sup>45</sup> Next, it is assumed that an Odinic hero is basically an equivalent of a fully initiated hero:

Sigurðr cannot prove his status as an Odinic hero (that is, fully educated in combat, mythological and religious wisdom and runes) to the serpent until their roles as bearers of mythical knowledge has been sufficiently affirmed.<sup>46</sup>

In other words, an Odinic hero is seen as a hero who demonstrates excellence in combat and ontological knowledge (supposedly Óðinn's domain as seen from *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Grímnismál*). However, as will be shown below in detail, if these criteria are strictly applied to other material, Sigurðr will most likely be the only example of an Odinic hero, since mythological knowledge is not a trait that is associated with other characters labelled as Odinic heroes by other scholars. Even more importantly, although it is clear that Sigurðr receives Óðinn's advice in *Reginismál*, it is not clear to what extent the special connection between Óðinn and Sigurðr is a traditional element rather than a thirteenth-century interpretation of the *Vǫlsunga saga*'s author-compiler, as will be demonstrated in chapter 2 of this thesis.

On the one hand, such problems can be easily attributed to a researcher's own limitations. The article quoted above, for example, was published after Tulinius and Schjødt's extensive work on *Vǫlsunga saga*'s Odinic aspects, but those are not referred to.<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, this particular use of the 'Odic hero' concept is an individual example of a common fallacy — to which, as it has been shown above, even proficient research is prone.<sup>48</sup> As this literature review aims to demonstrate, the main problem lies in the post-Dumézilean notion of an 'Odic hero' itself, which lacks a consistent methodological framework as it lacks an association with concrete

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<sup>45</sup> Adam Oberlin, 'Odic elements in the Northern Sigurðr legend: a re-reading of *Fáfnismál*', in *Myth: German and Scandinavian Studies*, ed. Evan Torner, Victoria Lenshyn (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 107.

<sup>46</sup> Oberlin 109.

<sup>47</sup> See Torfi H. Tulinius, *The Matter of the North: The rise of literary fiction in thirteenth-century Iceland*, trans. by Randi C. Eldevik (Odense: Odense University Press, 2002), 150-150, Initiation 282-311.

<sup>48</sup> See also examples from Gabriel Turville-Pretre, Jan de Vries and James Milroy's work in sections 1.3-1.4, where the vagueness of the concept 'Odic hero' either does not affect the main line of argumentation or is critically approached.

material.<sup>49</sup>

The vagueness of the concept of Odinic hero in post-Dumézilean criticism led to some scholars' discarding it as a cliché that stands in the way of elaborated analysis:

If we assume, by generalising from the *Gautreks saga* story, that Starkaðr is an *Óðinn-hero* and therefore a type of the warrior aristocrat [emphasis mine – E.M.], we may see in this episode [in *Gesta Danorum*, where Starkaðr refuses to have his wounds tended by servants — E.M.] proof of his intolerance of the 'common people'. But if we resist the temptation to put Starkaðr into these pigeon-holes, we may give the story a more careful and different reading.<sup>50</sup>

It had never been clearly established before Milroy's article that an Óðinn-hero or Odinic hero is specifically a warrior-aristocrat. As was demonstrated, the only common feature of Odinic heroes, as they are described by various scholars, is any connection to Óðinn at all. It seems reasonable to assume that it is this broadness of concept that led to further generalisation, among other things ascribing to a presumably Odinic hero any traits associated with Óðinn. Although Óðinn worship's association with an aristocratic military elite is a well-established notion, many of the heroes connected with Óðinn do not have specific traits that reinforce this connection, or in any way distinguish them from other heroes. All the prominent warriors of the heroic tradition and *fornaldarsögur* are a part of military elite, whether they are connected to Óðinn or not, because this is where a warrior character belongs from both the social and literary-traditional points of view. There are, in fact, only two characters who are both connected to Óðinn and are somehow involved in the opposition between the military aristocracy and the common people. The first of them is Starkaðr who, according to *Gautreks saga*, is destined by Óðinn to be respected by nobles, but destined by Þórr to be detested by commoners. The second one is, arguably, Bøðvarr bjarki, who defends the farmer's son Hǫttr from *berserkir*, and eventually helps Hǫttr to enter the military elite himself. The social implications of this last episode, however, are debatable — Jens Peter Schjødt has demonstrated, in fact, that Hǫttr's change of character and status rather has an initiatory meaning linked to the rest of *Hrólfs saga kraka*'s narrative (Initiation 322-326). It complicates

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<sup>49</sup> Jens Peter Schjødt, 'Heltedigtning og initiationsritualer en religionfænomenologisk analyse af den 'unge' Sigurd Fafnesbanes historie', in *Myte og Ritual i det førkristne Norden: Et symposium*, ed. Jens Peter Schjødt, Ulf Drobin (Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, 1994), 113-127.

<sup>50</sup> James Milroy, 'Starkaðr: An Essay in Interpretation', in *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* 19 (1975–76), 129.

Milroy's argument even further that, before Schjødt's 2008 article, *Hrólfs saga kraka* was seldom read in the Odinic framework, and when it was, the opposition between Hötr's humble origin and Hrólfr's military-aristocratic court was never brought into the argument. The affiliation between the historical Óðinn-worship and military elite is, of course, a well-studied phenomenon.<sup>51</sup> It is therefore natural that many Odinic heroes in the wider sense — that is, characters with Odinic connections and traits — are affiliated with the military elite — most *fornaldarsaga* characters are, as a matter of fact, because of the genre's usual subject matter. Whether this should be regarded an essential trait of an Odinic hero, however, is a problematic question.

To sum up, it is not clear which traits associated with Óðinn in mythology should be considered essential for defining an Odinic hero in the scholarship of the 1960s and later. The theme of poetic talent can be taken as an example of this unclear trait. Egill and Starkaðr are skalds, meanwhile Hadingus and Sigurðr apparently are not. All of them have a connection to Óðinn and have been often looked at as Odinic heroes. Their connection to Óðinn is obviously different, but all of them are designated as 'Odic heroes' by scholarly tradition, which has led to much misunderstanding as in Milroy's article discussed above. It has already been mentioned that the theme of poetry in Odinic context is important for some heroes and nonexistent for others. Besides that, the material is strikingly heterogeneous. Starkaðr and Sigurðr, despite both having been considered as typical in their relation to Óðinn, are in fact consistently presented as contrasting and even antagonistic figures in the sources (e.g. Starkaðr's humiliating defeat to Sigurðr in *Norna-Gests þáttr*) and in scholarship.<sup>52</sup> In terms of genre, the sources are even more problematic. Some of the material, like the stories of Hadingus and Haraldus (Harald Wartooth), is given only in *Gesta Danorum*. The *Völsungs'* or Starkaðr's affiliation to Óðinn is attested to by a variety of sources, *fornaldarsögur* as well as earlier texts like *Gesta Danorum* and Eddic poetry (in the *Völsungs'* case — see 1.9).<sup>53</sup> By contrast, Hrólfr kraki's complex and well-developed Odinic relationship is found only in the difficult to date but

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<sup>51</sup> See e.g. Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged echoes: Old Norse myths in medieval Northern society*, 2 vols (Odense: Odense University Press, 1994-98), I, 253-257. For a more detailed analysis of how the imagery of Valhøll is modelled on the historical kings' halls see Andreas Nordberg, *Krigarna i Odins sal* (Stockholm: 2:a upplagan, 2004).

<sup>52</sup> See e.g. William Layher, 'Starkaðr's Teeth', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 108 (2009), 1-26.

<sup>53</sup> See also chapter 2 for sources and parallels to the Odinic material in *Völsunga saga* and Chapter 6 for the discussion of the Starkaðr material.

presumably late *Hrólfs saga kraka* (see 3.2). Finally, among these legendary figures, all of whom have actually met Óðinn according to at least one source, an irregular case is that of Egill Skallagrímson, who belongs to the completely different aesthetic-ideological system of the *Íslendingasögur*. Despite this stand-alone status in terms of genre, his features of wolfishness, ugliness and poetic talent have been convincingly argued to have Odinic nature, often with connection to the figure of Starkaðr in different sources.<sup>54</sup> Needless to say, the heterogeneity of material, which ranges from the *Íslendingasögur* to the *fornaldarsögur* and Saxo's narratives, means that representation of Óðinn in them will differ from each other, and so will that of an Óðinn-worshipper or Odinic hero. Despite these limitations, scholarly discussion needs generalisations that transgress genre borders in order to perform any kind of analysis. This means that a new, working definition of 'Odic hero' was long due by the 1990s, and it is only natural that new approaches to saga criticism contributed to the development of this theme as well.

### 1.5. New approaches to studying the Odinic hero

It has been shown that 'Óðinn and mortal' is a complicated theme that embraces a wide variety of sources and characters, and has been a cause for scholarly difficulties. A notable feature shared by the studies looked at in section 1.4 is that none of them, in fact, focused on the Odinic hero as a theme or recurrent character, relying on an intuitively apparent phenomenon rather than analysing it. However, with the rise of scholarly attention to the *fornaldarsögur* in the last decades of the twentieth century, this theme attracted more intense scholarly attention.

A landmark for the study of the Odinic hero, as well as for scholarship on *fornaldarsögur* and their sources overall, was the publication of Stephen Mitchell's *Heroic Sagas and Ballads* in 1991.<sup>55</sup> In his assessment of saga genres and their nomenclature, Mitchell points out a type of saga narratives historically defined as 'mythical-heroic', and gives the examples of Óðinn's influence leading to Víkarr's death in *Hálfs saga ok hálfrekka* and *Gautreks saga* as a probable reflection of religious practices in pre-Christian Scandinavia.<sup>56</sup> He notes that this type of saga is the most important for the scholars of the 'mythical school' of the 1950s, such as Georges

<sup>54</sup> See, e.g. Jens Kristian Lindhardt Boll, 'Starkad og Egil Skallagrímsson som Odinshelte', *Religionsvidenskabeligt Tidsskrift* 9 (1986), 33-47.

<sup>55</sup> Stephen A. Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas and Ballads* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1991).

<sup>56</sup> Mitchell 40-41.

Dumézil and Otto Höfler. In his own analysis of ‘Odinic theophanies’, however, Mitchell notes the complexity of material and its often contrasting approach to picturing the heathen past in general and Óðinn in particular.<sup>57</sup> He notes the distinction between two major tendencies of introducing Óðinn in the *fornaldarsögur*: accounts that are consistent with the pre-Conversion material coexist with the theme of denial of Óðinn in texts like *Hrólfs saga kraka*, *Qrvar-Odds saga* and *Ketils saga hængs*. The nature of this duality, argues Mitchell, is not obvious: some important appearances of Óðinn are found only in late manuscript tradition, while the denial theme may not be immediately linked to Christian views, but rather to the concept of belief in one’s own strength.<sup>58</sup> Mitchell’s consideration will be especially important for further research on Odinic heroes because it establishes a connection between the idea of Óðinn’s unreliability, the influence of Christian ideas on saga narratives, and the theme of the Noble Heathen (as discussed by Lars Lönnroth on different material two decades earlier).<sup>59</sup> Noting that ‘the relationship between the literary uses of Óðinn and the facts concerning the actual religious practices of pagan Scandinavia is convoluted and often misunderstood’, Mitchell establishes a scholarly viewpoint that demonstrates awareness of both genre and structure, and allows for a more consistent analysis of the theme in the future.<sup>60</sup>

This new approach, articulated by Mitchell and demonstrated by an increasing number of scholars of mythological material in *fornaldarsaga* texts, gave an opportunity for important new insights in the related fields, including the Odinic hero theme. In fact, the development of this particular theme was inevitable as the new views on treating mythological material in the *fornaldarsögur* and other sources, and the connection to mortal warriors, is an important aspect of Óðinn. John McKinnell’s *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend* is an example of a work that defines the Odinic hero for methodological purposes and contributes to the understanding of this theme, although the overall theme of the work is different and broader.<sup>61</sup> While looking at the larger theme of contact with ‘otherness’ in Old Norse mythology, he

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<sup>57</sup> Stephen A. Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas and Ballads* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 61-64.

<sup>58</sup> Mitchell 61-62.

<sup>59</sup> Lars Lönnroth, ‘The Noble Heathen: A theme in the sagas’, in *The academy of Odin: Selected papers on Old Norse literature* (Copenhagen: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2011), 45-74.

<sup>60</sup> Stephen A. Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas and Ballads* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 61.

<sup>61</sup> John McKinnell, *Meeting the Other in Norse myth and legend* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005), 172-180.

devotes to this topic a short but illuminating chapter in his book, where he draws a thematic parallel between Óðinn's relation with feminine 'otherness', such as the figures of giantesses, and that of an Odinic hero. McKinnell's interpretation of what is an Odinic hero is simple but more than sufficient to be the basis of his observations: this is either Óðinn's protégé or, 'by a simple Christian reversal', a character who opposes Óðinn.<sup>62</sup> Most importantly for our understanding of the Odinic hero theme, McKinnell provides evidence based on a range of sources that there are common motifs and groups of motifs connected to Odinic heroes in different narratives. Those motifs are thematically connected to the allegedly earlier mythological narratives about Óðinn himself, but the Odinic hero seems to be an individual concept with its own set of associated features and even persistent plot structures, which are different from the Óðinn stories. McKinnell neither directly defines the Odinic hero through these literary structures, nor does he argue with previous notions. However, his work is important for our understanding of the Odinic hero in that, firstly, it is independent from the post-Dumézilean discussion. Secondly and most importantly, it directly implies that a certain character type, such as the Odinic hero, may be closely associated with recurring sets of motifs and plot structures, which emerge in texts that are set apart both chronologically and in terms of genre. An Odinic hero for McKinnell is, therefore, a literary-cultural construct rather than just a character type — which is an important development, on which this dissertation will methodologically rely. Another important aspect of McKinnell's contribution to understanding the Odinic hero theme is his point of view on this theme, which he considers in the context of liminality, a situation of encountering 'the other'. The Odinic hero, as will be shown below, is indeed most often presented in the liminal mode of existence, and is to a large extent determined by it. Just three years after the publication of McKinnell's monograph, Jens Peter Schjødt will consider this connection in detail, including, on the material of *Gesta Danorum*, the twofold liminality of a protagonist who is on the one hand connected to the uncanny feminine otherness, as Óðinn is in the myth, and on the other hand connected to Óðinn, which for a human being is also a liminal contact:

We thus come across a liminal scenario, which contains the feminine and the sexual as well as

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<sup>62</sup> John McKinnell, *Meeting the Other in Norse myth and legend* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005), 172-173.

the Odinic. In this way the two episodes are complementary as two sides of the Óðinn-hero's liminality: on one side the mythical Other World... including death, femininity and the underworld, and on the other the meeting with the 'tutelary deity' himself. (Initiation 281)

Schjødt's monograph *Initiation between two worlds: structure and symbolism in pre-Christian Scandinavian religion*, is undeniably the most in-depth investigation into the Odinic hero theme since Dumézil and up to today. Even more importantly, it develops an analytical viewpoint that allows to consider 'neither the rituals nor their reconstruction, but rather... an attempt to reveal the semantic universe within which the structure and symbolism of initiation take place' (Initiation 13). This is a huge step forward for scholarship on Óðinn, as it both develops a more cross-disciplinary methodological approach to the material, and enhancing the understanding of Óðinn and Odinic heroes in general, especially as long as the possible pre-Christian religious roots of the Odinic hero theme is concerned. Looking at how a myth or ritual (such as the Odinic consecration) manifestates in saga literature has been an important line of research since e.g. Olrik and Höfler, but neither of the two early researchers had a sufficient methodological instrumentarium to support these observations. The shift from merely 'reconstructing' the original pagan beliefs from later sources to a more synthetic view, independent from such notions as 'original' and 'secondary', is the attainment of the last century that both history of religion and allied subjects can make use of. Since the attention to details in the sources, which support his theoretical constructions, is arguably Schjødt's strongest point, his work will be mostly referred to in the corresponding chapters (mostly 2, 3), where the evidence might either support or oppose the ideas expressed in *Initiation between Two Worlds*. In order to undertake such analysis, however, an independent approach to the texts should be developed. Therefore, the next section deals with the choice of material in the thesis and its approach to this material.

## 2. THE ODINIC HERO COMPLEX

As the outline of the scholarship has demonstrated, 'Odic hero' is hardly a clearly defined concept. It is possible, however, to observe a number of features that warrior figures connected to Óðinn tend to share in common, as has been noted in scholarship and may be observed in the sources. Leaving aside the Dumézilean generalisation that

a first-function hero should be affiliated with a first-function deity, such as Óðinn, the following features apply to the many of the characters described as Odinic heroes:

1. **Óðinn's help.** The Odinic hero is, in the world of John McKinnell, 'Óðinn's protégé', and therefore is portrayed as someone who receives Óðinn's help. Although the mere indication of Óðinn's benevolence may be a rhetorical figure indicating military success, it is quite common for Óðinn to literally help heroes, in *fornaldarsaga* narratives as well as other sources. Óðinn's help usually takes the form of a gift or advice that proves to be useful in warfare. Clear examples include Óðinn's many gifts and pieces of advice to the protagonists of *Völsunga saga* (and occasionally its poetic sources), Hrani's advise and gifts to Hrólfr in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, or the Odinic old man's advise to Hadingus in *Gesta Danorum*. Axel Olrik considers this theme a reflection of an important aspect of the historical Óðinn worship, and quotes *Hyndluljóð* to support this notion (HLD 355). Jens Peter Schjødt elaborates this idea by suggesting that Óðinn's gift, especially the gift of a weapon, is for an Odinic hero a resolution of in initiation rite that confirms his status as well as affiliation with Óðinn.
2. **Odinic death.** The Odinic hero tends to die an Odinic death, i.e. a death which in the narrative is associated with Odinic imagery. A clear example of this is a death that is personally orchestrated by Óðinn; once again, *Völsunga saga* provides many examples, as do *Hrólfs saga kraka*, *Gautreks saga*, *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana* and in at least two narratives in *Gesta Danorum*. In the above listed texts Óðinn is personally present, or is strongly implied to be, at the place of a character's death; however, Hadingus hanging himself has been convincingly interpreted as an Odinic death.
3. **The presence of berserkir and the Männerbund.** An Odinic hero is often a part of what may be called a *Männerbund*, usually a group of twelve warriors (in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, Óðinn creates such a warband). Alternatively, he is famous for defeating such groups (most evidently Ásmundr berserkjabani and, once again, the protagonists of *Hrólfs saga kraka*). The group of twelve tends to be described as *berserkir* or be somehow similar to *berserkir*, suggesting another Odinic connection. This feature is far less evident than Odinic help and Odinic death, and is the most difficult one to adequately establish; Lars Lönnroth calls a group of twelve in Germanic tradition a 'cliché or a

conventional pattern'. There is, however, a strong scholarly tradition of considering how the '[Odinic] myths... partly adopt imagery from the cult',<sup>63</sup> and the association between the Indo-Germanic *Männerbünde*, *berserkir*, Óðinn and Odinic heroes has been discussed and re-evaluated from Axel Olrik and Otto Höfler to the works of Kris Kershaw, Jens Peter Schjødt and recently Roderick Dale, who warns that '*berserkir* were almost certainly associated with Óðinn, but it is possible to over-emphasize this interpretation of their role, because little is known about the actual extent of their association, and it may have been solely one of belonging to a sphere governed by the god' (see 1.6).<sup>64</sup> In this light, it is definitely worth to consider in more detail the extent of association between the literary *berserkir* and the literary Odinic hero, which may, in its turn, shed new light on the more historically-oriented research.

4. **Shapeshifting and bestiality.** Similarly to the concept of a *Männerbund*, but not necessarily in connection with it, the theme of bestiality and shapeshifting narrows the distance between an Odinic hero and a *berserkr*.<sup>65</sup> An Odinic hero often possesses animal traits, usually those of a wolf or a bear. Examples of this are Sigmundur and Sinfjötli's transformation into wolves in *Völsunga saga*, and Þóðvarr bjarki's transformation into a bear in *Hrólfs saga kraka*; Egill and even Starkaðr have also been interpreted this way.<sup>66</sup> Bestiality may be projected into something fought by the protagonist; so, in Book II of *Gesta Danorum* Biarco defeats a monstrous bear, meanwhile in *Hrólfs saga kraka* Þóðvarr bjarki transforms into a bear. Likewise, Sigmundur in *Völsunga saga* both defeats a monstrous she-wolf and transforms into a wolf himself.

So, if the most consistent scholarly attitudes to the Odinic hero are combined, two

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<sup>63</sup> Andreas Nordberg, *Krigarna i Odins sal: dödsföreställningar och krigarkult i fornnordisk religion* (Stockholm:2:a upplagan, 2004), 307.

<sup>64</sup> Roderick Dale, *Berserkir: a re-examination of the phenomenon in literature and life* (unpublished doctoral thesis, The University of Nottingham, 2014), 351.

<sup>65</sup> By now, the fact that *berserkir* were at least at some point associated with bestiality and shapeshifting seems to be a scholarly consensus, even though the precise nature of this connection is of course subject to debate. For an recent argumentation for the *berserkir*'s totemic roots, as well as polemics with earlier scholarship, see 'The Notion of Berserkir and the Relation Between Óðinn and Animal Warriors', *Proceedings of the 13<sup>th</sup> International Saga Conference 'The Fantastic in Old Norse/Icelandic Literature: Sagas and the British Isles'* (Durham: The Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006), 3. For a recent detailed overview of the problem and further reading see Dale 120-127, 57-69.

<sup>66</sup> See e.g. Boll, Jens Kristian Lindhardt, 'Starkad og Egil Skallagrimsson som Odinshelte', *Religionsvidenskabeligt Tidsskrift* 9 (1986), 33-47.

tendencies can be articulated:

1. The Odinic hero is both helped by Óðinn and dies because of him;
2. The Odinic hero is somehow connected to *berserkir*, either by being one of them or fighting them, or possessing bestial traits (or, by an inversion, fighting monsters).

It is not too difficult to see that Jens Peter Schjødt's picture of the literary uses of Óðinn, Óðinn's warriors and the *berserkir* relies on the assumption that these two ideas are closely interconnected. His work, however, is based on supertemporal paradigms rather than close-reading literary analysis of the sagas from which the material is taken. In order to make further steps in this direction, it is necessary to undertake a comparative analysis of as many relevant sources as possible. In order to do this, this thesis introduces an analytical tool called the Odinic hero complex, which is based on the observations made above.<sup>67</sup>

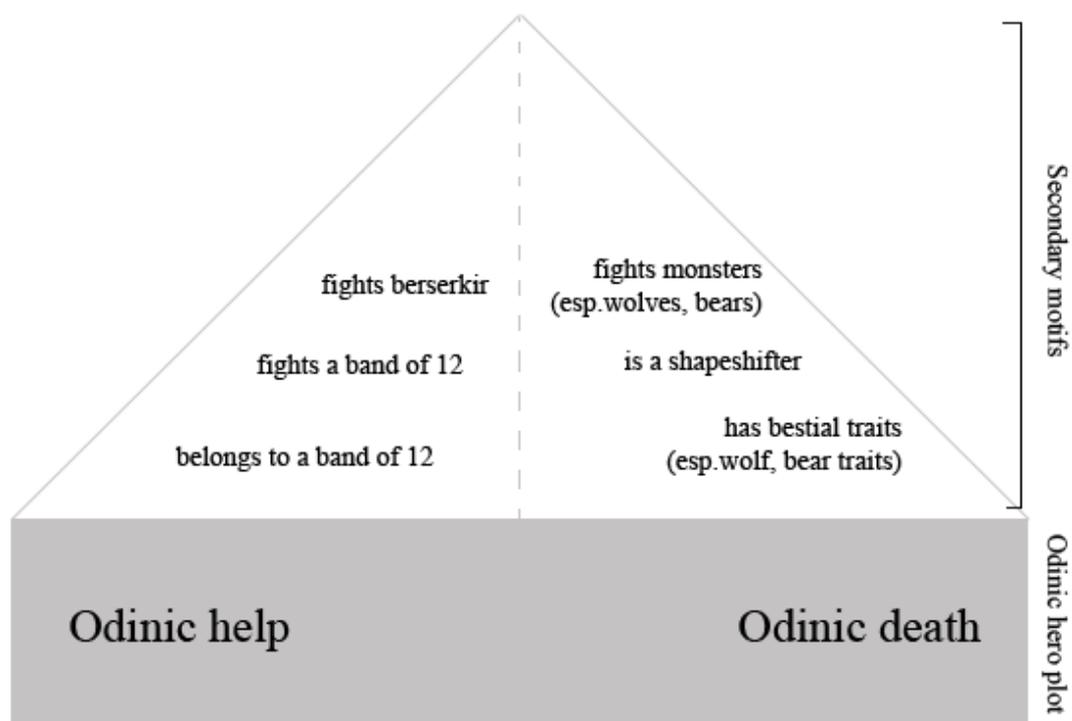


Figure 1. The Odinic hero complex

<sup>67</sup> Most concisely expressed in Jens Peter Schjødt, 'Óðinn, Warriors and Death', in *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World: Essays in Honour of Margaret Clunies Ross*, ed. Judy Quinn (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007).

As it is shown in the figure, the basis of the complex is the plot about a protagonist who is helped by Óðinn but then betrayed by him. If this happens to a character, he will be called an **Odinic hero** in this thesis. The whole story of Óðinn's help and betrayal will be called the **Odinic hero plot**. So, if a text contains the Odinic hero plot, it will be considered in the thesis.

**Examples of texts containing both elements of the Odinic hero plot.** *Völsunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka* are both focused on characters who are helped and betrayed by Óðinn, which is why these sagas have thesis chapters dedicated to them (see chapters 2 and 3 correspondingly). Hadingus in Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum* is helped by an unnamed but clearly Odinic old man, and dies by hanging, so this narrative also contains the Odinic hero plot, albeit in a less evident form (see 7.1). All the three texts mentioned above also happen to contain many motifs from the triangle in the upper part of the figure, which backs up the Odinic hero complex as an actual paradigm in saga literature.

The upper part of the figure contains a number of secondary motifs that suggest the Odinic hero's association with *berserkir* and *Männerbünde*. If taken independently, these motifs are in general very widespread in saga literature, and their mere presence in the text will not lead to it being analysed in the thesis. However, this thesis will consider texts that contain at least one element of the Odinic hero plot (either Odinic help or Odinic death), and at least one motif from the subordinate part of the complex.

**Examples of texts containing only one element of the Odinic hero plot, as well as some secondary motifs of the complex.** The characters of *Hálfs saga ok hálsrekka* are never helped by Óðinn in any way, but their death can be described as Odinic, and the *hálsrekkar* are a band of twelve; therefore, *Hálfs saga* qualifies and yields interesting parallels with other sources (see chapter 3). Similarly, *Vita et Passio Waldevi* relates how Siward of Northumbria is presented with a banner and military advise by an Odinic old man, but no Odinic death follows, and the text switches to a completely different style at this point. However, *Vita et Passio Waldevi* also gives an account of Siward's descent from a polar bear, so we consider that the Odinic hero complex is present in this text (see 7.2).

It is evident that defining the Odinic hero as above drastically narrows the material. Many of characters that clearly are both Odinic and heroes do not fit this scheme, as

this figure demonstrates:

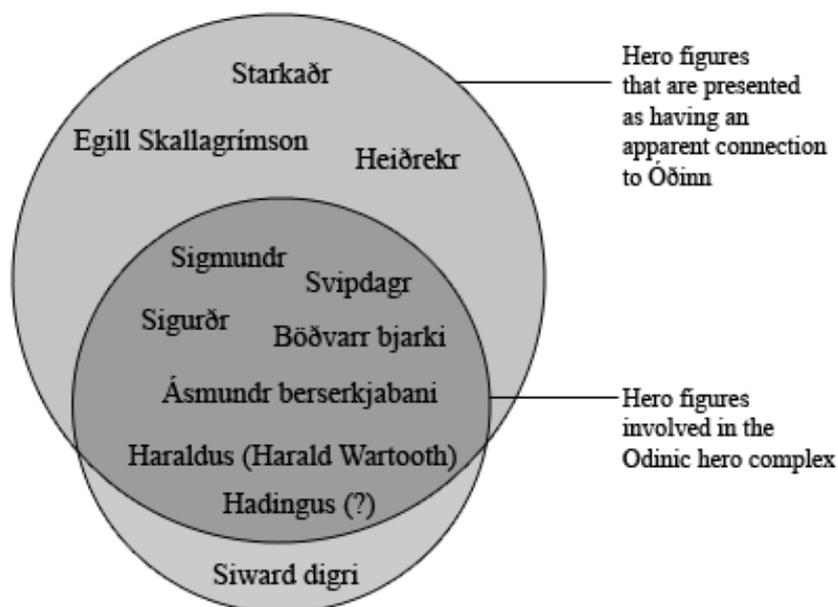


Figure 2. The relation of the Odinic hero complex as defined in this thesis to other Óðinn-related material

This is perhaps most clearly illustrated by the fact that it leaves aside the figure of Egill Skallagrímsson, whose connection with Odinic imagery is well-studied. *Egils saga* demonstrates not only a clearly direct association of the protagonist with Óðinn in *Sonatorrek*, but also suggests *berserkr*-connected bestiality and shapeshifting in the figure of Kveldúlfr. However, while being essential for our understanding of Óðinn, *Egils saga* does not contain the fundamental structure this dissertation is looking at, which is the Odinic hero plot. Therefore, *Egils saga* is not considered in this thesis, even though at times its argumentation builds upon the scholarship on Óðinn and/or *berserkir*, for which *Egils saga* is of course an important source.

Such a concept as the Odinic hero complex, one could argue, is impossible to introduce without distorting the material to fit into the scheme — exactly what James Milroy was against when he refused to ‘pigeonhole’ Starkaðr.<sup>68</sup> It should be noted, however, that the Odinic hero complex is formal not because of its artificiality, but rather because it relies on narrative elements and their satellite motifs rather than on

<sup>68</sup> James Milroy, ‘Starkaðr: An Essay in Interpretation’, in *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* 19 (1975–76), 129.

the more obscure thematic level, and describes a literary-structural phenomenon that actually existed in Iceland at the time when the most important *fornaldarsögur* were being written. Transmission and change of context could even lead to the existence of the Odinic hero complex technically without Óðinn. For example, the account of Siward digri's early exploits in the Anglo-Latin *Vita et Passio Waldevi* contains important elements of the complex, including an Odinic encounter. However, the 'old man on the hill' met by Siward is never identified, and the hagiographical context together with the explicitly positive connotation of the episode lead to the assumption that this figure has not been understood as Óðinn either by the author or compiler or by the intended audience (see 3.6 for a detailed discussion of *Vita et Passio Waldevi*). The Odinic parallels to this episode in *Vita Waldevi*, however, are quite clear. From a broader perspective, both Siward and e.g. Egill are 'Odic', but the nature of the material that connects them to Óðinn is strikingly different and requires different methodological approaches. Finding an approach that suits a group of sources, which is unified by common features relevant for the research, is here the primary aim.

## CHAPTER 2

### VQLSUNGA SAGA

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#### 1. INTRODUCTION

Of all the material relevant to this research, the most suitable text to start the analysis is, for several reasons, *Völsunga saga*. Firstly, it is probably the most famous saga narrative associated with the Odinic theme, with Sigmundur a model of the ‘Odic hero’ that often reappears in the following tradition. Secondly, *Völsunga saga* is an early text of its kind: it survives in a manuscript from ca. 1400 together with *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, but probably was composed much earlier — as R.G. Finch argues, between ca. 1200 and 1270. Starting the analysis with this text will, therefore, allow a rough chronological consistency throughout the thesis, even though the dating of the other, probably later, texts is also problematic and will be discussed in their corresponding chapters. The third reason to start with *Völsunga saga* is that it stands out among other sagas of its kind as a text with well-preserved sources, since most of its text stems directly from versions of the Eddic poems found in *Codex Regius*.

This thesis focuses on the Odinic hero as saga protagonist, which means that its aim is to describe the means of representation of a certain character type in Icelandic sagas. This character type is undoubtedly connected to a memory of pre-Christian belief as well as to older narratives, such as Eddic poetry that survived in Medieval Iceland. One important reason for this is that many of the sagas dealing with an Odinic hero as protagonist go back to very old and influential narrative traditions; this is especially the case with *Völsunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka* and the traditions that precede them that could be described as corpora of texts connected with the *Völsungs* and *Skjöldungs*.

Extensive research has been carried out on those narrative traditions, but this work has no ambition of saying something new in this field. Its object of consideration is rather the saga texts themselves, their structure and the ways they represent characters and plot situations.

A retrospective view will be used whenever necessary, with an awareness that pre-written tradition is almost always a speculative field. This applies to *Völsunga saga* to a lesser extent than to some other sagas observed in this work, since most of

its immediate sources survive and the relationships between them and the saga text are well-established.

## 2. OVERVIEW OF THE SCHOLARSHIP

Unlike most other *fornaldarsögur*, *Völsunga saga* has been extensively analysed, not only recently but since the nineteenth century, and there is a considerable body of scholarship connected to this text. Chronologically, as Ragnhild Boklund-Schlagbauer noticed, this scholarly work can be roughly divided into two categories: firstly, research of the period when scholars were mostly interested in source problems; and secondly, newer works when ‘began sich Wissenschaftler mit der Saga als eigenständigen Werk zu befassen’.<sup>69</sup> Boklund-Schlagbauer mostly connects this newer trend with the name of R.G. Finch. This division reflects the change of scholarly attitude towards *Völsunga saga*, but simplifies the situation, since even when scholars were mostly looking at literary transmission, they also contributed to an understanding of the texts that were a part of this process.

Given the number and diversity of academic works on *Völsunga saga*, it will be easier to review these thematically rather than chronologically, dividing scholarly works into several categories corresponding to different trends in research, its main objects of consideration and methodology. It should be noted, of course, that any arrangement will be conventional and more or less artificial, as, in fact, few works would fall into one category only. There were, however, quite distinctive trends towards considering this text as a part of the ‘Nibelungen legend’ and the *Völsung-Nibelung* cycle:

- focusing mainly on the text’s own structure and poetics in relation to its sources;
- as a reflection of Old Norse myth (and sometimes as remote evidence for pre-Christian religious practices).

As can be seen from the title, this dissertation falls into the second category,

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<sup>69</sup> See Ragnhild Boklund-Schlagbauer, *Vergleichende Studien zu Erzählungsstrukturen im Nibelungenlied und in nordischen Fassungen des Nibelungenstoffes* (Kümmerle Verlag: Göppingen, 1996), 153, where brief overview of scholarship on *Völsunga saga* is provided.

since it requires the evidence of mythology and religion studies as supportive material. The association of *Völsunga saga* with Odinic myth and its treatment in the text itself, on the level of structure, are therefore two topics that are the most relevant to this research and a more detailed account of them will thus be given than of the first category.

### **2.1. *Völsunga saga* and its sources as a part of the ‘Nibelungen legend’.<sup>70</sup> The ‘original form’ of the Sigurðr-Siegfried narrative<sup>71</sup>**

The earliest works<sup>72</sup> mentioning *Völsunga saga* looked at it, and at the whole *Völsung-Nibelung* corpus, as a primarily historical source, preserving memory of events ranging from the fifth to the eleventh centuries AD.<sup>73</sup> A considerable body of research has been carried out in this field, with Scandinavian material usually seen as a sidelight on the continental material. This Scandinavian material encompassed mostly *Völsunga saga* itself and, more importantly, its earlier Eddic sources. The saga and its source poetry were usually seen as a more or less complex literary unity.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, it became increasingly clear, especially in the light of Karl Lachmann’s research, that the fictional element in the ‘Nibelungen legend’ had been underestimated.<sup>74</sup> Scholarly interest gradually shifted, therefore, from the supposed historical roots of the *Nibelungenlied* and related texts to the narrative tradition behind them.<sup>75</sup> This tradition has, basically, two variations: Scandinavian (*The Poetic Edda, Völsunga saga*) and continental (*Nibelungenlied, Anhang zum Heldenbuch*). The drastic difference between their versions of the Guðrún-Kriemhilt legend has been the subject of a long debate between Andreas Heusler and his followers, who argued that the Burgundian-Gothic heroic themes came to Scandinavia through Germany, and the scholars who, opposed to the Heusler

<sup>70</sup> Detailed bibliographies on the origins of the *Nibelungenlied* are provided by Hermann Fischer, *Die Forschungen über das Nibelungenlied seit Karl Lachmann* (Leipzig, 1874); Theodor Abelung, *Das Nibelungenlied und seine Literatur* (Leipzig, 1907).

<sup>71</sup> Julius Goebel, ‘On the original form of the Legend of Sigfrid’, in *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 12.4 (1897), 461.

<sup>72</sup> See, e.g., Johann-Christoph Gottsched, *De temporibus teutonicorum Vatum mythicis* (Leipzig: Lipsiae ex Officina Breitkopfia, 1952), x.

<sup>73</sup> An overview of historical parallels to the episodes of the ‘Nibelungen legend’, established in scholarship, are listed in the form of a table in Gudmund Schütte, ‘The Nibelungen Legend and its Historical Basis’, in *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 20/3 (1921), 291-327.

<sup>74</sup> See, e.g., Karl Lachmann, ‘Kritik der Sage von den Nibelungen’, in *Zu den Nibelungen und zur Klage: Anmerkungen* (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1836), 333–349.

<sup>75</sup> Gudmund Schütte, ‘The Nibelungen Legend and its Historical Basis’, in *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 20/3 (1921), 291-327.

School, argued for the transmission of material during the Migrations (VS xvi-xxi). Investigations in this field continue to this day,<sup>76</sup> but scholars do seem to agree that ‘the German version of the Burgundian catastrophe is adapted from an older tradition to which *V[ölsunga] S[aga]* is more faithful’ (VS xxi).

It should be noted that, during the development of the literary-critical approach to *fornaldarsögur* and its application to *Völsunga saga*, it has not lost its importance as source evidence in the studies of the Völsung-Nibelung cycle and contacts between the traditions connected to it. An important work here is Theodore M. Andersson’s *The Legend of Brynhild*, which makes a neo-Heuslerian approach to the reconstruction of the *Nibelungenlied*’s sources in connection with other texts belonging to the cycle.<sup>77</sup>

## 2.2. *Völsunga saga*’s relation to its sources

The fact that *Völsunga saga* was usually seen as a not very significant part of the Völsung-Nibelung cycle does not mean that it never received scholarly attention as a separate text — for instance, in 1876 Barend Symons published his dissertation on the ‘so-called *Völsunga saga*’,<sup>78</sup> where he performed some textual analysis and briefly but comprehensively observed the text’s connections to *Ragnars saga* and especially to the Eddic poems. Such investigations, however, were rare. It was not until the early twentieth century that scholarship began to focus on the saga text itself, especially on the principles of treatment of the poetic sources by the author-compiler. A milestone in this field was Per Wieselgren’s *Quellenstudien zur Völsungasaga*,<sup>79</sup> a monograph giving linguistic analysis of the saga parallel to its known Eddic sources and registering all the alterations made by the compiler as he was reworking poetic material into prose. Quite in the spirit of his time, Wieselgren attempts to reconstruct lost sources (like *Sigurðar saga*). The aim of his book is, therefore, to provide the saga with as complete background as possible and, as its reviewer hoped, to ‘take [Old Norse scholars] back to still earlier stories’.<sup>80</sup> Ironically, the effect of

<sup>76</sup> See, e.g., Ragnhild Boklund-Schlagbauer, *Vergleichende Studien zu Erzählstrukturen im Nibelungenlied und in nordischen Fassungen des Nibelungenstoffes* (Kümmerle Verlag: Göppingen, 1996).

<sup>77</sup> Theodore M. Andersson, *The Legend of Brynhild* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980).

<sup>78</sup> Barend Symons, *Untersuchungen ueber die sogenannte Völsunga saga* (Druck von E. Karras: Halle, 1876).

<sup>79</sup> Per Wieselgren, *Quellenstudien zur Völsunga Saga* (Tartu, 1935).

<sup>80</sup> F. Norman, ‘*Quellenstudien zur Völsungasaga* by Per Wieselgren’, in *Modern Language Review*, 34/1 (1939), 125.

Wieselgren's monograph was quite the opposite: it provoked a scholarly discussion of the saga compiler's motivation as he edited the sources and reworked them into saga prose.

If we consider Per Wieselgren's work in the framework of today's saga scholarship, his approach to the saga as a literary work seems pretty traditional for his time, as he considers it rather a poor and inconsistent compilation made from Eddic verses rather than a work of some independent value. On the other hand, Wieselgren's monograph demonstrated an unusual attention to the saga text itself, and was praised for that reason by those frustrated by the earlier scholarship:

The everlasting discussion of 'sources' is a poisonous nuisance, inherited from the pragmatic nineteenth century, and it is pointless unless it leads up to the positive achievement of the last link in the chain. Unfortunately, the poet [i.e. the author-compiler of *Völsunga saga* — E.M.] usually has to be content when we have proved that most of his ideas were borrowed.<sup>81</sup>

The immediate results of Wieselgren's textual analysis have become a basis of further investigations that emerged with the growing interest in the poetics of *fornaldarsögur*. Today, scholars seem to have come to an agreement that the author-compiler had some sort of systematic approach to the material, though there are few common ideas of what exactly his literary conception was.

One of the scholars who regarded *Völsunga saga* as a work of art was R.G. Finch, who published extensively on this saga and also prepared an edition and translation of its text (VS). He also produced a detailed, text-based study of the saga compiler's approach to his poetic sources that refers to Per Wieselgren's *Quellenstudien zur Völsungasaga*, but tests his results by literary rather than linguistic analysis. Finch analyses corresponding passages from surviving Eddic poems and the saga text and, generalizing the observations he had made, formulates the principles of the compiler's treatment of the sources, his attitude to poetic vocabulary, syntax and other features such as the numerous epithetical words and phrases of the heroic poetry. Furthermore, Finch looks upon the compiler's treatment of mythological and supernatural subjects and notes, in general, a tendency to reduce the number of supernatural elements in the saga compared to its source poetry.

Finch argues with Wieselgren, who earlier claimed that the author-compiler, out of principle, excluded all the sentimental elements from his text, as well as

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<sup>81</sup> F. Norman, 'Quellenstudien zur Völsungasaga by Per Wieselgren', in *Modern Language Review*, 34.1 (1939), 123.

gruesome and cruel episodes.<sup>82</sup> In Finch's opinion, these elements were excluded not for the reason of their own qualities, but rather because the compiler preserved only what fitted his picture of 'saga-style', which often manifested itself in simply cutting out the unnecessary detail. Finch's view of this problem is important since it reflects the author-compiler's effort to create an appropriate style for a saga-narrative dealing with mythological and heroic subjects, though Finch does not go into much detail on this subject.

Finch's ideas clearly show that his view of *Völsunga saga* grows out of Per Wieselgren's work, to which he refers, but at the same time he disagrees with Wieselgren in his most important conclusions, explains the compiler's motivation in cases Wieselgren regarded as flawed<sup>83</sup> and attempts to prove that the compiler 'is in fact surprisingly consistent and logical in his handling of material'.<sup>84</sup> According to Finch, '...Wieselgren's criticism of the compiler's lack of consistency is ill-founded', though, in fact, it can be explained by the fact that Wieselgren's book appeared in 1935, long before the recent interest in *fornaldarsögur* as works of art.<sup>85</sup> Wieselgren has no theory that would explain disagreements of this saga's text because he was, in fact, never looking for such a theory.

'Throughout this study the term 'compiler' has been used. Should it not perhaps yield to 'author'?',<sup>86</sup>— wonders Finch at the end of his article. In today's saga research, the latter is almost always the case.<sup>87</sup> In 2002, Manuel Aguirre argued vehemently for the saga's artistic qualities and identified a few consistent compositional strategies in the saga-text, finding a definite narrative and thematic structure to the text.<sup>88</sup> Aguirre analyses the saga's problematic parts (especially the

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<sup>82</sup> Ronald Finch, 'The Treatment of Poetic Sources by the Compiler of *Völsunga saga*', *Saga-Book*, 16 (1962-65), 334.

<sup>83</sup> Finch, 333-34.

<sup>84</sup> Finch, 347.

<sup>85</sup> Finch, 350.

<sup>86</sup> Finch, 353.

<sup>87</sup> See Stefanie Würth, 'The Rhetoric of *Völsunga saga*', in *Fornaldarsagornas struktur och ideologi*, ed. Ármann Jakobsson, Annette Lassen (Uppsala: Institutionen for nordisk språk, 2003), 101-11; Agneta Ney, 'Genus och ideologi i *Völsunga saga*', in *Fornaldarsagornas struktur och ideologi*, ed. Ármann Jakobsson, Annette Lassen and Agneta Ney (Uppsala: Institutionen for nordisk språk, 2003), 113-22; Manuel Aguirre, 'Narrative Composition in *The Saga of the Volsungs*', *Saga-Book*, 26 (2002), 5-37; Ronald G. Finch, 'The Treatment of Poetic Sources by the Compiler of *Völsunga saga*', *Saga-Book*, 16 (1962-65), 315-53; Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, 'The Origin and Development of the Fornaldarsögur as illustrated by *Völsunga saga* [itals? for fornald and VS?]', in *The Legendary Sagas: Origins and Development*, ed. Agneta Ney, Ármann Jakobsson and Annette Lassen (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2012), 59-82.

<sup>88</sup> Aguirre 5-37.

Brynhildr episodes), traditionally explained by inconsistent compilation of contradictory sources, and comes to the conclusion that

- the ‘lack of unity’ the text has been charged with is nowhere much in evidence;
- the fabled inconsistencies in Brynhild’s character are illusory;
- the study of narrative structure brings to light the double thematic structure of the saga.<sup>89</sup>

This argument relies on the assumption that numerous ‘repetitions’, lying on the surface of the narrative, are in fact systematic and fit a few patterns that lie, according to Aguirre, behind most of *Völsunga saga*’s episodes.

Although some of Aguirre’s arguments are problematic, methodologically his view of the saga is an example of the general rise of interest in *fornaldarsögur* as independent works of art with more or less conscious authorship. This attitude is shared by this dissertation as well, especially in the case of *Völsunga saga*, which, as will be demonstrated below, gives substantial evidence of purposeful reworking of the sources.

### 2.3. *Völsunga saga*’s mythological pretext

The type of *fornaldarsögur* that could be described as mythical-heroic sagas has long been regarded as a source of information about Old Norse mythological or religious tradition — and, most importantly for this discussion, about Odinic cults. *Völsunga saga* is, alongside *Gesta Danorum*’s first books, one of the central sources for any investigation of the subject. The saga and its sources have long been considered to provide important information about Old Norse mythology and religion, especially in relation to Odinic cults.<sup>90</sup> With this connection, mention must be made of the fact that *Völsunga saga* itself has traditionally been regarded as less valuable evidence than its source, not only because it was a much later work, but also because of the fact that ‘The supernatural and mythological references of this source dwindled away until comparatively few remained. And yet — none of these omissions in any way

<sup>89</sup> Manuel Aguirre, ‘Narrative Composition in *The Saga of the Volsungs*’, *Saga-Book*, 26 (2002), 5.

<sup>90</sup> Investigations in other large themes connected to *Völsunga saga* and especially its source material, such as the serpent-fighting motif or the awakening of Brynhildr as a part of Indo-European solar myth, will be left aside here.

materially affected the main outlines of the narrative... [In *Vǫlsunga saga*] the mythological and supernatural elements were on the whole expendable'.<sup>91</sup> Up to today, in studies dealing with long-term literary transmission the saga comes to the foreground only when it can provide material not surviving elsewhere, for instance, when it preserved stanzas corresponding to the 'Great Lacuna' in *Codex Regius*.<sup>92</sup> It was not until the first third of the last century, with Per Wieselgren's work, that an interest in the saga text started to emerge.

Even if all the late sagas, as scholars agreed, provided but a vague literary memory of the mythological past, the information this text contains is still priceless when the surviving material about pre-Christian Germanic cults is so scarce overall. The importance of *fornaldarsögur* to scholarship in this particular field, for which other historical evidence is scarce, was noted recently by Jens Peter Schjødt — rather retrospectively: since the previous century and up to today, historians of religion rely heavily on *fornaldarsögur* as a source of information about the cult of Óðinn, although the approach to this material has altered greatly throughout the last century. Even in studies focused on ancient history, culture and religion, some form of literary analysis has always been necessary as long as they used literary material. This is especially important for legendary sagas, created and written down centuries after paganism was a part of people's lives. Ritual and mythology, the main object of interest for a historian of culture and religion, have always been blended with each other, and the relationship between them is complicated. Furthermore, there is no 'pure' mythology in any of our sources: mythological images and legendary tradition become incorporated into literary narratives that change their form historically; as time passes, different genres become dominant. A *fornaldarsaga* from this point of view is a very late literary product, and any conclusions on the presumably earlier material included into them can be made only after an analysis of these texts' structure and context.

An example of early systematic studies in this subject is H. Munro Chadwick's work, most importantly his monograph *The Cult of Othin*, which tries to encompass all the known sources and pays special attention to literary texts.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> R.G. Finch, 'The Treatment of Poetic Sources by the Compiler of *Vǫlsunga saga*', *Saga-Book*, 16 (1962-65), 331.

<sup>92</sup> Paul Salmon, 'Sivrit's Oath of Innocence', in *Modern Language Review*, 71/2 (1976), 315-26.

<sup>93</sup> Hector Munro Chadwick, *The Cult of Othin: An essay in the Ancient Religion of the North* (C.J. Clay and sons: London, 1882).

Chadwick, whose work is based to a large extent on *fornaldarsaga* material, including that from *Völsunga saga*, acknowledges that these sagas are late and quite problematic texts, and even apologises for their extensive use in his work; he justifies it, however, by his conviction that ‘much of the material which they contain is considerably older’.<sup>94</sup> Chadwick refers, where possible, to its earlier poetic sources, not to *Völsunga saga* itself, but he draws important parallels to Sigmundr’s death episode in the saga.<sup>95</sup> Although Chadwick’s research is in the history of Old Norse religion, it contributed, as often happened, to saga scholarship as well. Arranging saga motifs systematically and complementing them with other evidence created a frame of reference for future investigations, allowing the recognition of certain motifs as ‘Odinic’, e.g., the motif of (sacrificial) hanging<sup>96</sup> or stabbing with a spear.<sup>97</sup>

An important branch of research in mythology, history and religion that bears upon a number of *fornaldarsögur*, with special focus on *Völsunga saga*, is the investigation of shapeshifting in Old Norse literature. This theme inevitably leads to *berserkir* and *úlfhéðnar* figures that have been described as having connection to Odinic cults.<sup>98</sup> As accumulated knowledge opened the door to generalization, new readings of the saga emerged. Thus, Jens Peter Schjødt, who as a historian of religion specialises in rendering of material preserved in *fornaldarsögur*, sees the shapeshifting episode in *Völsunga saga* as a reminiscence of ancient initiatory rites, comparing it to the blood-drinking episode in *Hrólfs saga kraka* and a number of other saga scenes.

#### 2.4. *Völsunga saga*’s literary-historical background

As has been shown, scholarly attitudes to the structure of *Völsunga saga* have never been uniform. As a starting point, it is now well established due to Wieselgren’s monograph that the text is a product of consistent reworking of Eddic poems into saga prose. Very diverse theories, however, have been put forward about its literary technique and the ideas behind the compiler’s or author’s attitude to the structuring of

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<sup>94</sup> Hector Munro Chadwick, *The Cult of Othin: An essay in the Ancient Religion of the North* (C.J. Clay and sons: London, 1882), preface (unnumbered first page).

<sup>95</sup> Chadwick, 15-16.

<sup>96</sup> Chadwick, 16-20.

<sup>97</sup> Chadwick, 15-16.

<sup>98</sup> Kirby Flower Smith, ‘An Historical Study of the Werwolf in Literature’, in *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 9:1 (1894), 24; Hilda R. E. Davidson, ‘Shape-Changing in Old Norse Sagas’, in *Animals in Folklore*, ed. Joshua R. Porter and William M.S. Russell (Cambridge: Brewer, 1978), 126–42.

the saga. A researcher focusing on *Vǫlsunga saga* today is, therefore, in a difficult situation, as every new reading of this text is going to compete with a dozen others. Acknowledging the difficulty of the situation, this discussion aims to reconsider the role of Odinic imagery in *Vǫlsunga saga* rather than give a quietus to the argument on the saga's poetics and ideology.

Indeed, *Vǫlsunga saga* is made very special by the fact that the pagan theme — or, more precisely, the Odinic theme — becomes central there. Even compared to other early mythical-heroic sagas, like *Hervarar saga* with its Gestumblindi episode, *Vǫlsunga saga* is particularly focused on this topic, to the extent that the whole narrative can be read as systematic discourse on the relationship between an active hero and his destiny personified by a pagan deity.

Before moving on to *Vǫlsunga saga* itself, it should be emphasised that this text's interest in the legendary past is not specifically Icelandic or Scandinavian. It is shared by other early *fornaldarsögur*, but should also be seen in the context of wider European literature, since, as Margaret Clunies Ross has noted, 'the development of the *fornaldarsaga* was a part of a general arousal of interest in the legendary past in medieval European literature of the twelfth century and beyond, witness Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* and Walter of Châtillon's *Alexandreis*, both extremely popular works, and both influential in Scandinavia'.<sup>99</sup> By the end of the thirteenth century, which was probably the time *Vǫlsunga saga* was written, attention to the pagan past in the sagas was not a novelty. In fact, basing his argument on the example of *Sturlunga saga*, Viðar Pálsson has convincingly demonstrated that pre-Christian mythology was, during the saga age, a natural part of the audience's cultural background, and it is in this context that the rise of *fornaldarsaga* should be understood.

*Vǫlsunga saga* has a few features that are crucial for further argument and that will be taken as starting points.

First of all, it is evident, especially in the light of Wieselgren's work, that *Vǫlsunga saga* is a written text. It was composed by an individual consciousness and perhaps never transmitted orally in the form we know it. The narrative tradition behind the saga is, of course, very old, as testified by the Eddic poems on which the

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<sup>99</sup> Margaret Clunies Ross, 'Poetry in Fornaldarsögur: Origins, Nature and Purpose', in *The Legendary Sagas: Origins and Development*, ed. Agneta Ney, Ármann Jakobsson (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2012), 121.

saga is based, and archaeological evidence.<sup>100</sup>

It is certain that the author-compiler had before him a collection of Eddic poetry very similar to *Codex Regius*, and relied on it heavily. *Codex Regius* poems ‘involved’ this way in the creation of *Vǫlsunga saga* are, in fact, very diverse, are dated quite differently, probably come from different backgrounds and are connected to each other mostly by recurring characters and by the fact they were selected by the compiler of *Codex Regius*.

### 3. *VǪLSUNGA SAGA*’S REFERENCES TO ÓÐINN AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE NARRATIVE

‘Hér hefr upp ok segir frá þeim manni, er Sigi er nefndr ok kallaðr, at héti son Óðins’: this is the very first phrase in *Vǫlsunga saga*’s text, which starts the saga by indicating the eponymous family’s divine origin. It is hardly a coincidence that Óðinn’s last appearance in the saga is in its very last paragraph, and this time in connection with death rather than with birth and origin, advising the means to kill the otherwise invulnerable Vǫlsung heroes Hamðir and Sǫrli. This circular plot structure, created either consciously or, less probably, spontaneously, is heavily supported by a network of recurring motifs interwoven into the narrative.

The Vǫlsungs are identified as Óðinn’s offspring already in the first chapter. This idea is duplicated in the clearly folklore-inspired story of Vǫlsung’s birth, where the queen cannot conceive until Rerir eats an apple brought by a valkyrie on Óðinn and Frigg’s command. The idea that the Vǫlsungs descend from Óðinn, introduced in the opening lines of *Vǫlsunga saga*, joins together all the recurring motifs described below, which are either explicitly or supposedly connected in the saga to the Odinic theme.

Very often Óðinn personally assists the protagonists in their enterprises. The fact that Óðinn is a recurring character in *Vǫlsunga saga* is well known, and yet it may be useful to make a survey of his participation in the story.

In all, according to *Vǫlsunga saga*, Óðinn personally takes part in the career of almost every significant Vǫlsung: Sigi, Rerir, Sigmundr (and Sinfjǫtli), and especially

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<sup>100</sup> For the representation of the Vǫlsung material on carved stone monuments see Marjolein Stern, ‘Runestone images and visual communication in Viking Age Scandinavia’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, The University of Nottingham, 2013), 45-47, 196-198.

Sigurðr who encounters him three times; Óðinn also appears at Hamðir and Sqrli's death (VS 78) and advises against them. Helgi is an exception here — his story, given in chapter 9 (VS 14-17) follows *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* quite closely, though Helgi's relationship with the valkyrie Sigrún could theoretically be also worked into the argument.

Almost all the mentions of Óðinn in *Völsunga saga* are, therefore, connected to a specific hero. This is reflected in the titles listed below, given in the same order as in the saga.

### 3.1. Sigi's ancestry

Sigi, the ancestor of the Völsungs, is believed to be a son of Óðinn (VS 1). Óðinn is therefore connected to all the characters of the saga, both by this ancestry and by the fact that he takes part in their undertakings.

### 3.2. Óðinn helps Sigi

When Sigi is outlawed, Óðinn follows and helps him to establish himself as a warrior, to later become a chieftain and finally a king. The logical sequence is outlined quite clearly in the saga:

Óðinn fylgir honum nú af landi brott, svá langa leið, at stóru bar, ok eigi létti hann fyrr en hann kom honum til herskipa. Nú tekr Sigi at leggjast í hernað með þat lið, er faðir hans fekk honum, áðr þeir skildu, ok varð hann sigrsæll í hernaðinum. Ok svá kemr hans máli, at hann fekk herjat sér land ok ríki um síðir.  
(VS 2)

Óðinn followed him out of the land, for a long way, and did not leave him until he came to some warships. Then Sigi started raiding with his men that his father had assigned to him before they parted, and he was fortunate in his warfare. And it befell him so, that he won for himself some land and a kingdom at last.

This is a pattern to be found elsewhere further in the saga, most clearly in the episodes of Sigurðr's vengeance for his father (VS 28-29) and his killing of Fáfnir (VS 30-31):

- Óðinn helps the hero in some way
- The hero undertakes some dangerous enterprise
- The hero is victorious, as the victory has been symbolically bestowed on him from the beginning.

Gudmund Schütte argued that Sigi himself 'is obviously a hypostasis of Odin, who was also known also as Sigfadir and Sigtyr, the god of victory, and whose principal

sanctuary in Sweden, according to the Snorra Edda, was Sigtuna ('the town of Sig').<sup>101</sup>

### 3.3. The birth of Vǫlsungr

Further on, Óðinn extends his patronage of the Vǫlsungs from assistance in warfare to other spheres of life. Rerir, Sigi's son, and his queen have no children and they pray that they might have a child. Óðinn answers their prayers and sends to them a valkyrie in the form of a raven, who drops an apple on Sigi's lap. After eating that apple, the couple are able to have a son:

Rerir fekk sér nú herfang mikit ok konu þá, er honum þótti við sitt hæfi, ok eru þau mjök lengi ásamt, ok eigu þau engan erfingja ok ekki barn. Þat hugnar þeim báðum illa, ok biðja þau goðin með miklum áhuga, at þau gæti sér barn. Þat er nú sagt, at Frigg heyrir bæn þeira ok segir Óðni, hvers þau biðja. Hann verðr eigi orþrifráða ok tekr óskmey sína, dóttur Hrímnis jötuns, ok fær í hönd henni eitt epli ok biðr hana færa konungi. Hún tók við eplinu ok brá á sik krákuham ok flýgr til þess, er hún kemr þar, sem konungrinn er ok sat á haugi. Hún lét falla eplit í kné konunginum. Hann tók þat epli ok þóttist vita, hverju gegna mundi; gengr nú heim af hauginum ok til sinna manna ok kom á fund drottningar, ok etr þat epli sumt. Þat er nú at segja, at drottning finnr þat brátt, at hún mundi vera með barni.

(VS 2-3)

Now Rerir won a lot of booty and a wife whom he found most suitable for himself, and they lived well together for a long time, but they had no heir and no child at all. That grieved them both, and they prayed eagerly that they might have a child. Now it has to be told that Frigg heard their prayer and told Óðinn about it. He did not hesitate and summoned his valkyrie, daughter of Hrímnir the jötun, put an apple into her hand and told to bring it to the king. She took the apple, turned into a raven and flew until she found the king, who was sitting on a mound. She let the apple fall on the king's knees. He took the apple and thought that he knew what the matter was. He went home from the mound and came to the queen, and ate a part of the apple. Now it is to be told that the queen soon felt that she was going to have a child.

A bird as magical helper is number 553 in the Aarne-Thompson tale type index, and a child born after his parents have eaten a magical fruit (or sometimes a fish) is 705A. An apple, stresses Hilda Ellis Davidson, is an especially important symbol of fertility in Germanic and Celtic mythologies.<sup>102</sup> The typically folktale chain of events is put in *Vǫlsunga saga* into a mythological framework. Further in the saga, the raven motif is reduplicated in another episode of clearly folktale origin, where a raven brings a healing or resurrecting herb to Sigmundr and Sinfjötli (VS 11). In the latter case, the appearance of the raven is not explained, but it could be suggested, on the analogy with Rerir's case, that the herb is sent to Sigmundr intentionally, as divine help.

<sup>101</sup> Gudmund Schütte, 'The Nibelungen Legend and its Historical Basis', in *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 20/3 (1921), 292.

<sup>102</sup> Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe: Early Scandinavian and Celtic Religions* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1988), 181.

The place where the raven finds Rerir, a mound, can on the one hand be described as a liminal location, a source of supernatural gifts, including those connected with fertility and with the cult of ancestors.<sup>103</sup> On the other hand, sitting on a mound can be interpreted as an occupation that signifies a king's authority.<sup>104</sup>

On the whole, this episode serves in the saga as a duplication of the divine origin motif (number 1 on this list). It is interesting that, in contrast to his more usual connections to power or death, Óðinn is here associated with life and fertility. This association contrasts dramatically with Óðinn's catastrophic interference in the last lines of the saga (number 11), where he finally eliminates the Völsungs who descend from him.

### 3.4. Rerir's death

Shortly after his son is conceived, Rerir falls ill during an expedition and dies; it is stated that he 'meant to join Óðinn, and this was considered by many people a good thing in those times' ('sækja hein Óðin, ok þótti þat mǫrgum fýsiligt í þann tíma' VS 3). Although 'to join Óðinn' may be read as simply a paraphrase for 'to die', the extension about people's opinion suggests that simply death is not meant here. It is clear, in the context of Sigi and Rerir's connections with Óðinn, as well as their descendants', that Rerir's desire to 'join' his grandfather should have a special significance. Furthermore, it is unlikely to be a coincidence that the way Rerir dies is similar to Óðinn's own death according to *Ynglinga saga*, where Óðinn dies of sickness, and before that has himself marked with a point of a spear to ensure that he goes to Goðheimr in his afterlife to reunite with his friends ('fagna þar vinum sínum').<sup>105</sup> Immediately after that Njǫrðr, who also dies of sickness, has himself marked for Óðinn before his death ('lét hann marka sik Óðni, áðr hann dó', 'He had himself marked of Óðinn before he died').<sup>106</sup> The story of Rerir's death is clearly based on this tradition.

### 3.5. Óðinn gives the sword to Sigmundur

Chapter 3 of *Völsunga saga* contains the famous 'sword in the tree' episode, where

<sup>103</sup> Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe: Early Scandinavian and Celtic Religions* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1988), 130.

<sup>104</sup> Compare *Þrymskviða*, stanza 6: 'Þrymr sat á haugi, / þursa dróttinn', 'Þrymr was sitting on a mound, / King of the giants' (Edd. I, 423)

<sup>105</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Ynglingasaga*, ed. Elias Wessén (København: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1952), 12.

<sup>106</sup> *Ynglingasaga*, 13.

Óðinn, disguised as a one-eyed old man, enters King Vǫlsungr's hall during the wedding of his daughter Signý and King Siggeir. He plunges a sword into the trunk of the large apple-tree, *barnstokkr*, which stands in the middle of the building, and says that the one who is able to pull out the sword will receive it from him as a gift. No one is able to pull the sword out except for Vǫlsungr's son Sigmundr, which provokes Siggeir's jealousy and anger and starts a feud between Siggeir and the Vǫlsungs (VS 4-5).

Although the sword in the tree motif is not paralleled by *Vǫlsunga saga's* possible sources, the idea that Sigmundr received a sword from Óðinn is expressed in *Hyndluljóð*:

gaf hann Hermóði  
hjálmu ok brynju  
en Sigmundi  
sverð at þiggja.  
(Edd. 460)

He [Óðinn] gave to Hermóðr a helm and a mailcoat, but to Sigmundr a sword to own.

This gift of a sword can be considered as a model for all of Óðinn's gifts in *Vǫlsunga saga*, since it is one of the few examples paralleled by some other text. Sigmundr's career starts with obtaining this sword, curiously similar to the Arthurian legend of the sword in the stone; this suggests, according to Jan de Vries, an association of the weapon with power and authority.<sup>107</sup> Indeed, Sigmundr becomes a powerful king afterwards (VS 14), but in the end is deprived of the sword and authority, together with his life, by Óðinn in person — similar to the way in which the sword was given to him (VS 20-21; see below).

On the other hand, Hilda Ellis Davidson stresses the role of the *barnstokkr* ('child-trunk') in the preservation of the family and the idea of fertility, and draws a number of parallels to the *Vǫlsunga saga* episode that also feature a 'guardian tree' standing either in or beside a house. Those trees are usually associated with a family's prosperity and childbirth — and so is, metonymically, the saga's sword in the tree.<sup>108</sup> The owner of the sword, according to this logic, should be considered as the paragon of the family's glory, and continue the lineage with his children. Considering that the scene takes place at a wedding of a Vǫlsung princess and King Siggeir, Sigmundr is

<sup>107</sup> Jan de Vries, 'Baum und Schwert in der Sage von Sigmundr', in *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum* 85 (1954), 95.

<sup>108</sup> Hilda Ellis Davidson, 'The Sword at the Wedding', *Folklore* 71:1 (1960), 4-5.

definitely the ‘wrong’ person to get the sword.

The ‘luck’ of a family must largely depend on the successful bearing and rearing of sons, and there is a general belief that when the guardian tree is destroyed, the family will die out. In view of all this, it seems reasonable to suppose that at the wedding it should have been Siggeir, the bridegroom, who drew the sword from the tree, and that its possession would symbolise the ‘luck’ that would come to him with his bride, as well as the successful continuation of his own line in his sons, to be born of the marriage. But the sword was refused him, and this may well have seemed a deadly insult. Moreover, we know that it later came about that Signý’s only surviving son was Sinfjötli, born of an incestuous union with her brother Sigmundr, the owner of the sword, while no son survived to carry on the inheritance to King Siggeir. This gives a new and tragic significance to the scene in the hall and helps to explain the intensity of Siggeir’s anger.<sup>109</sup>

It can be understood from the saga that Sigmundr is able to pull out the sword because he is chosen by Óðinn to own this weapon. The same sword later will be inherited by Sigurðr and used to slay Fáfnir, encompassing thus the very idea of the family’s glory. On the other hand, the sword becomes the cause of Sigmundr’s mortal enmity with Siggeir and the death of many Völsungs. This is a clear example of how Óðinn’s gifts, as well as his advice, tend to be represented as ambivalent.

The saga’s account of Sigmundr and Sinfjötli’s strife with Siggeir has also been connected with Odinic imagery, but, since those connections are questionable, they will be considered in the section 4. The next episode where Óðinn clearly takes part in the saga’s events is the death of Sinfjötli.

### 3.6. Sinfjötli’s death

After Sinfjötli is poisoned by his stepmother Borghildr, Sigmundr leaves for the wilderness, carrying his body. The following chain of events takes place there:

Sigmundr ríss upp ok gekk harmr sinn nær bana ok tók líkit í fang sér ok ferr til skógar ok kom loks at einum firði. Þar sá hann mann á einum báti litlum. Sá maðr spyrr, ef hann vildi þiggja at honum far yfir fjörðinn. Hann játtar því. Skipit var svá lítit, at þat bar þá eigi, ok var líkit fyrst flutt, en Sigmundr gekk með firðinum. Ok því næst hvarf Sigmundi skipit ok svá maðrinn.  
(VS 18-19)

Sigmundr rose, stricken by grief, took the body and went into the woods. In the end he came to a fjord. He met a man in a small boat there. The man asked if he wanted to be carried to the

<sup>109</sup> Hilda Ellis Davidson, ‘The Sword at the Wedding’, *Folklore* 71:1 (1960), 5.

other side of the firth, and Sigmundr agreed. The boat was too small to take them both, so the corpse was taken first, and Sigmundr walked along the firth. Then both the man and the boat vanished from Sigmundr's sight.

It is generally agreed that Óðinn is the man in the boat who takes the dead Sinfjötli with him. Such a Charonic passage across a river or other body of water is a common part of Indo-European imagery of life and death.<sup>110</sup> In Old Norse tradition, it is particularly associated with Óðinn (e.g., in *Harbarðsljóð*, where he appears as 'ferjakarlinn með skipit', 'ferryman with his boat', Edd. I, 388).

The passage quoted above, together with the preceding account of Sinfjötli's poisoning, corresponds almost precisely to the Eddic *Frá dauða Sinfjötla* or *Sinfjötalok* — a short prose fragment that in the *Codex Regius* connects *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* and *Reginismál*.

Sigmundr bar hann langar leiðir í fangi sér ok kom at fyrði einum mjóvum ok lǫngum, ok var þar skip eitt lítit ok maðr einn á. Hann bauð Sigmundi far of fjörðinn. En er Sigmundr bar líkit út á skipit, þá var bátinn hlaðinn. Karl mælti, at Sigmundr skyldi fara fyrir innan fjörðinn. Karl hratt skipinu ok hvarf þegar.  
(Edd. II, 284)

Sigmund carried him a long way and came to a long and narrow fjord, and there was a little boat with a man inside. He offered Sigmundr to carry him to the other side. But when Sigmundr put the corpse into the boat, it was fully laden. The man said Sigmundr had to go around the fjord. Then the man pushed off the boat and disappeared.

As can be seen, the texts are very similar except for minor details (a forest is not mentioned in the *Edda*, and *Vǫlsunga saga* does not stress that Sigmundr's way was long), and this scene was, most certainly, adapted directly from the *Poetic Edda*. It is even possible that the manuscript used by the author-compiler included a version more similar to what can be seen in *Vǫlsunga saga*. The resemblance is not only between the texts themselves; they also occupy the same position in larger texts in which they are included: in *Vǫlsunga saga* this episode, as well as in the *Codex Regius*, is set after an account of Helgi's deeds and before the story of Sigurðr's youth, including his meeting with Hnikarr.

The main significance of Sinfjötli's death episode for this research is that it is one of the three appearances of Óðinn in the text that has clear parallels outside *Vǫlsunga saga*, the other two being Fjǫlnir's conversation with Sigurðr (number 9) and the death of Hamðir and Sǫrli (number 11). It should be noted, however, that Sinfjötli's death in the *Poetic Edda* and the Fjǫlnir episode are probably direct

<sup>110</sup> L.V. Grinsell, 'The Ferryman and his Fee: A Study in Ethnology, Archaeology, and Tradition', in *Folklore* 68.1 (1957), 257-69.

borrowings from a manuscript similar to the *Codex Reguis* and should be treated as borrowings, in contrast to Hamðir and Sǫrli's death that is attested to in *Gesta Danorum* and can be seen as a part of a wider tradition (see section 3.11).

### 3.7. Sigmundr's death

The account of Sigmundr's fall in battle is, probably, the clearest example of the 'Odinic death' in saga literature:

Ok er orrosta hafði staðit um hrið, þá kom maðr í bardagann með síðan hǫtt ok heklu blá. Hann hafði eitt auga ok geir í hendi. Þessi maðr kom á mót Sigmundi konungi ok brá upp geirinum fyrir hann. Ok er Sigmundr konungr hjó fast, kom sverðit í geirinn ok brast í sundr í tvá hluti. Síðan sneri mannfallinu, ok váru Sigmundi konungi horfin heill, ok fell mjök liðit fyrir honum. Konungrinn hlífði sér ekki ok eggjar mjög liðit. Nú er sem mælt, at eigi má við margnum. Í þessari orrostu fell Sigmundr konungr...  
(VS 20)

Fighting continued for a while, and then a man entered the battle, wearing a black cloak and a hat. He was one-eyed and had a spear with him. He made way towards King Sigmundr and raised his spear. And when King Sigmundr struck violently, his sword hit the spear and broke apart. Then the tide of battle was reversed; fortune turned from King Sigmundr and he suffered heavy losses... In that battle King Sigmundr fell...

Although a single eye and a spear are Óðinn's traditional attributes, his alias in this is significantly different from the others: he is represented as a warrior-figure in high-status clothes (dyed *blár*) rather than the humble-looking stranger more usual for the saga, like the barefoot wanderer (3.5) or the ferryman (3.6). Óðinn's figure in *Vǫlsunga saga* is a confluence of the many variants of the theme 'Óðinn in human disguise', which is perfectly explained by the narrative logic, since his image is dependent on the narrative situation: on the battlefield he is a warrior, at a wedding a stranger and in the wilderness a *skeggmaðr*. On the other hand, this diversity of motif variants suggests that the author dealt with a wide range of sources and fused them together in his work. Notably, Sigmundr is aware of Óðinn's presence and says to Hjǫrdis: 'Vill Óðinn ekki, at vér bregðum sverði, síðan er nú brotnaði' (VS 21, 'Óðinn does not want me to strike with the sword, so it is broken'). Ironically, it is the same sword that was given to Sigmundr by Óðinn earlier, and later Óðinn will appear again to assist Sigurðr in his vengeance for Sigmundr.

### 3.8. 'Skeggmaðr' helps Sigurðr to choose Grani

According to the saga, Sigurðr's horse is, along with the sword Gramr given to Sigmundr, another of Óðinn's gift to the Vǫlsungs. Once again, Óðinn appears as a

wandering stranger; once again, as after Sinfjötli's death, he meets the hero in the woods. Similar to the account of Sigmundur's death, the stranger is directly identified as Óðinn in the end.

Annan dag eptir fór Sigurðr til skógar ok mætir einum gømlum manni með síðu skeggi. Sá var honum ókunnigr. Hann spyrr, hvert Sigurðr skyldi fara. Hann svarar:

‘Hest skyldum vér kjósa. Ráð um með oss.’

Hann mælti:

‘Förum ok rekum til árinna, er Busiltjörn heitir.’

Þeir reka hrossin út á djúp árinna, ok leggjast at landi nema einn hestr. Hann tók Sigurðr. Hann var grár at lit ok ungr at aldri, mikill vexti ok vænn. Engi hafði honum á bak komit. Skeggmaðrinn mælti: ‘Þessi hestr er kominn frá Sleipni, ok skal hann vandliga upp fæða, því at hann verðr hverjum hesti betri.’ Maðrinn hverfr þá. Sigurðr kallar hestinn Grana, ok hefir sá hestr beztr verit. Óðinn hafði hann hittan.

(VS 23-24)

The next day Sigurðr went to the forest and met an old man with a long beard there. That man was unknown to him. He asked where Sigurðr was going.

‘I want to choose a horse for myself,’ he said. ‘Give me advice about it’.

‘Let us drive the horses to the river that is called Busiltjörn,’ said the man.

They drove the horses into deep water, and all of them turned back except for one horse. That was the horse Sigurðr took. It was grey, young, large and handsome. It had not been mounted before. Then the man with the beard said:

‘This horse descends from Sleipnir. Care for it well and it will grow to be better than any other horse.’

Then the man disappeared. Sigurðr called the horse Grani, and it was the best of horses. The man he had met was Óðinn.

Here, as well as in *Frá dauða Sinfjötla*, Óðinn is associated with a border represented by a piece of water. This time, however, the idea of liminality is connected not with death, but with the horse's ability to cross world-boundaries, shared with its ancestor, the mythical Sleipnir, as Grani will prove to be the only horse able to cross the wall of fire that surrounds Brynhildr.

No other sources directly suggest the connection between Grani and Sleipnir (or any other parts of the Odinic complex). *Biðreks saga af Bern* tells simply that Sigurðr tamed the horse, which was exceptionally good but wild. An indirect connection was suggested by Michael Hart in his paper at the International Saga Conference in Aarhus, where he argued that the motif of the horse as Óðinn's gift in *Völsunga saga* might go back to Óðinn's ancient shamanic role as a horse-god, and supported this idea by parallels with *Gautreks saga*, where Hrosshárs-Grani is one of Óðinn's names.<sup>111</sup> It should be stressed, however, that *Gautreks saga*'s evidence is no less problematic than that of *Völsunga saga*, since they were both composed in late Medieval Iceland.

<sup>111</sup> Michael Hart, ‘Never Look a Gift Horse in the Mouth: Óðinn as Horse-god in Old Norse Tradition’, in *Proceedings of the 15th International Saga Conference: Sagas and the Use of the Past* (Aarhus, August 2012), 147.

### 3.9. ‘Fjǫlnir’ boards Sigurðr’s ship and calms the storm

The episode (VS 28-29) is modelled on *Reginsmál* where, in a similar situation, Óðinn boards Sigurðr’s ship and gives him advice before his battle with the sons of Hundingr. The saga quotes stanza 18 of *Reginsmál*:

Hnikarr hétu mik,  
þá er Hugin gladda,  
Vǫlsungr ungi  
ok vegit hafða.  
Nú máttu kalla  
karl af bjargi  
Feng eða Fjǫlni.  
Far vil ek þiggja.  
(VS 29, compare Edd. II, 300-301)

I was called Hnikarr when I gladdened Hugin, o young Vǫlsungr, and slayed people; now you can call the man on the rock Feng or Fjǫlnir; I would accept passage.

Fjǫlnir gives Sigurðr important advice and disappears, after which Sigurðr is victorious in the battle; compare the similar sequence in Sigi’s career (VS 2) and in Sigurðr’s later fight with Fáfñir (VS 30-31).

Fjǫlnir is one of Óðinn’s well-attested names, found among other sources in *Grímnismál*, *Gylfaginning* and the list *Óðins nofn* in *Skáldskaparmál*. More or less the same dialogue is found in *Norna-gests þátr*.<sup>112</sup> Boarding the hero’s ship during a storm is a typical *topos* of the disguised Óðinn;<sup>113</sup> the clearest parallel featuring the sea voyage theme is perhaps Hadingus’ similar encounter with an Odinic stranger during a storm in Book I of *Gesta Danorum* (GD I, 126).<sup>114</sup>

### 3.10. Óðinn gives Sigurðr advice before his fight with Fáfñir

Similar to the Grani episode, chapter 18 features a mysterious long-bearded man who advises Sigurðr how to slay Fáfñir and then disappears, his advice ensuring Sigurðr’s victory over the serpent (VS 30). The episode has no parallels in the surviving versions of Sigurðr’s fight with Fáfñir, but the motif of Óðinn’s advice that helps to win the battle is common elsewhere.

<sup>112</sup> For the discussion of the corresponding stanzas of *Reginsmál* and their parallels see Klaus von See et al., *Kommentar zu den Liedern den Edda*, 7 vols. (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 1997-2012), v, 320-52.

<sup>113</sup> von See 321.

<sup>114</sup> For the discussion of this episode in connection with other ‘careers of the ‘Odinshelden’, see Georges Dumézil, *From Myth to Fiction: The saga of Hadingus* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973), 43-45.

### 3.11. Hamðir and Sqrli's death

The forty-fourth (and the last) chapter of *Völsunga saga* tells the story of Hamðir and Sqrli's vengeance on King Jormunrekr, who had killed their sister Svanhildr; this is based on the Eddic poem *Hamðismál*. According to both *Hamðismál* and *Völsunga saga*, Hamðir and Sqrli invade Jormunrekr's hall and manage to mutilate the King. They fight the hall's defenders and cause great damage; no weapon harms them. Then, in the saga's version, Óðinn interferes once again:

Þá kom at einn maðr, hár ok eldiligr, með eitt auga ok mælti:  
 'Eigi eru þér vísir menn, er þér kunnið eigi þeim mönnum bana at veita.'  
 Konungrinn svarar:  
 'Gef oss ráð til, ef þú kannt.'  
 Hann mælti: 'Þér skuluð berja þá grjóti í hel.'  
 Svá var ok gert, ok þá flugu ór öllum áttum steinar at þeim, ok varð þeim þat at aldragi.  
 (VS 78)

Then appeared a one-eyed man, grey-haired and elderly, and said: 'You are no wise people if you do not know how to kill these men.'  
 The King answered: 'Give us advice on this, if you can.'  
 The man said: 'You should stone them to death.'  
 That was done, and stones flew at them from everywhere, and that was the end of them.

These are the last lines of the saga. Stanza twenty-five of *Hamðismál*, containing the advice to stone the brothers, goes as follows:

Þá hraut við  
 inn reginkunngi  
 baldr í hrynju,  
 sem björn hryti:  
 'Grýtið ér á gumna,  
 alls geirar né bíta,  
 eggjar né éarn  
 Jónakrs sonu.'  
 (Edd. II, 412)

Then bawled the god-born warrior in mail-coat, as a bear could roar: 'Throw stones at them, whom spears do not harm, neither (sword-)edges nor iron, the sons of Jónakr.'

As can be seen, nothing in the poem identifies 'reginkunngi baldr' as Óðinn.<sup>115</sup> The narrative rather suggests this to be Jormunrekr, because the stanza immediately follows Hamðir's mocking words addressed to him, and presumably the very moment when Jormunrekr's limbs were cut off. Ursula Dronke reads the stanza this way, supposing that Jormunrekr knows the means to kill his enemies because of his divine origin or because he is close to death and this state gives him supernatural

<sup>115</sup> See Klaus von See et al., *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, 7 vols. (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 1997-2012), VII, 969.

knowledge.<sup>116</sup> By ascribing the advice to stone Hamðir and Sqrli to Óðinn, *Völsunga saga* follows a tradition alternative to the *Codex Regius*, found in Saxo Grammaticus's account of Jarmerik's (Iamericus's) death in Book 8 of *Gesta Danorum*. There Svanhild's brothers (Hellespontines) are made invulnerable by spells of 'a witch called Guthrun', who most certainly corresponds to the Guðrún of Icelandic tradition (GD Fisher I, 258). She blinds Jarmerik's warriors, but then Othinus (one of Saxo's several Odinic figures) appears, counteracts her magic and advises them to stone the Hellespontines:

Eo tumultu superuenies Othinus mediosque preliantium globos appetens Danis, quos paterne semper pietate coluerat, ademptum preestigiis uisum supera uirtute restituit. Hellesponticos uero corpora aduersum tela carminibus durare solitos crebro silice conuerberandos esse perdocuit. Ita utrumque agmen mutua cede consumptim interiit. Iamericus utroque pede ac manibus spoliatus trunco inter exanimes corpore rotabatur.  
(GD I, 554)

In the mêlée Odin appeared, seeking the very thick of the fighting, and by his divine power counteracted the sorcery to restore the Danes' stolen vision, for he had always fostered them with a fatherly attention. Although the Hellespontines habitually used charms to toughen their bodies against weapons, he taught Danes how to pound them severely with a hail of stones. In this way each band was destroyed in the mutual slaughter. Jarmerik's mutilated, lopped off both its feet and hands, rolled among the dead.<sup>117</sup>

Finnur Jónsson supposed that the author-compiler, when composing the finale of *Völsunga saga*, used not the variant of *Hamðismál* known to us from the *Codex Regius* but a later non-extant variant, where Óðinn's intervention is included.<sup>118</sup> The existence of such a variant is possible but questionable, since *Hamðismál* as we know it is built around the personal conflict between the brothers and Jǫrmunrekr: they want revenge on Jǫrmunrekr; Jǫrmunrekr threatens them; they wound and mock him; finally, he orders them killed with stones, but ends up dead himself. It is plausible to assume, therefore, that the interpretation of 'Grýtið ér á gumna...' as Óðinn's words rather than Jǫrmunrekr's is a conscious narrative decision made by the author-compiler of *Völsunga saga*, probably inspired by a source that was not the version of *Hamðismál* he was working with. Even if Finnur Jónsson's hypothesis is correct, however, the author-compiler clearly wanted to finish the saga with Óðinn's

<sup>116</sup> *The Poetic Edda*, ed. Ursula Dronke, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), I: *Heroic Poems*, 236.

<sup>117</sup> GD I, 258. As it is evident from the quote, Jarmerik is shown here as a Danish king, and Gothic like elsewhere, since Saxo identifies different people, including the Goths and Winnili, with the Danes — probably on the grounds of their connection with Mars or Wodan; see GD Fisher II, 140-41.

<sup>118</sup> Finnur Jónsson, *Den oldnorske og oldislandske litteraturs historie*, 3 vols. (København : G.E.C. Gads Forlag, 1920-1924), II, 837.

appearance, as he most likely omitted the finale of *Hamðismál* — Hamðir and Sqrli's final dialogue from stanzas 26-30 (Edd. II, 412-413). This way, *Volsunga saga* is effectively finished with Óðinn's interaction, quite similarly to how its narrative starts and develops.

This continuity of the Odinic theme, so pronounced in *Volsunga saga*, is clearly not the case with its source. Eddic parallels exist for only two or three of the episodes described in the list above: that of Sinfjötli's death, and the stranger's advice to Sigurðr (VS 29) which is a clear parallel to *Reginsmál*. The case of *Hamðismál* and the fall of Hamðir and Sqrli (VS 78) is, as discussed above, problematic.

Although there are no Eddic parallels for the story of Sigmundr's sword, given and then shattered by Óðinn, there is other evidence than in *Volsunga saga*, that supports the image of Sigmundr as an 'Óðinn-hero'. Important for this argument is this character's position in Valhøll according to *Eiríksmál*; both Sigmundr and Sinfjötli are present there as *einherjar*, which could theoretically suggest a traditional connection between those two figures and specifically Odinic imagery (or, on the other hand, could mean nothing in particular: it is quite possible that the author of *Eiríksmál* just picked two famous names from legendary-heroic tradition to set a proper background for Eiríkr. We do not know if the legend of Sinfjötli's death, preserved in the Poetic Edda, already existed when *Eiríksmál* was created; the fact that it is written in prose suggests that it may be later than the poetry it accompanies). Finally, a late connection between Sigmundr and Óðinn survives in Norwegian folklore that, according to Hans Ross, imagines Sigmundr to be 'foremost in Oskoreia, riding ahead of everybody'.<sup>119</sup> Åsgårdsreia (Nynorsk 'Oskoreia'), or the Wild Hunt, is in Germanic medieval tradition strongly associated with Óðinn, who is sometimes imagined as its leader,<sup>120</sup> and the image of the Wild Hunt itself has been considered in connection to *valkyrja* figures.<sup>121</sup> Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the name Sigmundr is listed in *Skáldskaparmál* as one of Óðinn's names.<sup>122</sup> As it has been shown, Óðinn eight times personally takes part in the saga's events, and three

<sup>119</sup> *Norsk ordbok*, ed. Hans Ross (A. Cammermeyr, L. Swanstrøm: Christiania, 1895), 642.

<sup>120</sup> Susan Hilary Houston, 'Ghost Riders in the Sky', in *Western Folklore* 23:3 (1964), 157.

<sup>121</sup> Franz Josef Vonbun, *Beiträge zur deutschen Mythologie* (Chur: Druck und verlag von Leonh Hitz, 1862), 15.

<sup>122</sup> On Óðinn's names corresponding to the names of 'his favourite heroes', see Gabriel Turville-Prette, *Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964), 62. Svipdagr and Hqtrr in *Hrólfs saga kraka* also bear Óðinn's names and are involved in a clearly Odinic storyline, especially Svipdagr, who loses one of his eyes in a battle.

more times affects the storyline in some other way. In all those cases, he is associated with his traditional mythological roles: he either bestows gifts and victory or represents the characters' deaths. In a few cases, those of Sigmundr and Hamðir and Sqrli (and arguably Randver),<sup>123</sup> Óðinn appears in person and provokes the protagonist's death, performing in this way his function as a death-deity. This aspect of Óðinn's figure is structurally emphasised by the closing position of the Hamðir and Sqrli episode. 3.11 is an indication of the Vqlsungs' connection to Óðinn. All other episodes fall quite distinctively into two categories, reflecting two aspects of Óðinn, who is both a victory-god and a death-god:

- In six cases, Óðinn gives the hero advice or a gift, which is sometimes inseparable (as in the case of Grani). This gift or advice secures their victories and their rise to power.
- In three cases, Óðinn plays the role of a death deity: he either receives the dead heroes (Rerir and Sinfjötli) or drives them towards their end (Sigmundr).

The last example, not listed above, is the death of Hamðir and Sqrli and the finale of the saga. It curiously belongs to both categories, and is at the same time a subversion of both: Óðinn appears and gives advice that decides the outcome of the battle — but this time he advises against the Vqlsungs, bringing their end. Considering the whole story of Óðinn's interference in the saga, this is a high-impact finale — too much so, perhaps, to be just an adoption from a now-lost source. In fact, the Odinic theme in *Vqlsunga saga* is quite consistent and well-structured, which is not the case with the *Codex Regius* poems as a whole. This observation supports Finch's and Aguirre's argument that the author-compiler uses the poetic material for his own artistic intentions rather than is entirely dependent on it. In other words, Óðinn's image in *Vqlsunga saga* is a thirteenth-century construct based on traditional material rather than just a retelling of this traditional material. Such artistic independence makes *Vqlsunga saga* a valuable document that reflects the Medieval Icelandic attitude to the mythical-heroic Vqlsung corpus; on the other hand, this means that a researcher should have serious reservations when treating the *Vqlsunga saga* material as a source for studies in mythology and history of religion. When discussing the Odinic motifs in the saga, this especially applies to the episodes where the mythological connections are presumable rather than self-evident.

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<sup>123</sup> Régis Boyer, *La saga de Sigurdr ou la parole donnée* (Paris: Lés Editions du Cerf, 1989), 47.

#### 4. PRESUMABLY ODINIC MOTIFS IN VOLSUNGA SAGA

##### 4.2. The problem of interpreting motifs

Section 3 above deals with the saga's explicitly Odinic episodes that often involve the god's immediate, personal participation in the story. Even when Óðinn is not identified (like, e.g., in Sigmundr's death episode or after Sigurðr's choosing Grani), there can be little doubt that it is he who gives Sigmundr the sword, receives Sinfjötli's body, repeatedly assists Sigurðr, and advises Jǫrmunrekr's warriors how to slay Hamðir and Sǫrli. There are, however, less clear examples that have been often read by scholars in mythological, and especially Odinic, context, and observed as motifs connected to saga representation of ancient initiatory rites (references to those opinions will be given in discussions of specific passages).

The following *Volsunga saga* episodes can be, and have been, read as implying reference to Óðinn and Óðinn-worship.

- In chapter 8, Sigmundr and Sinfjötli transform into wolves, who are in Old Norse mythology known as Óðinn's beasts. Given the clear initiatory structure of the episode, parallels may be drawn with Sigmundr and Sinfjötli's shapeshifting and the *úlfhéðnar* of *Ynglinga saga* — probably a warrior cult also associated with Óðinn.
- At the very end of Sigmundr and Sinfjötli's life in the forest in their wolf-shape (chapter 8), Sinfjötli accidentally gets either mortally wounded or killed by Sigmundr. Later, Sigmundr manages to either cure or resurrect Sinfjötli with a magical leaf brought by a raven. Jens Peter Schjødt mentions the connection between Óðinn and ravens (Initiation 309), and another argument that could support the hypothetical 'Odinism' of the raven episode could be a parallel with chapter 1, where Óðinn sends to Rerir a valkyrie in raven form to bring him a magical apple. Hilda Ellis Davidson, too, emphasises the association between birds, especially ravens, and Óðinn, among other things in *Volsunga saga*, though she does not mention this particular episode.<sup>124</sup>
- The presence in the narrative of Sigrún and Brynhildr, both identified as *valkyrjur*, may signify a specific connection of the events to Óðinn — and

<sup>124</sup> Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe: Early Scandinavian and Celtic Religions* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1988), 86-87.

may not. One should bear in mind that the main reason for those two characters being present in the same text is, as in the case of *Völsunga saga*, determined by the fact that *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* and *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* are found in the same manuscript, as are the Sigurðr poems (*Sigrdrífumál*, *Guðrúnarkviða I*, *Sigurðarkviða hin skamma*, *Helreið Brynhildar*). This is, therefore, probably the weakest connection, as it does not seem possible to support it with anything but *valkyrjur*' well-known connection to Óðinn.

- Jǫrmunrekr threatens to hang Hamðir and Sǫrli when they come to his hall, death through hanging being conceived an Odinic. Jǫrmunrekr (in *Hamðismál*, *Gesta Danorum* and *Völsunga saga*) is particularly associated with hanging his enemies, which has been interpreted as a memory of a rite of sacrifice. This notion is partly based, however, on the assumption that the Odinic theme dominating *Völsunga saga* has also been the feature of the tradition behind it, which allows the assumption that motifs such as death by hanging could be seen as a part of a complex. This work tests this argument rather than relying on it, therefore the association between Jǫrmunrekr and hanging, and its possible Odinic context, will be left aside.

Aside from the possible allusions listed above, other supporting arguments have been put forward, e.g., that Svanhildr is a characteristic name for a *valkyrja*, which, together with Randver's hanging, forms a group of Odinic motifs, which suggest that the ill-advisor Bikki should also (as in encounters with Sigmundr and Sigurðr listed above) be disguised Óðinn.<sup>125</sup> In fact, views on how extensive Odinic allusions are in *Völsunga saga* depend to a certain extent on how critical a scholar is towards this conception.

Whether to evoke Odinic associations in those cases was the author's intention or not is not entirely clear, and the picture becomes even more complicated if we consider the wolf episode, Sigrún and Brynhildr plots and the hanging motif in the light of the text's sources, which are very diverse. Certainly, wolves, ravens and death by hanging are all associated with Óðinn in the mythological tradition, but the mere occurrence of these themes in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, *Sigrdrífumál* and *Hamðismál* does not mean that those poems are focused on the Odinic theme or that

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<sup>125</sup> Régis Boyer, *La saga de Sigurdr ou la parole donnée* (Paris: Lés Editions du Cerf, 1989), 47.

they have been traditionally understood this way.

Animal imagery in chapter 8, connected with Sigmundr and Sinfjötli's life in Siggeir's realm, is of specific importance here for several reasons. Firstly, its Odinic nature is a complicated feature. In the context of either this particular saga or other *fornaldarsögur*, its connections to mythological imagery associated with Óðinn are quite strong, especially compared to the mere presence of valkyrie figures or the hanging motif. On the other hand, both the wolf episode and the raven episode have numerous and clear parallels in folklore outside Scandinavia, and quite often outside Europe. Such a wide background outside Scandinavia makes those connections problematic, strong as they are inside the particular text. This twofold nature of the wolf motif and the raven motif in the saga suggests that their interpretation as Odinic is chronologically late, and secondary, dating back to the time of *Völsunga saga*'s composition rather than to earlier tradition.

Below is a more detailed view of the problematic chapter 8 and, in particular, its shapeshifting imagery will be looked at. It will be shown that, contrary to Schjødts' assumptions, this episode hardly shows any long-lived connection to mythological Odinic imagery that could precede the composition of the written saga. Most likely, the whole chapter 8 is an insertion composed by the author-compiler and based on folktale material, which was only partly and sometimes awkwardly adapted to the poetics of saga narrative. It is most probable, nevertheless, that the author-compiler understood wolves and ravens as Odinic, and for that reason chose narratives featuring them for this insertion.

### 4.3. Sigmundr and Sinfjötli's transformation into wolves

Sigmundr and Sinfjötli's temporary transformation into wolves in chapter 8 has been read as a warrior consecration rite associated with *úlfhéðnar* or 'wolf-skins', which *Ynglinga saga* mentions in Odinic context (1.1). The characters' shapeshifting in this episode has been traditionally associated in scholarship with Óðinn's ability to shapeshift, known from *Ynglinga saga* and from the *Prose Edda*.<sup>126</sup>

The initiatory nature of Sigmundr and Sinfjötli's vengeance episode is well

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<sup>126</sup> Aside from this association being one of Schjødts' main arguments, see, e.g., Kirby Flower Smith, 'An Historical Study of the Werewolf in Literature', in *PMLA* 9.1 (1984), 25.

studied,<sup>127</sup> and the shapeshifting theme's connection to *úlfhéðnar* can be easily worked into the argument. Such an understanding of the episode can be supported by a parallel with Bǫðvarr's transforming Hǫttr into a warrior in *Hrólfs seaga kraka*, a similarity mentioned by Jens Peter Schjødt.

Moreover, Kris Kershaw has connected *berserkir* and *úlfhéðnar*, observed in her study as ecstatic Germanic warrior-cults, with Óðinn's *einherjar*.<sup>128</sup> Sigmundur and Sinfjǫtli, at the same time, are figures traditionally connected to the Valhǫll imagery even outside *Vǫlsunga saga*, as far as we can judge from their role in *Eiríksmál*.<sup>129</sup> The characters in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, in a similarly initiatory background, are closely connected with the idea of *berserkir* — both in the actual storyline as they fight *berserkir* before and immediately after the episode, and through the supposed association of *berserkir* with bears (Bǫðvarr of *Hrólfs saga kraka* shapeshifts into a bear, and the corresponding character in *Gesta Danorum* kills a bear). Although the parallel itself does not exactly prove the connection between wolves and bears in the sagas and legendary *úlfhéðnar* and *berserkir*, it establishes a tendency that is often found in the *fornaldarsögur*.

The story of transformation into animals through putting on the animal's hide, and especially the allowance to temporarily put off the hide after a specified period of time (often accompanied by the motif of burning the hide), is a widespread folktale motif that has no Odinic implications *per se*. It is a common *fornaldarsaga* practice, however, to interweave folktale shapeshifting stories into the same plots as *berserkir/úlfhéðnar* legends, as can be seen from *Bǫðvar-Bjarka þáttur* in *Hrólfs saga kraka*. It is an open question whether the author-compiler of *Vǫlsunga saga* had in mind the connection between wolves, *úlfhéðnar* and Óðinn, or not. Considering the accompanying imagery, it is possible. On the other hand, the werewolf folktale plot is a very widespread one and is found in many European traditions, and is not usually connected with Óðinn. This particular association in *Vǫlsunga saga* is based, therefore, only on our general knowledge of Snorri's *Edda* and skaldic poetry where

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<sup>127</sup> See, e.g., Initiation 299-312; Jan de Vries, 'Das Motiv der Vater-Sohn-Kampfes im Hildebrandslied: Mit einer Nachschrift des Verfassers', in *Zur germanisch-deutschen Heldensage* 4 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1961), 248-284.

<sup>128</sup> Kris Kershaw, 'The one-eyed god: Odin and the (Indo-)Germanic Männerbünde', *Journal of Indo-European Studies: Monograph* 36 (Washington DC: Centre of the Study of Man, 2000).

<sup>129</sup> John Lindow, 'Narrative worlds, human environments, and poets: The case of Bragi', in *Old Norse Religion in Long-Term Perspectives: Origins, Changes, and Interactions*, ed. Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert, Vägar till Midgård 8 (2012), 21-22.

Óðinn is connected with wolves. The origin of Sigmundur and Sinfjötli's transformation story does not survive and could be a late interpolation.

Another supposedly Odinic motif occurs when Sinfjötli, when in his wolf-form, is either resurrected or healed by a leaf brought by a raven — the raven, as Schjødtt notes, being 'Óðinn's bird *par excellence*' (Initiation 309). This motif supports his argument about the 'Odic' nature of Sigmundur and Sinfjötli's initiatory story, even though Schjødtt never examines it in more detail. The way the raven motif is used in the saga, however, is from the literary point of view quite peculiar, and could probably shed some light on the structure of the text. The saga tells that Sigmundur and Sinfjötli, when in their wolf-shape, argue at one point and start fighting:

Sigmundur hleypr at honum svá hart, at hann stakar við ok fellr. Sigmundur bítr í barkann framan. Þann dag máttu þeir eigi komast ór úlfahömunum. Sigmundur leggur hann nú á bak sér ok berr heim í skálann, ok sat hann yfir honum, en það tröll taka úlfhamina. Sigmundur sér einn dag, hvar hreysikettir tveir váru, ok bítr annarr í barkann öðrum, ok rann sá til skógar ok hefir eitt blað ok færir yfir sárit, ok sprettr upp hreysiköttrinn heill. Sigmundur gengr út ok sér, hvar hrafn flýgr með blaðit ok færði honum. Hann dregr þetta yfir sárit Sinfjötla, en hann sprettr upp þegar heill, sem hann hefði aldri sárr verit. Eftir þat fara þeir til jarðhúss ok eru þar, til þess er þeir skyldu fara ór úlfhömum. Þá taka þeir ok brenna í eldi ok báðu engum at meini verða. Ok í þeim ósköpum unnu þeir mǫrg frægðarverk í ríki Siggeirs konungs. Ok er Sinfjötli er frumvaxti, þá þykkist Sigmundur hafa reynt hann mjök.  
(VS 11)

Sigmundur jumped on him so violently that he staggered and fell. Sigmundur bit him in the throat. That day they were unable to take off the wolf-hides. Sigmundur put him on his shoulder and carried him back to the hut, and watched over him, and wished that trolls would take the wolf-hides. One day Sigmundur noticed two weasels, one of which bit the other and then ran into the forest and returned with a leaf, and laid it over the wound. Then the other weasel jumped up, quite healthy. Then Sigmundur went out and saw a raven carrying a leaf, and he took it. He put it on Sinfjötli's wound and he jumped up quite healthy, as if nothing had happened to him. After that they went to their underground dwelling and stayed there until they could take off the wolf-hides. Then they burned them in the fireplace and said no one would suffer from them again. As wolves, they did a lot of harm in King Siggeir's reign. By then Sinfjötli had grown up and Sigmundur thought he had tested him thoroughly.

As can be seen, Sinfjötli's death and immediately following resurrection, both caused by Sigmundur, are the culminating and final points of the characters' lives as wolves and the initiatory preparation for their main deed, that is, their vengeance on Siggeir, for which Sinfjötli is ready once he is 'tested thoroughly'. This initiatory nature of the episode, as we find it in the saga, is well-established and demonstrated in scholarship. Much more problematic, and left aside by Schjødtt, is this episode's explicitly folktale structure, of which the raven motif is, as will be shown, the most symptomatic.

The plot about a bird, most often a raven, that brings some magical means of

resurrecting a dead (always violently killed) hero, is present in folktales virtually all around the world. In Slavonic tradition, the protagonist's death is particularly often followed by appearance of a raven that brings the 'Water of Life' or 'living water' (Russian 'живая вода'), which has the power to resurrect the hero after he is killed by his adversaries. The death and resurrection are then followed by the final stage of conflict, ending with the hero's triumph. In the Russian folktale *Marya Morevna*, the hero is killed and dismembered by his nemesis Koschei, but is brought back to life by his kinsmen, three shape-shifter-wizards, Raven son of Raven, Falcon son of Falcon and Eagle son of Eagle, after which he passes a number of tests and is able to kill Koschei<sup>130</sup> (this is the clearest parallel to *Völsunga saga*'s account of events described in chapter 8, where the werewolf episode is followed by rescue from the mound, after which Sigmundr and Sinfjötli finally confront Siggeir). In the Czechoslovak folktale *Zlatovláska*, the killed hero is brought back to life by magical Water of Life brought by a raven.<sup>131</sup> A number of Burmese folktales also feature either resurrecting water or other magical means brought by a raven to bring the dead hero back to life: in *Seven Sons of Old Lopo*, a raven and a snake obtain a magical root to resurrect the hero,<sup>132</sup> and Maung Young Yan sends a few ravens to get the reviving water.<sup>133</sup> The figure of the intermediary between the worlds, of course, can be different, though it tends to be a raven in surprisingly multiple cases, as listed above. Even when not a raven, it tends to be a bird: in the North Caucasus folktale *Timar*, the hero is resurrected by a magical bird's feather,<sup>134</sup> and in the Burmese *Why We Have Moon and Sun Eclipses* a resurrecting root is brought by a *nat* (a spirit) in the form of a falcon.<sup>135</sup> The raven, however, is the most widespread type of the resurrecting figure, which is probably not surprising, considering this bird's common association with wisdom, death and

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<sup>130</sup> 'Marya Morevna', in *Russkiye narodnye skazki (Russian folk-tales)*, 3 vols. (Moscow: Nauka, 1984-1985), I, 303.

<sup>131</sup> 'Zlatovláska the Golden-Haired: the story of Yirik and the Snake', in *The Shoemaker's Apron: A Book of Czechoslovak Fairy Tales and Folk Tales*, ed. Parker Fillmore (Harcourt: Brace and Howe, 1920), 43.

<sup>132</sup> 'Sem Synovey Starogo Lopo (Seven Sons of Old Lopo)', in *Skazky Narodov Birmy (Burmese Fairy-Tales)*, ed. V.B. Kasevich, Yu.M. Osipov (Moscow: Glav-Red-Vost-Lit, 1976), 45.

<sup>133</sup> 'Maung Young Yan', in *Skazky Narodov Birmy (Burmese Fairy-Tales)*, ed. V.B. Kasevich, Yu.M. Osipov (Moscow: Glav-Red-Vost-Lit, 1976), 318.

<sup>134</sup> 'Timar', in *Skazki i legendy ingushei i chechentsev (Ingush and Chechen Folk-tales and legends)* (Moscow: Glav-Red-Vost-Lit, 1983), 99.

<sup>135</sup> 'Pochemu byvayut sonnechnyye I lunnye zatmenya (Why we have Moon and Sun Eclipses)', in *Skazky Narodov Birmy (Burmese Fairy-Tales)*, ed. V.B. Kasevich, Yu. M. Osipov (Moscow: Glav-Red-Vost-Lit, 1976), 151.

transgression, and its meaning for shamanic societies.<sup>136</sup>

In this type of folktale storyline, the hero is usually resurrected with some kind of magical item or substance, usually magical water or, as in *Vǫlsunga saga*, some type of herb. It is impossible to establish exactly when the raven motif was incorporated into the saga, since no sources to the Sigmundr and Sinfjǫtli story survive. It is quite probable as well that one folktale interpolation, that of shapeshifting into wolves, resulted in further inclusion in the saga of other folktale motifs, since the entire episode starts to work as a fairy-tale with its own generic features, different from the traditional saga narrative.

The author-compiler, who had already made use of the shapeshifting folktale motif, and perhaps intended connection with Óðinn, could also bear in mind the god's association with ravens when he was composing the entire text of the saga. This connection, then, is likely to be a late Icelandic association that never belonged to the legend of the *Vǫlsungs* in the first place.

It can be added that the *topos* of a raven saving the protagonist by bringing something vital to him, present in chapters 1 and 8 of *Vǫlsunga saga*, seems to be very old, appearing most famously in the Book of Kings where the ravens feed Elijah, and has been transmitted in the legend of St. Benedict and hagiographical literature. In the Book of Kings, the fact that Elijah is fed by a raven is interpreted as God's miracle, since ravens are usually greedy (ravenous) birds.<sup>137</sup> It is questionable in what relation Elijah's raven plot, the very similar St. Benedict plot and the folktale motif stand to each other, but their transgressive meaning is evident in all three cases.

Sinfjǫtli's resurrection fits perfectly into the initiatory scheme described above, as long as it is considered as a folktale plot only. When looked upon as a part of a saga narrative, however, it inevitably raises a number of interconnected questions, the most important of them the following:

- In the light of the folktale origin of the whole wolf skin episode and its parts, e.g., the resurrection by a herb, how valid are Schjødts' taken-for-granted connections between the wolf-hides and the raven on the one side, and the Odinic imagery on the other?
- If we accept that there indeed is such a connection, are then the Odinic

<sup>136</sup> See, e.g., Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe: Early Scandinavian and Celtic Religions* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1988), 86-87.

<sup>137</sup> 'Elijah's conflict with Ahab and his flight', in *Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. John Barton, John Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 245.

implications behind the ‘testing of Sinfjötli’ story a part of some tradition behind *Völsunga saga*, or was the parallel between the story’s werewolves and the raven and Odinic beasts made by the author-compiler?

From the pre-Wieselgren point of view on *Völsunga saga* as an awkward prose compilation of diverse sources, the answer to the first question would most certainly be ‘not valid at all’, and this argument would not go any further. There has, however, been a general agreement in the last decades that the author-compiler’s contribution to the saga structure is both systematic and significant. In the light of the saga’s recurrent motif of Óðinn’s patronage, and particularly the sword given by him to Sigmundur, it is very probable that the saga audience perceived those motifs as a part of the Odinic complex — especially the raven and herb motif, which would then recall the episode in chapter 1 of the saga, where a valkyrie transforms into a raven and, on Óðinn’s command, brings Rerir a magical apple.

If we, however, think of the transformation story covered in chapter 8 as an independent narrative, without the evidence of the rest of *Völsunga saga*, the connection of wolf-hides and the raven to Óðinn will seem highly improbable. As we have seen, the corresponding folktale plots are present in very different traditions. The Odinic associations in the ‘testing of Sinfjötli’ episode are thus activated only in the context of *Völsunga saga* as we know it.

This brings us to the second question. The story of a cursed animal skin or hide that transforms the owner into the said animal (especially if the skin can be taken off regularly and eventually burned) is, as we have observed, extremely widespread in different cultures. So is the resurrection plot. The episode in *Völsunga saga* bears unmistakable signs of the narrative’s conscious adoption of saga-style, not always perfect and logical. For example, the original owners of the wolf-hides, a king’s sons, appear in the story without any explanation and immediately disappear from it once the wolf-hides are introduced into the plot. Sinfjötli’s death and resurrection is not commented upon in any way, and the narrative is constructed in such a way that it is not evident that Sinfjötli’s wound is mortal. Indeed, an actual death of the character followed by a resurrection, being a natural narrative element of a folktale, would ruin saga narrative, to which the *topos* of death and resurrection is extraneous. Sinfjötli’s death, therefore, can be interpreted as a mortal wound from which the leaf miraculously heals him. This reduces the dramatic impact, characteristic of similar episodes in folktales. Another feature that decreases the significance of the episode is

the fact that the ‘dying and resurrecting’ theme is duplicated later in the chapter, much more effectively and at greater length, when Sigmundr and Sinfjötli are bound and put into a mound by Siggeir, and then escape. Being buried alive and breaking away from the burial mound is a clear parallel for dying and rising from the dead, which happens, as usual in a folk-story, immediately before the final confrontation that the hero or the heroes are to win. According to the same narrative logic, it is Siggeir who ‘kills’ them this way, while, when they are in wolf-shape, it is Sigmundr who wounds or kills Sinfjötli.

If the saga’s events, from Sigmundr and Sinfjötli’s transformation into wolves to their rescue from the mound, are observed as a logical sequence, the two ‘deaths’ make perfect sense. First, Sigmundr acts as an initiator towards Sinfjötli; he tests and consecrates him by ‘killing’ and then ‘resurrecting’ for a new life. Next, they both undergo a more serious test, to which the saga gives much more emphasis — that is, their escape from the mound where Siggeir buries them alive. With Sinfjötli’s ‘resurrection’ ends the heroes’ life in the forest in their wolf-forms; with their rescue from the mound ends a larger timespan that includes Sigmundr’s seclusion in the wilderness. As it was put by Schjødt, who analysed the events of chapter 8 exactly from this consciously unhistorical, diachronic point of view, Sigmundr can be seen as both an initiator to Sinfjötli and an initiate himself (Initiation 283). The initiation of Sinfjötli is his ‘testing’ in the wolf-form, while Sigmundr’s initiation takes place before and after it (his killing of the she-wolf, rescue from the pit, and finally breaking away from the mound together with Sinfjötli).

Indeed, the structure of the plot clearly demonstrates all the most important elements of the initiatory complex (testing, transformation, killing of adversaries in the liminal phase, ‘death’ and subsequent ‘rebirth’). It is hard, however, despite Schjødt’s implications, to say how ‘Odinic’ this initiation structure is of itself, without the association between wolves and *úlfhéðnar* and the raven and Óðinn’s ravens. This association, however, as has been shown, is specific for the saga, and in the case of the wolves-*úlfhéðnar* connection relies on evidence from other, even later *fornaldarsögur*. Óðinn is, of course, the god of death in one of his aspects and was himself resurrected, which could suggest a connection between the folktale motif and the mythological concept in the Norse material, but it is hardly possible to prove it.

Schjødt is aware of the dangers of his decidedly unhistorical approach, and stresses that, in the framework of structural analysis, his methodology is fairly valid

as long as it is not just specific texts that are analysed, but rather a corpus, a tradition, a narrative. ‘It could be an objection that treating various sources in this [uniform — E.M.] way indicates a lack of respect for the generic differences they clearly manifest, and that is true, but generic distinctions are only of secondary interest to the analysis of structures. If a series of pieces of information, taken from different sources about the same hero or the same subject and with a common basic narrative structure, *together* clearly point towards a connection with initiation complex, it is not expedient to reject this connection just because every piece of information is not found in the same source or within the same genre’ (Initiation 283-84). On the whole, Schjødts methodology indeed allows him to perform a substantial analysis that, on the other side, leaves many details uncovered or even misinterpreted, exactly because they depend on the disregarded historical-generic features of the text. It has been convincingly demonstrated by Schjødts and his predecessors that the story of Sigmundr and Sinfjötli’s isolation in the forest, as given in *Völsunga saga*, is initiatory, but this argument is attended by a number of uncertainties. It is clear that the initiatory nature of this particular episode, out of the saga’s context, is defined by its folk-tale origins. How closely then is this plot related to the traditional *Völsung* legend? Is the initiation structure in this episode connected, as Schjødts supposes, to specifically Odinic imagery?

As can be seen from folktale parallels listed above, the answer to the second question is ‘no’. Transformation into a wolf and resurrection by a raven are common folktale motifs found elsewhere in the Indo-European world without any comprehensible connection to anything that we know about Óðinn. However, inside *Völsunga saga* as a separate work of art created by an individual author, it is possible to trace this connection: it is supported by the recurrent Odinic theme, as well as by a particular parallel between two episodes in chapters 1 and 8, in which a raven brings a magical item from the Otherworld to assist the *Völsungs*. In the first case, it is told explicitly that the raven was a valkyrie sent by Óðinn; in the second case, it is logical to assume, in this particular text, a similar reading. It is quite possible that the author-compiler had this parallel in mind when he was composing the saga, and therefore the ‘Odinism’ of Sigmundr and Sinfjötli’s adventures is, in fact, artificial, literary, going back to the time when *Völsunga saga* as we know it was created and hardly earlier.

## 5. CONCLUSION: *Völsunga saga*'S ODINIC IMAGERY IN THE LIGHT OF ITS SOURCES

The traditional understanding of the *Völsungs* as Odinic should therefore be reconsidered. An Odinic background for virtually everything that happens to the *Völsungs* is evidently the case in *Völsunga saga* but, as we can see in the example of chapter 8, the author-compiler tends to introduce connections with Odinic imagery to material that originally might have never had them. The same tendency may be, with some reservations, traced throughout the rest of the saga, where we can compare the saga's account to its Eddic sources. It has been considered how the characters' Odinic encounters that those episodes form a logical and explicitly rhetorical structure, which could hardly be inherited from *Völsunga saga*'s sources. While the mere fact of Sigmundur and Sinfjötli's traditional understanding as 'Óðinn-heroes' is supported by texts like *Eiríksmál*,<sup>138</sup> the late Medieval contribution to the development of this theme should not be underestimated.

Similar reservations have already been put forward by Otto Höfler, but his criticism of too straightforward an understanding of the Odinic theme in *Völsunga saga* was based mostly on observations of the 'literary' style in the episode of the 'testing of Sinfjötli'.<sup>139</sup> This chapter's analysis of the saga's recurrent motifs, as well as consideration of some scenes in the light of their parallels in European folklore, demonstrates that what Höfler calls 'literary' constitutes not only the style of the saga, but the whole narrative and the structure of the saga on the macro-level.

Transmission of motifs is an uncertain area, since evidence that is now found only in *Völsunga saga* could originally be based on traditions that have not survived. What should be pointed out, however, is that we have no early parallels for the listed episodes. If we really accept our understanding of the author-compiler's attitude to his sources, as shown in the example of wolf and raven episodes, the following imagery should be seen as, to a large extent, specific to the *fornaldarsaga* age.

To sum up, *Völsunga saga* shows some traits of conscious reworking of mythological, legendary and folklore material that forms its basis, performed in such a way that the theme of relationship between Óðinn and his chosen heroes should be emphasised and driven to the foreground of the narrative. Wherever the Odinic theme

<sup>138</sup> See Otto Höfler, *Kultische Geheimbünde der Germanen* (Frankfurt am Main, 1934), 212.

<sup>139</sup> Höfler 201.

was clearly present in the sources, as in the case of *Reginismál* and the saga account about Sigurðr's vengeance for his father, the motif would be developed and duplicated. Where there are motifs that did not originally belong to the Odinic framework, as is most probably the case with the wolf-hides story in chapter 8 and Sinfjötli's healing-resurrection by a raven's herb in the same chapter, those motifs are likely to be worked into this framework. The means of performing it are tellingly literary, belonging to the written era, such as parallelism between episodes belonging to different narratives, or the cyclic composition of starting the saga with an account of the Völsungs' descent from Óðinn, and finishing it with their end, for which he is personally responsible.

Eddic parallels to the Odinic theme in *Völsunga saga* are substantial enough but should not be overestimated. It has been demonstrated that the theme in the saga is too concise, logical and well-developed to be a product of mere preservation of the sources. Either the older theme was systematically emphasised by the author-compiler, or derived from a younger tradition reflected also in *Gesta Danorum*. In either case, the result is a very specific reading of the older sources, which established a typical *foraldarsaga* type of hero. It will be seen from the following chapters that the Odinic hero complex, while clearly having roots in mythology, is a late Icelandic phenomenon and exists within the genre of 'mythical-heroic saga'. This is an important argument both for understanding the Icelandic *foraldarsögur*, which aside from allusions to considerably older sources also have important interconnections, and our view of mythology, into which *foraldarsaga* views are often, at the scholars' own risk, 'read'.

## CHAPTER 3

## HRÓLFS SAGA KRAKA

1. USE OF THE ODINIC HERO THEME IN *HRÓLFS SAGA KRAKA*

The connection between Hrólfr kraki and Óðinn is not so well-attested beyond the saga text as it is the case with the major characters of *Völsunga saga* (2.3). However, this connection is quite clear-cut in a *páttir* in *Flateyjarbók* titled *Óðinn kom til Ólafs konungs með dul ok prettum* (‘Óðinn came to king Ólafr with deception and trickery’). In this short text, the disguised Óðinn visits Ólafr inn helgi, and they speak of the old times their most famous kings. At some point, Óðinn asks Ólafr who of the ancient kings he would like to have been. Ólafr states that, although he would not want to be anyone else but himself, he would prefer to have Hrólfr kraki’s conduct and leadership, but still keep his Christian faith. Óðinn, still disguised as Gestr, suddenly becomes frustrated and asks why Ólafr would like to be like Hrólfr kraki and not some other king, handsome and strong without equal, capable of assigning victory to himself and to the others, and gifted in poetry. Apparently recognising Óðinn’s most famous powers in this description, the king attempts to strike Gestr with his prayer book, saying: ‘Þú vilda ek sízt vera, hinn illi Óðinn’ (‘You, evil Óðinn, is the least I want to be’).<sup>140</sup>

The relationship between Ólafr and Óðinn in this episode is that of direct antagonism, and Hrólfr kraki is seen as Ólafr’s closest alternative in the pagan world. Hrólfr’s best qualities, his conduct (*afterð*) and leadership or lordship (*hofðingskapr*), are presented in a direct opposition to Óðinn’s gifts, and therefore the reason for Óðinn’s frustration and his eventual moral defeat by a Christian king. Despite not being Christian like Ólafr, Hrólfr kraki is depicted, essentially, as anti-Odinic.

It is remarkable to observe how the same theme underlies the main conflict of *Hrólfs saga kraka*, a text first found in a manuscript three hundred years younger than *Flateyjarbók* (2.2). In *Hrólfs saga kraka*, Hrólfr literally rejects Óðinn’s gifts, and makes Óðinn an enemy who eventually destroys him (3.4.4, 3.4.5). Nothing of the

<sup>140</sup> *Flateyjarbók: En samling af norske konge-sagaer med indskudte mindre fortællinger om begivenheder i og udenfor Norge samt annaler*, ed. Guðbrandur Vigfússon, Carl Richard Unger, 3 vols (Oslo: P.T. Malling, 1860–68), II, 134–135.

kind happens in *Vǫlsunga saga* where, even when Óðinn is clearly responsible for a hero's defeat, the reaction is that of accepting fatalism (2.3.7). This contrast makes it even more remarkable to observe that *Hrólfs saga kraka*, as well as *Vǫlsunga saga*, demonstrates a very complete version of the Odinic hero complex applied to Hrólfr and his twelve followers. Óðinn's help, his gift of a weapon, and finally Hrólfr's defeat orchestrated by Óðinn form the basic Odinic hero plot; all of the secondary motifs listed in 1.2 are also present in the saga. So, *Hrólfs saga kraka* is based on the same narrative structure as *Vǫlsunga saga*, the Odinic hero complex, but the attitude to Óðinn is much more sophisticated and dramatic in *Hrólfs saga kraka*. While the author-compiler of *Vǫlsunga saga* refrains from giving Óðinn's actions either positive or negative connotation, *Hrólfs saga kraka* embraces Óðinn's sinister ambiguity as well as the tragic position of a hero who becomes a victim of his betrayal. The conflict is complicated even further by the introduction of the Christian theme, notably absent in *Vǫlsunga saga*, and in *Hrólfs saga kraka* reinforced by the *Flateyjarbók* parallel.

However, in spite of the ideological differences between the two sagas, they share in common more than just a narrative structure and a number of motifs described here as the Odinic hero complex. The most important and relevant features of the *Hrólfs saga kraka* that have been considered in the previous chapter, *Vǫlsunga saga*, are as follows:

- 1) Both *Vǫlsunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka* belong to the type of *fornaldarsögur* labeled by Stephen Mitchell as 'mythical-heroic sagas'. They draw upon, and are dependent on, a strong tradition connected to particular characters of mythical-heroic lore (e.g. Sigurðr, Jǫrmunrekr, Hrólfr kraki etc). Variations of many narratives known from the sagas are found in indisputably earlier texts.
- 2) The sources for the saga are very diverse, ranging from Eddic poetry (as long as *Bjarkamál* can be labelled as 'Eddic') to folktale material.
- 3) The theme of relationship between Óðinn and a mortal hero is a central one in the sagas, and their plots tend to be driven by episodes either attended with Odinic imagery or featuring Óðinn as an actual character. This is different from the mere presence of the Odinic hero complex in a text: chapter 7, for example, deals with two narratives that formally contain the Odinic hero complex, but they inherit it from other sources and are not themselves making

a statement about Óðinn and Óðinn worship. By contrast, *Hrólfs saga kraka* and *Völsunga saga* not just contain the same formal features listed in 1.2, but are evidently depicting the disastrous effect that Óðinn's will has on a human life.

So, fundamental similarities between the two sagas — those concerning the genre, the sources and the theme — highlight the drastic difference between their treatment of both the main themes and the source material. This opposition, which will be considered in more detail in the following chapter, can be explained chronologically. Although *Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappá hans* is, as is often the case, a saga with problematic dating, the critics seem to agree that it should be much later than *Völsunga saga*, and further analysis is aiming to show how this text demonstrates a later and more complex approach to saga writing than *Völsunga saga* or *Hervarar saga*. This attitude will be demonstrated in the example of the Odinic hero theme, which is a key theme in both narratives. As has been shown in the previous chapter, *Völsunga saga* provides a development of the Óðinn-hero legend in more or less in the form we know it from *Ynglinga saga* or from Saxo, a part of the relatively early, twelfth- and thirteenth-century Icelandic written literary tradition that 'bear[s] indisputable witness to a profound and genuine interest in the past, not least the pagan past'.<sup>141</sup> In *Hrólfs saga kraka*, this interest takes a different form, aiming to reinterpret the myth of the Óðinn-hero from the Christian point of view, and introducing a conflict between the heathen world and the hero. For the *Völsungs* Óðinn is, according to the saga, an ancestor and an accepted divine ruler of their destinies, but for *Hrólfr kraki* he is a negative force that has to be opposed.

## 2. HRÓLFS SAGA KRAKA'S ORIGIN<sup>142</sup>

The oldest surviving manuscripts of *Hrólfs saga kraka* are all from the seventeenth century, and, according to Desmond Slay's work, some of them go back to a now lost original, probably from the sixteenth century.<sup>143</sup> Although there are no earlier

<sup>141</sup> Viðar Pálsson, 'Pagan Mythology and Christian Society', in *Gripla XIX* (Stofnun Árna Magnússonar: Reykjavík, 2008), 129.

<sup>142</sup> A comprehensive analysis of these sources may be found in James Caldwell, 'The Origin of the Story of Bothvar-Bjarki', in *Arkiv for nordisk filologi* 55 (1940), 223-75, Tom Shippey, 'Hrólfs saga kraka and the Legend of Leire', in *Making History: Essays on the Fornaldarsögur*, ed. Martin Arnold and Alison Finlay (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2010), 23-26.

<sup>143</sup> Desmond Slay, *The Manuscripts of Hrólf's saga kraka* (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1960), 132.

surviving manuscripts, a *Hrólfs saga kraka* is listed among the books kept in the Icelandic monastery of Mjóðruvellir in 1461. The exact dating of the text is therefore, due to the lack of genuine medieval material, subject to debate. For this work, however, approximate dating is sufficient as it still confidently places the saga in the epoch after the classical thirteenth-century ‘saga age’, in the flowering of the relatively young genre of *fornaldarsögur* that are based on ancient heroic material but where ‘the elements of fiction and fantasy grow, till they predominate’.<sup>144</sup>

The sources of the saga are chronologically diverse and naturally contradict each other in their image of legendary Denmark ruled by the Skjöldung dynasty. Leaving aside a supposed connection of the saga to *Beowulf*, where several kings of the Skjöldung dynasty are mentioned briefly, one of the oldest surviving manifestations of the ‘legend of Lejre’<sup>145</sup> is probably in *Grottasöngur* (Eddukvæði II, 431-436), which presents an account of Hrólfr’s incestuous conception and his antagonism with King Fróði.<sup>146</sup> The defence of Hleiðargarðr, featured in chapter 49 of the saga, is the theme of *Bjarkamál*.<sup>147</sup> Both poems are difficult to date, though, according to chapter 208 of *Óláfs saga Helga*,<sup>148</sup> *Bjarkamál* was considered ‘old’ (*Bjarkamál hin fornu*)<sup>149</sup> already in 1030,<sup>150</sup> when it was recited before the Battle of Stiklarstaðir (Stiklestad) by the skald Þórmóðr Kolbrúnarskáld to King Óláfr the Saint before the battle was lost and the king killed, quite similar to the situation in *Bjarkamál*. Of all these sources, *Bjarkamál* is probably the oldest, even though the exact dating of it is subject to discussion.<sup>151</sup> The actual text of the poem survives only

<sup>144</sup> Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *The Folk-stories of Iceland* (London: UCL, 2003), 80.

<sup>145</sup> The term was coined by Tom Shippey in his article ‘Hrólfs saga kraka and the Legend of Leire’, in *Making History: Essays on the fornaldarsögur* *Making History: Essays on the Fornaldarsögur*, ed. Martin Arnold and Alison Finlay (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2010), 17-32.

<sup>146</sup> On *Grottasöngur*’s references to the Hrólfr kraki legendarium see Klaus von See, Beatrice la Farge, Eve Picard, *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, III (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1993-2012), 952-955.

<sup>147</sup> Surviving Old Norse stanzas of *Bjarkamál* are published with English prose translation: ‘Biarca-mal in fornu; or, the Old Lay of Biarki’, in *Corpus Poeticum Boreale, The Poetry of the Old Northern Tongue from the Earliest Times to the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford, At the Clarendon Press, ), 188-189. For a reconstructed version of the whole poem see Olrik, Axel, *The Heroic Legends of Denmark*, translated by Lee M. Hollander (New York: The American-Scandinavian Foundation, 1919), 90-98. Olrik provides the Old Norse stanzas and Saxo’s Latin text of *Bjarkamál* with a commentary on 99-136.

<sup>148</sup> Sturluson, Snorri, *Heimskringla*, ed. Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen: G.E.C. Gads Forlag, 1911), 389-390.

<sup>149</sup> Since the poem is referred to as *Bjarkamál in fornu* in chapter 208 of *Óláfs saga Helga* (see above).

<sup>150</sup> *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia*, ed. Knut Helle, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003-), 178.

<sup>151</sup> Axel Olrik dates *Bjarkamál* ‘900 or shortly after’, see HLD 213. As mentioned above, *Óláfs saga Helga* suggests this poem was known as *Bjarkamál hin fornu* as early as in 1030.

in scattered fragments found in the *Prose Edda*<sup>152</sup> and in *Heimskringla*,<sup>153</sup> six stanzas altogether. A full Latin retelling, however, is given in the second book of Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum* (GD 170-187), and chapter thirty-three of *Hrólfs saga kraka* also seems to contain a prose retelling of certain of *Bjarkamál*'s stanzas, as there are clear parallels with passages in Saxo and surviving Icelandic text, and these passages are stylistically different from the remaining narrative.<sup>154</sup>

The most extensive versions of the Lejre legend are given in the early thirteenth century, by Saxo Grammaticus in Book Two of *Gesta Danorum* (GD 136-189) and by Snorri Sturluson in *Ynglinga Saga*.<sup>155</sup> *Skáldskaparmál* also contains some King Hrólfir lore: the story about him being surnamed 'kraki',<sup>156</sup> the Uppsala raid,<sup>157</sup> a few skaldic stanzas and a fragment from *Bjarkamál*.<sup>158</sup> There is little evidence of these works' sources,<sup>159</sup> though there are mentions of the Hrólfir story in such twelfth-century texts as *The Lejre Chronicle*<sup>160</sup> and Sven Aggesen's *Short History of the Kings of Denmark*.<sup>161</sup> *Skjöldunga saga* gives a consistent version of the story but survives only in Arngrímur Jónsson's Latin epitome written around 1570;<sup>162</sup> the original text could be one of the sources of *Hrólfs saga kraka*. Finally,

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<sup>152</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Skáldskaparmál*, ed. Anthony Faulkes, 2 vols, Viking Society for Northern Research (London: University College London, 1998),60-61.

<sup>153</sup> Sturluson, Snorri, *Heimskringla*, ed. Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen: G.E.C. Gads Forlag, 1911),390.

<sup>154</sup> The origin of the *Bjarkamál* stanzas from Snorri's Edda is questionable. For Olrik's argument that they were not a part of the original *Bjarkamál* but rather were composed in Iceland see HLD192-196. These stanzas are not included in 'Biarca-mal in fornu; or, the Old Lay of Biarki', in *Corpus Poeticum Boreale, The Poetry of the Old Northern Tongue from the Earliest Times to the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford, At the Clarendon Press, ),188-189, and Lee M. Hollander considers the stanzas from *Heimskringla* the only surviving fragment of the original *Bjarkamál*: Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla, History of the Kings of Norway*, ed. Lee M. Hollander (Austin: University Texas Press, 1964),499.

<sup>155</sup> 'Ynglinga saga', in Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, trans. Alison Finlay and Anthony Faulkes (London: University College London, 2011),6-47.

<sup>156</sup> *Skáldskaparmál* 58.

<sup>157</sup> *Skáldskaparmál* 58-59.

<sup>158</sup> *Skáldskaparmál* 60-61.

<sup>159</sup> Tom Shippey gives an outline of texts related to the Lejre legend but emphasizes the obscurity of their influence upon each other; see Tom Shippey, 'Hrólfs saga kraka and the Legend of Leire', in *Making History: Essays on the Fornaldarsögur*, ed. Martin Arnold and Alison Finlay (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2010), 23-24.

<sup>160</sup> 'Chronicon Lethrense: de antiquissimis Danie regibus', in *Scriptores minores historiae Danicæ medii ævi*, ed. M. Cl. Gertz, Selskabet for udgivelse af kilder til Dansk historie, 2 vols (Copenhagen: Gad, 1917-22),1 (1917), 43-53.

<sup>161</sup> Sven Aggesen, 'Short History of the Kings of Denmark', in *The works of Sven Aggesen, twelfth-century Danish historian*, ed. Eric Christiansen, Viking Society for Northern Research (London: University College London, 1992),48-74.

<sup>162</sup> Arngrímur Jónsson, *Rerum Danicarum Fragmenta*, in *Arngrimi Jonæ opera latine conscripta*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, Bibliotheca Arnamagnæana, 9-12, 4 vols (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1950-57): 1 (1950), 331-456.

*Bjarkarímur*,<sup>163</sup> composed about the beginning of the fifteenth century, centres on one of the main heroes of the Hrólfr cycle, Bǫðvarr Bjarki.<sup>164</sup> In a sense, however, *Hrólfs saga* still belongs as much to Scandinavian legendary history as to the fourteenth-century ‘present’: its subject matter, as the very term *fornaldarsaga* suggests, is the Scandinavian heroic past and the lives of the saga audience’s distant ancestors.

### 3. GENRE AND SUBJECT MATTER

The material of *Vǫlsunga saga* was, to a great extent, determined by the material in the collection of poems in a manuscript that the author-compiler followed quite straightforwardly. Despite the many important reinterpretations considered in the previous chapter, in all, the saga follows the collection from the beginning to the end. This is not a typical situation for a saga’s sources, and, since this dissertation considers the later *Hrólfs saga* in the light of the earlier *Vǫlsunga saga*, it should be remembered that the author of *Hrólfs saga kraka*, or a number of its authors and editors, never had to adjust the narrative structurally to just one written source. This means more freedom in constructing the storylines and expressing any ideas that had to be expressed; the role of an author is larger in *Hrólfs saga kraka* simply because an author would have more material and diverse traditions to choose from. Sagas, poems and folktales, and possibly *rímur*, have to be reworked into a new type of written narrative, the saga narrative, which had been fully developed by the fourteenth century, and not only had the tradition of the classical *Íslendingasögur* behind it, but also a tradition of dealing with mythical, heroic and legendary material. One could claim that, in terms of composition, *Hrólfs saga kraka* is more mature than *Vǫlsunga saga*.

In terms of subject matter, *Hrólfs saga kraka* meets the definition proposed by Stephen Mitchell when he claimed *fornaldarsögur* to be ‘Old Icelandic prose

<sup>163</sup> ‘Bjarkarímur’, in *Hrólfs saga Kraka og Bjarkarímur*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur 32 (Copenhagen: Møller, 1904), 109-163. Further quotations from *Bjarkarímur* refer to this edition with the page number in brackets.

<sup>164</sup> It is not clear whether *Bjarkarímur* may be regarded as a source for *Hrólfs saga kraka* because of both texts’ problematic dating. Oscar Ludwig Olson provides arguments for the saga’s influence on *Bjarkarímur*, which in this case is a later text: Olson, Oscar Ludwig, *The Relation of Hrólfs saga kraka and Bjarkarímur to Beowulf: A Contribution to the History of Saga Development in England and in the Scandinavian Countries* (Marston Gate: Hard Press, 2012), 33-41. On the other hand, Björn K. Þórolfsson lists it along ‘the oldest rímur’. Finnur Jónsson dates *Bjarkarímur* approximately 1400 but even if this date is agreed upon, the question of its relation to *Hrólfs saga kraka* remains open. See Stephen Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas and Ballads* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991), 168.

narratives based on traditional heroic themes, whose numerous fabulous episodes and motifs create an atmosphere of unreality'.<sup>165</sup> Having no claim to comprehensively describe the literary phenomenon, this neat generalization describes what has historically been implied by terms like *fornaldarsaga*, *legendary saga*, *mythical-heroic saga*, *viking romance*, *saga of the old times* — and other similar umbrella terms that are convenient to use but make little contribution to understanding the essential features of this kind of saga literature.<sup>166</sup> An early definition of *fornaldarsögur* by their subject matter, time and place of action was proposed at the beginning of the nineteenth century by Carl Christian Rafn and his predecessors and has survived since then, despite criticism.<sup>167</sup> When speaking of the *fornaldarsögur*, most scholars seem silently to agree on what this term implies, meaning that they belong 'to a period of history before the settlement of Iceland and before the conversion to Christianity' and the abundance of fantastical elements.<sup>168</sup>

*Hrólfs saga kraka* shares, therefore, its ambiguous position in Old Norse-Icelandic literature with the other *fornaldarsögur* created more or less at the same time. Despite being a relatively late text composed in Christian Iceland, it deals with an extremely old legendary tradition that goes back to the early Middle Ages associated with paganism. The Icelandic audience of *Hrólfs saga kraka* was divided from the Old Danish kings of Lejre by, one could argue, a Bakhtinian 'absolute epic distance' that makes specific historicity impossible; it is set in an 'absolute past' and creates not a concrete image but an ultimate picture of the audience's heroic ancestors.<sup>169</sup> However, the threshold that makes the aforementioned distance 'absolute' is not only created by the extremely large chronological gap, the transition from time's quantity into quality. King Hrólfr lived, or was supposed to have lived, in the heathen era. The saga, on the contrary, was written in Christian times, when the position of old lore and its venerated heroes becomes contradictory and has to be reconsidered and reshaped, creating positive images to counterbalance the unacceptable features of the old paganism. The 'absolute past' of *Hrólfs saga kraka*,

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<sup>165</sup> Stephen Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas and Ballads* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991), 27

<sup>166</sup> The history of genre nomenclature in Old Norse literature with focus on the *fornaldarsögur* is reviewed by Stephen Mitchell: Mitchell 8-43.

<sup>167</sup> Mitchell 20.

<sup>168</sup> Margaret Clunies Ross, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 76.

<sup>169</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Epic and novel', *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Mikharl Holquist (Austin: UTP, 1981), 10.

as well as all the *fornaldarsögur*, is, therefore, primarily a heathen legendary past. This inevitably raises the question of a good Christian's suitable approach to heroes living in pagan times. Because of its very subject matter and time of creation, *Hrólfs saga kraka* cannot elude the conflict between the positive image of legendary kings and heroes and the fact that they all lived in a time when 'the holy faith... had not been proclaimed... in the northern lands' ('var ekki boðuð sú heilaga trú hér á norðrlöndum', HSK 96). This leads directly to the image of the noble heathen in saga literature, and to the closely connected concept of *trúa a mátt sinn ok megin* (see e.g. HSK 96) and the concept of natural religion.<sup>170</sup>

When Lars Lönnroth introduced the term 'noble heathen' into wide scholarly use, he was relying on his analysis of the *Íslendingasögur*.<sup>171</sup> Naturally, in a *fornaldarsaga* this character type will be introduced by completely different literary means, even if the idea of an almost Christian morality in pagan times stays essentially the same across the genres. So, King Hrólfr and his champions are described as being in conflict first with characters who are characterised as heathen or are so because of their essence: the *berserkir*, Aðils who is 'hinn mesti blótmaðr' (HSK 34-35), the *álfir* (HSK 30-32) and norms (HSK 95), and finally the god Óðinn himself (HSK 92-93, 105). On the other hand, the characters are definitely not Christian as well, even if their morals may be attractive from the Christian audience's point of view. It is told in the saga that Hrólfr and his champions are indifferent to pagan worship and rely only on their own valour:<sup>172</sup>

En ekki er þess getit, at Hrólfr konungr ok kappar hans hafi nokkurn tíma blótat goð, heldr trúðu þeir á mátt sinn ok megin... (HSK, 96)

But it is not told that king Hrólfr and his champions had ever sacrificed to the gods, they rather had faith in their own might and main.<sup>173</sup>

<sup>170</sup> Klaus von See, *Mythos und Theologie in skandinavischen Hochmittelalter* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1988), 89-96.

<sup>171</sup> Lars Lönnroth, 'The Noble Heathen: A Theme in the Sagas', in *Scandinavian Studies* 41 (1969), 1-29.

<sup>172</sup> Similar statements are made about a number of other saga characters who deny heathen sacrifice, such as Qrvar-Oddr ('Aldri vildi Oddr blóta; trúði hann á mátt sinn ok megin' (QOS 6), or king Hákon the Good: Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, trans. Alison Finlay and Anthony Faulkes (London: University College London, 2011), 101.

<sup>173</sup> The English phrase 'trust (or believe) in one's own might and main' is a traditional way to translate the "trúa á mátt sinn ok megin" formula in the sagas, for example, in Jesse Byock's translation of *Hrólfs saga kraka*, Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards's translation of *Qrvar-Odds saga*, Alison Finlay and Anthony Faulkes's recent translation of *Heimskringla* (see bibliography).

By the time of the saga's culmination the characters' indifference towards pagan deities gives place to open conflict. It will be shown how the theme of king Hrólfr and his champions' confrontation with the hostile pagan world becomes more and more prominent in the saga, starting with the very first *þættir* and reaching its climax by the end of *Uppsalaþor* and finally resolved in *Skuldarbardagi*, the final *þáttir* of the saga.

#### 4. THE SAGA'S STRUCTURE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ODINIC THEME

##### 4.1. General overview

There are six *þættir* in the saga: *Fróða þáttir*, *Hróars þáttir ok Helga*, *Svipdags þáttir*, *Böðvarr-Bjarka þáttir*, *Uppsalaþor* and *Skuldarbardagi*. Some of the *þættir*, like *Uppsalaþor*, are more or less integral in structure, though some of them include episodes that are quite diverse, especially *Hróars þáttir ok Helga* and *Böðvarr-Bjarka þáttir*. Every *þáttir*, however, tends to center around a protagonist: brothers Hróar and Helgi, Helgi, Svipdagr, Böðvarr Bjarki and Hjalti. The last chapters, those about the raid to Uppsala and the defence of Hleiðargarðr, have no single protagonist, and see Hrólfr and the band of his twelve followers as a unity.

It is noteworthy that Hrólfr himself, the saga's eponymous character, is hardly ever the narrative's focus:<sup>174</sup> even in *Uppsalaþor*, where Hrólfr is the leader of the expedition, the narrative tends to focus more on Böðvarr than on the king. As Tom Shippey put it, 'the biggest lacuna of the saga... is simply Hrólfr'.<sup>175</sup> It is only from *Svipdags þáttir* that the reader first learns about Hrólfr's outstanding features (generosity, valour, mildness of character). This information, quite untypically, comes not directly from the narrative voice but from Svipdagr's father, Svipr, who advises his sons to go to Hleiðargarðr (HSK 42-43).

Although there are six titled *þættir* in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, the structure of the saga becomes clearer if it is divided into four larger parts.

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<sup>174</sup> The actual role of the eponymous hero in this saga is so insignificant that it made Valgerður Brynjólfsdóttir regard the whole text as a parody of a heroic tale. See Valgerður Brynjólfsdóttir, 'A valiant King or a Coward? The Changing Image of King Hrólfr kraki from the oldest sources to *Hrólfs saga kraka*', *Fornaldarsagornas struktur och ideologi*, ed. Ármann Jacobsson (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2003), 141-156. Marianne Kalinke makes a similar argument, supposing that the reason for Hrólfr's downfall in the saga is his lack of practical wisdom: Marianne Kalinke, 'Transgression in *Hrólfs saga kraka*', *Fornaldarsagornas struktur och ideologi*, ed. Ármann Jacobsson (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2003), 157-171.

<sup>175</sup> Tom Shippey, '*Hrólfs saga kraka* and the Legend of Leire', *Making History: Essays on the Fornaldarsögur*, ed. Martin Arnold and Alison Finlay (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2010), 23.

- 1) *Fróða þáttir* and *Hróars þáttir ok Helga* tell about the lives Hrólfr's father and uncle. Conflicts with Aðils and Skuld, the main antagonists in the finale of the saga, go back to these two *þættir*; both those characters are introduced as heathens and sorcerers associated with *seiðr*, and connoted very negatively.
- 2) *Svipdags þáttir* and *Bøðvars þáttir* tell about Hrólfr's champions Svipdagr (and his brothers Beigaðr and Hvítserkr), Bøðvarr and Hjalti, and their adventures before they swear loyalty to Hrólfr. A number of initiatory episodes is connected with these characters, and the *berserkr*-fighting theme is especially prominent in these two *þættir*.
- 3) *Uppsalafor* tells about Hrólfr and his followers' raid to king Aðils' court in Uppsala. Óðinn appears as a character in connection with this expedition and changes his attitude to Hrólfr from benevolent to malevolent, which leads, according to the narrative's logic, to the final catastrophe.
- 4) In *Skuldarbardagi*, Hrólfr's hall is attacked by the forces of his half-sister Skuld, and this leads to the main characters' defeat.

#### 4.2. *Fróða þáttir* and *Helga þáttir*

As can be seen, chapters from one to five are united under the title *Fróða þáttir* which tells how Hrólfr's future father, Helgi, and his brother Hroar, avenge their father Halfdan and acquire kingship. The events of this *þáttir* correspond roughly to *Skjöldunga saga*'s account.<sup>176</sup> None of the characters of this *þáttir* feature in the saga's dénouement, but Helgi plays a very prominent part later in the story. Compared to other episodes where poetic stanzas are rare, this first *þáttir* is rich in poetry.

*Fróða þáttir* is followed by the long *Hróars þáttir ok Helga*, or simply *Helga þáttir*, that covers the chapters from 6 to 12. The structure of *Helga þáttir* is complex and contains several interrelated episodes. The central one is the story of Hrólfr's incestuous ancestry, with brief offshoots that deal with Helgi's exploits and the story of Hroar's ring. It is in this part of the story that Helgi's ambiguous and sometimes contradictory character reveals itself: he is a forceful person, valiant and fierce but sometimes reckless and cruel. This can be seen from his encounters with Queen Ólöf as well as from the way he mutilates his nephew Hrókr. The story of Helgi's

<sup>176</sup> *Skjöldunga saga i Arngrim Jonssons udtog*, ed. A. Olrik (Aarbøger: 1894), XI, 83-164.

incestuous marriage to his daughter Yrsa also throws a rather grim light upon his character, which as well contributes to the image of Hrólfr as a doomed king. It is in the finale of *Helga þátttr*, in chapter eleven, that Skuld features first, the daughter of the *álfkona* forsaken by Helgi, who is going to become a powerful sorceress and ultimately the bane of Hrólfr kraki and his champions. Another important antagonist of king Hrólfr is introduced in connection with Helgi's unfortunate life: this is the evil king Aðils of Sweden, a sorcerer, sacrificer and the second husband of Hrólfr's mother Yrsa. Curiously, Hrólfr gets all his supernatural enemies as a kind of heritage from his father. Compared to the rather detailed account of king Helgi's life, nothing is told about Hrólfr's character and his reign in Hleiðargarðr except for a brief mention that he did not participate in his father's raids.

### 4.3. *Svipdags þátttr* and *Bøðvarr-Bjarka þátttr*

After king Helgi's death, the story enters another stage, where Hrólfr's *kappar* are introduced into the narrative; those are *Svipdags þátttr* and *Bøðvarr-Bjarka þátttr* (or *Bøðvars þátttr*), the closing part of which is sometimes credited as *Hjalta þátttr*. *Svipdags þátttr* introduces its eponymous character, the warrior Svipdagr who is looking for glory, and his conflict with king Aðils' twelve *berserkir*. After achieving an uneasy victory over the *berserkir*, Svipdagr and his brothers Beigaðr and Hvítserkr come to Hleiðargarðr and become King Hrólfr's champions. In Hleiðargarðr Svipdagr meets another band of twelve *berserkir* who are this time Hrólfr kraki's elite troops. A dangerous quarrel starts between them and Svipdagr but king Hrólfr interferes and averts the fight. The Hleiðargarðr *berserkir* disappear from the story, but only until *Bøðvar-Bjarka þátttr* where Bøðvarr and Hjalti finally bring them down.

The structure of *Bøðvars þátttr* is complex, not only in terms of a structure heavy with subordinate storylines but also in terms of its sources: the text interweaves, quite similarly to Chapter 8 of *Völsunga saga*, heroic legends with folktale material.<sup>177</sup> *Bøðvars þátttr* introduces two more champions into the saga: the bear-born warrior Bøðvarr Bjarki, the future leader of Hrólfr's warriors, and young Hjalti, whom Bøðvarr turns from a desperate coward into a bold hero. With Svipdagr, Bøðvarr and Hjalti having joined Hleiðargarðr's troops, the *kappar* stage ends, and

<sup>177</sup> Friedrich Panzer, *Studien zur germanischen Sagengeschichte*, 2 vols (München: C.H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1912), II, 262-263.

the narrative moves further on, to Hrólfr's famous raid to Uppsala, which is also known from *Snorra Edda*.

The *berserkr*-slaying theme found both in *Svipdags þáttr* and *Bǫðvars þáttr*, especially in connection to the bear imagery of *Bǫðvars þáttr*, is important for the understanding of heathen/Odinic themes in the saga, and will be looked at in more detail later. Those features, however, are more easily understood in the light of the saga's main conflict that is given most clearly in *Uppsalaþor* and *Skuldarbardagi*.

#### 4.4. *Uppsalaþor*

*Uppsalaþor* features all the five champions presented in the previous *þættir* with seven more listed later, in all forming a band of twelve warriors, with Hrólfr as their leader. Bǫðvarr urges Hrólfr to claim his property from king Aðils, who was also one of the primary antagonists in *Helga þáttr*, and an expedition to Sweden is undertaken. On their way, the characters encounter a mysterious one-eyed farmer skilled in sorcery, clearly an Odinic figure, who is called Hrani and who helps them, ensuring their victory over Aðils. During their encounter, Hrani acts as an initiator as, during the character's stay at his farm, he subsequently tests Hrólfr's followers with cold, hunger and with fire. Only twelve warriors are left in the end, and Hrani advises Hrólfr that only they are capable of the enterprise. This is a typical initiatory episode; extending the comparison with *Vǫlsunga saga*, tests undergone by Sinfjötli come to mind here, where, as well, only those who had been tested can continue with the exploit (the Uppsala raid in *Hrólfs saga kraka* and vengeance on Siggeir in *Vǫlsunga saga*).

Although initiatory episodes tend to be present and prominent in the stories of Óðinn-heroes, it is untypical to have Óðinn himself as the initiator; as has been shown in *Vǫlsunga saga*, supported by parallels, his role tends to be that of an advisor or bestower of a gift. Even in *Gesta Danorum*, the old one-eyed man only *advises* Hadingus to kill a lion and drink its blood, although in this connection one could speak of the theme of the disguised Óðinn as initiator there. In *Hrólfs saga kraka*, the Odinic nature of the initiation episode is reinforced by the possible connection of the fire-enduring test with a similar ordeal in *Grimnismál*. This last test proves to be the most important one, as the fire-enduring theme is heavily stressed in the Uppsala episodes, and breaking out from a burning hall becomes one of the characters' important exploits.

Later, when the heroes are returning from Uppsala victorious, they meet Hrani once again. He gives Hrólfr a sword, a shield and a coat of mail. The paradigm of Óðinn's gift is immediately recognisable: not only are his gifts usually war-related (compare e.g. 2.3.5, 2.3.8, 2.3.9, 2.3.10, 2.3.11, 7.2.2, 7.2.3), but this particular combination of a sword, a shield and a mailcoat evokes the list of Óðinn's gifts to heroes in *Hyndluljóð*:

Biðum Herjaföðr  
í hugum síta,  
hann geldr ok gefr  
gull verðinu;  
gaf hann Hermóði  
hjálm ok brynju  
en Sigmundi  
sverð at þiggja.  
(Edd. I, 460)

We ask for Herjaföðr's [Óðinn's] favour; he pays and gives the price of gold [usually interpreted as gold given by a chieftain to his followers]; he gave Hermóðr a helm and a mailcoat, but to Sigmundr a sword to own.

So, Óðinn's gift to Hrólfr should be interpreted as an invitation to accept him as a ruler, to become in full an Odinic hero. However, Hrólfr refuses for the reason that the weapon and armour are *ferligr* ('hatesome', 'monstrous'):

Þeir Hrólfr konungr ok hans menn fóru nú veg sinn ok ríða þann dag nær allan. Ok sem náttu tók, finna þeir bæ einn ok kómu til dyra. Er þar fyrir Hrani bóndi ok býðr þeim allan greiðskap ok kallaði, at ekki hefði farit fjarri eptir því, sem hann gat til um ferðir þeira. Konungr sannar þat ok kallar hann vera óreykblindan. 'Hér eru vápn, er ek vil gefa þér', segir Hrani bóndi. Konungr mælti: 'Ferlig vápn eru þetta, karl', en þat var skjöldr ok sverð ok brynja. Ekki vill Hrólfr konungr þiggja vápnin. Hrani bregzt við þetta nær reiðr ok þykkir gerð til sín svívirðing mikil í þessu.  
(HSK 92)

Now king Hrólfr and his men went on their way, and they rode nearly for the whole day. And when night fell, they found a farm and came to the door. It was Hrani the *bóndi* there, and he offered them all hospitality and said that their expedition ehent not differently from what he told them. The king agreed and told that Hrani was really clear-sighted. 'Here are weapons that I want to give you', said Hrani the *bóndi*. The king said: 'Those weapons are hatesome, old man', and those were a shield, a sword and a mailcoat. King Hrólfr did not want to receive them. [Now] Hrani is nearly furious, and he thinks he has been shown great disrespect.

The saga makes it quite clear that this episode provokes Óðinn's wrath, so he makes the king lose his famous last battle, an account of which is given in *Skuldarbardagi*. The act of refusal on its own must have broken the audience's horizon of expectations since, from the many recipients of Óðinn's gifts in Old Norse-Icelandic tradition, Hrólfr is the only one to reject the gift. Even more remarkable here is the use of the

word *ferligr*. There is no evident explanation of how weapons and armour can be ‘monstrous’, and the situation is complicated even further by the fact that, when *ferligr* denotes physical ugliness in Old Icelandic, it tends to describe living creatures rather than artifacts.<sup>178</sup> This dismisses the casual interpretation that the weapons are ugly or not well-made and therefore unfit for a king. So, the text obviously hints at Hrólfr’s irrational disgust of the mere idea of serving Óðinn, even though Hrani’s true identity is still unknown to him.

The account of Hrólfr’s fall is given in the last *þáttr* of the saga.

#### 4.5. *Skuldarbardagi*

*Skuldarbardagi* is different from the other *þættir* of *Hrólfs saga kraka* in terms of source material, which was, most probably, some form of the now-lost heroic poem *Bjarkamál*. *Bjarkamál* is probably the earliest known text where Hrólfr kraki is mentioned, and this makes Hrólfr’s last battle one of the most traditional parts of the story, in contrast to the arguably late interpolations like the story of Bǫðvarr’s parentage.

It is not clear how much of the original poem eventually made it to *Skuldarbardagi* as we know it. Axel Olrik approaches the saga text quite critically as a source on *Bjarkamál*, since it does not correspond structurally to *Bjarkamál*’s paraphrase in Book II of *Gesta Danorum* and lacks some of its material (HLD 185-188). Bǫðvarr’s curses towards Óðinn are, however, present both in the saga and in Saxo’s version of the story. This important sequence will be first considered according to the saga’s version, and then compared to *Gesta Danorum*’s account.

During the battle with Skuld’s troops, when Hjalti supposes that all of king Hrólfr’s warriors are going to be guests in Valhǫll that very day (‘vér skulum í Valhǫll gista í kveld’), which is both a paraphrase for ‘death’ and an Odinic statement. Bǫðvarr, however, blames Óðinn for treachery and scheming and calls the god ‘sonrinn hinn fúli ok hinn ótrúi’ (‘son of the foul and unholy one’, i.e. the devil; HSK 104). So, Bǫðvarr rejects both Óðinn and the afterlife in Valhǫll, and he does so in response to Hjalti’s fatalistic statement that accepts both, and would not look out of place in *Vǫlsunga saga* (compare and contrast 2.3.7).

<sup>178</sup> Aldís Sigurðardóttir et al., *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* (Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen, 2010) <<http://onpweb.nfi.sc.ku.dk/webart/f/fe/20216ckron.htm>> [accessed September 1 2015].

Bǫðvarr's response is perfectly in line with the Christian tradition of depicting pagan deities as evil spirits, even if the characters themselves never oppose to the heathen powers any faith except for that in 'their own might and main'.

In Saxo Grammaticus's Latin paraphrase of *Bjarkamál*, Biarco expresses his enmity towards Odinus in conversation with his wife Ruta, not with Hialto. Otherwise, the situation when the utterance is made, as well as its menacing meaning, is similar to the saga's account:

Si potero horrendum Friggę spectare maritum,  
Quantumcunque albo clypeo sit tectus et altum  
Flecat equum, Lethra nequaquam sospes abibit:  
Fas est belligerum bello prosterne diuum!  
(GD 186-187)

If I should set eyes on the fearsome husband of Frigg,  
though he is protected by his white shield and manoeuvres  
his tall horse, he shall not go unhurt from Leire;  
it is right to lay low the warrior god in battle.  
(GD Fisher 62)

The presence of Biarco's threats in a text composed long before *Hrólfs saga*, and most certainly in the lost *Bjarkamál* itself, suggests that the theme of Hrólfr's strife with Óðinn is very traditional. It has already been shown how the same idea is taken up in *Ólafs saga helga* (3.1). However, even though the tradition behind this sentiment in *Hrólfs saga kraka* is long, its meaning clearly has been reinterpreted over time. While the saga is clearly composed from the Christian perspective, Axel Olrik convincingly argued against the assumption that the supposed author of *Bjarkamál* 'denies Heathendom and adheres to Christianity', or that in *Bjarkamál* Óðinn is depicted as an 'evil and dangerous spirit', which happens in *Hrólfs saga kraka* (HLD 155). According to Olrik, in *Bjarkamál* the conflict is seen from the heathen perspective: Bjarki's loyalty to Hrólfr is so absolute that it means struggle against any power that opposes it, no matter how omnipotent. The scholar draws parallels between *Bjarkamál* and *Sonatorrek* and *Hákonarmál*: all of those three poems encompass the theme of struggle against death personified by Óðinn, and in none of them is it built on the opposition between paganism and Christianity (GD Fisher 131, 157-158, 175).

What makes the reader comprehend Bǫðvarr's words in *Skuldarbardagi* as a part of a conscious, ideological struggle, is the pretext given in the Hrani episodes,

and especially in the scene where Hrólfr refuses Óðinn's weapons. Hrólfr is in the saga such an idealised figure, while everything heathen has such negative connotation, that Hrólfr's moral superiority should be evident to the reader even leaving aside the audience's supposed anti-pagan sentiment. There are no references to Hrólfr's encounters with the disguised Óðinn either in Book II of *Gesta Danorum*, nor — quite certainly — in *Bjarkamál* itself, which starts with Hjalti's call to arms. The first books of *Gesta Danorum* preserve quite a few examples of Óðinn-hero narratives with the Odinic hero interfering in the course of events (most importantly the stories of Hadingus and Harald), and the career of Rolf Krake is not one of them: Óðinn is present only in the dialogue between Biarco and Ruta. The Hrani episodes were most probably introduced into the saga to explain Bǫðvarr's outburst, inherited from *Bjarkamál* but lacking motivation in the saga's framework; this hypothesis is supported by the fact that the motif of a 'magical farmer' is most clearly a phenomenon characteristic of Icelandic literature, not Old Norse tradition overall.<sup>179</sup>

Thus, Bjarki's threats towards Óðinn in *Bjarkamál* may have inspired the central conflict of the saga, that of the Hleiðargarðr heroes' heroic trust in their might and main on the one side, and paganism, seen more precisely as Óðinn worship, on the other. The Hrani episodes in *Uppsalaþor*, most probably developed to explain Bjarki's hatred, have been already considered. *Uppsalaþor* and *Skuldarbardagi*, united by the story of encounters with Hrani, together give an account of Hrólfr and his champions' triumph and subsequent defeat — this is indeed the core of the story of *Hrólfr kraki ok kappar hans*. The earlier *þættir* tell the backstory of the most prominent of Hrólfr's followers and prepare the reader for the culmination of *Uppsalaþor* and the tragedy of the finale. What follows is an attempt to trace the saga's most important themes back to those *þættir*.

The motifs of Odinic help and Odinic death have already been observed on the example of *Völsunga saga*, where the career of most of the characters follows more or less the same narrative scheme. Now that similar material has been observed in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, it is possible to look at the two texts in comparison, leaving aside for a moment the formal Odinic hero complex as described in 1.2. Then the narrative core of *Hrólfs saga kraka* as well as most episodes in *Völsunga saga* can be described as

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<sup>179</sup> Thor Ewing, *Gods and worshippers in the Viking and Germanic World* (Tempus: Chalford, 2008), 87.

follows:

- 1) An initiatory episode (or a chain of episodes) — e.g. Sinfjötli's testing in *Völsunga saga* chapter 8. In *Hrólfs saga* this is the episode where Hrani tests the heroes; a number of other initiatory episodes is found in *Bǫðvars þáttur*.
- 2) Óðinn's gift or advice is given before an important exploit, like a battle or a duel. In *Hrólfs saga*, this is primarily Hrani's refused gift, though his help before the raid to Uppsala also qualifies.
- 3) Subsequent victories and glory, ensured by the gift and/or advice; this virtually always follows any of the gift episodes with the exception of when Hrólfr refuses the gift. The initiatory episode with Hrani's testing implies, however, that Hrólfr's triumph at Uppsala was in some way insured, or at least 'blessed' by Hrani.
- 4) Óðinn's betrayal, which leads to the death of the protagonist. As it was noted in 1.2, death in a battle is the most usual way for an Odinic hero to die, with exceptions like Hadingus, who hangs himself, or Sigurðr, whose identity of an Odinic hero was most likely emphasised, and to a certain degree invented, by the author of *Völsunga saga*. The last *þáttur* of *Hrólfs saga*, *Skuldarbardagi*, corresponds quite clearly to this stage.

## 5. INITIATION STRUCTURES IN *SVIPDAGS ÞÁTTUR* AND *BǪÐVARS ÞÁTTUR*

Before joining king Hrólfr as his champions, all the protagonists experience events that have a clearly initiatory sense.<sup>180</sup> In Svipdagr's case it is his victory over *berserkir* where he loses his eye, which introduces an Odinic theme. Bǫðvarr also overcomes an antagonist, the Sami witch Hvit. Even more importantly, he drinks his monstrous brother Elgfróði's blood to become a stronger warrior (HSK 62, *Bjarkarímur* 135) and this way complete his initiation. This is not the only blood-drinking episode in the *þáttur*: forced by Bǫðvarr, the coward Hǫttr drinks the troll-dragon's blood and changes drastically, becoming strong and brave (HSK 69, *Bjarkarímur* 140). Both blood-drinking episodes involve a struggle between the person who performs the initiation and the one who is being initiated: Bǫðvarr

<sup>180</sup> For an analysis of a structure of initiation in the dragonslaying episode of *Hrólfs saga kraka*, including the blood-drinking motif, see Initiation 312-325.

wrestles with Elfróði (HSK 62) and Hjalti wrestles with Bøðvarr (HSK 69) to test their new strength. Hjalti's sham killing of the dragon may be regarded as another part of an initiation rite.<sup>181</sup> Moreover, according to *Bjarkarímur*, Hjalti kills another monster shortly after and rightfully becomes one of Hrólfr's champions (*Bjarkarímur* 139-142).

**The weapon.**<sup>182</sup> In the course of all the initiatory episodes except for Svipdagr, a weapon is involved, which can also have a ritual pretext. Bøðvarr receives a magical sword that had been intended for him by his father (HSK 60). Høttr, the future Hjalti, temporarily receives from king Hrólfr the sword Gullinhjalti<sup>183</sup> so that he could kill the dragon (HSK 70, in *Bjarkarímur* 142 Hrólfr also throws him a sword). The new name he gets after undergoing the initiation is after this sword's name. It is noteworthy that, when Hrólfr and his champions meet Óðinn-Hrani after their Uppsala raid, Hrani also intends to give the king a weapon and armour, this way, most evidently, making him consecrated to Óðinn as the god of war. Hrólfr, however, refuses to accept the gift (HSK 92). This is the only case of an unfulfilled rite in a long row of ritual-based episodes, many of which involve an initiatory weapon, and the most important one: it makes it clear that King Hrólfr and his champions do not belong to the Odinic world — the world of which they, a king's warriors, would be a natural part.

**The name.**<sup>184</sup> The initiatory sense of the dragonslaying scene in *Bøðvars þáttr* is emphasised by the fact that after it Høttr gets a new name, Hjalti (HSK 71). There is no particular naming episode connected with Bøðvarr, but it is noteworthy that he is called simply 'Bøðvarr' throughout all the account of his adventures, but in *Skuldarbardagi*, after the list of Hrólfr's warriors (HSK 98), he is usually called 'Bøðvarr bjarki' (HSK 98, 99, 101, 103, 104, 106). This can be regarded as a testimony of his new status. Some of Hrólfr's champions have names connected with

<sup>181</sup> The initiatory meaning of this particular scene was discussed by Georges Dumézil, *Gods of the Ancient Northmen*, ed. and trans. Einar Haugen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 69-70.

<sup>182</sup> Bøðvarr's sword passed to him from his father, Gullinhjalti given to Hjalti by Hrólfr and finally the rejected sword given to Hrólfr by Óðinn may all be considered as parallels to Sigmundr's getting his sword from the trunk of the tree, which starts his story as an Odinic warrior.

<sup>183</sup> The sword Gullinhjalti ('golden hilt') plays a special role in Hjalti's initiation as Hrólfr's champion and also provides him with a new name in this role. H.R. Ellis Davidson notes a special role of the sword-hilt in swearing the oath of allegiance in the Germanic world: Hilda Ellis Davidson, *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 76.

<sup>184</sup> On the significance of the name in initiation rites see Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge, 2004), 62. In narratives that are based on structures of initiation but do not preserve the memory of its initial meaning the change of name may be regarded as an accompanying motif to the initiatory episode.

Óðinn in some way, which reinforces their connection to the Odinic hero myth: Svipdagr's name may be allusion to the hero of *Svipdagsmál* who is to guess Óðinn's riddles; Hǫttr appears as one of Óðinn's names in *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*.<sup>185</sup>

**The supernatural advisor.** Both Svipdagr and Bǫðvarr have supernatural advisors who in both cases are of their blood kin (a father or a brother) and tell them to go to Hrólfr's hall once the initiation story comes to an end. In *Svipdags þáttr*, this role is played by the character's father Svipr; in Bǫðvarr's case, this advisor is his brother Elgfróði.<sup>186</sup> Before joining Hleiðargarðr's champions, the hero must undergo a quest, a consecration, and only after that can he be considered appropriate to become one of Hrólfr's *kappar*. The separate episodes of *Hrólfs saga kraka* may be considered subordinate to the final tragedy of the characters' confrontation with Óðinn and the following catastrophe.

It has already been noted that both *Svipdags þáttr* and *Bǫðvars þáttr* are dominated by the *berserkir*-fighting theme, and that many of the episodes in those *þættir* have, similarly to Hrólfr's first visit to Hrani, an initiatory meaning. In fact, it has been noted by a number of scholars that in saga literature the *berserkir*-fighting motif (especially when a group of twelve *berserkir* are involved), sometimes substituted by the bear-slaying motif, is often a part of an initiation structure.<sup>187</sup> Jens Peter Schjødt has observed of *fornaldarsaga* material that killing of the *berserkir* tends to be regarded as 'a vague memory of some legendary hero who had a special relationship with Óðinn during an initiation which made him an Odinic hero — an initiation which consisted in 'killing' one or more *berserkir* who would sacrifice him,

<sup>185</sup> *Hálfs saga ok hálfsrekka*, ed. A. Le Roy Andrews, Altnordische Saga-Bibliothek (Halle: Verlag von Max Niemeyer, 1909), 1, 3, 5.

<sup>186</sup> Supernatural origin, clear in Elgfróði, is somewhat less evident in the figure of Svipdagr's father who is presented as a human. However, the saga heavily implies that Svipr is not an ordinary human. As soon as he is introduced into the saga, the reader learns that Svipr lives "far from other men", "hann bjó... fjarri öðrum mönnum" (HSK 35), and people believe that this person is not exactly what he seems ('ok hafði verit hinn mesti kappi ok eigi í öllu þar at hann var séðr', HSK 35). Moreover, Svipr is 'skilled in many things' ('ok kunni hann mart fyrir sér', HSK 35), which is an even more evident cliché for describing a character with magical abilities.

<sup>187</sup> In relation to family sagas this theme was investigated in Mary Danielli, 'Initiation Ceremonial from Norse Literature', *Folklore* 56 (1945), 229-245. Schjødt develops the same theme in the *fornaldarsögur*. Jens Peter Schjødt, 'Óðinn, Warriors and Death', *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World: Essays in Honour of Margaret Clunies Ross*, ed. Judy Quinn and others (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007). Margaret Arent, 'The Heroic Pattern: Old Germanic Helmets, *Beowulf*, and *Grettis saga*', in *Old Norse Literature and Mythology: a Symposium*, ed. Edgar C. Polomé (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969) investigates the relation between bear-fighting initiation rites, bear cults connected to berserkers and heroic characters famous for slaying berserkers or bears, including Bǫðvarr Bjarki.

that is, initiate him to the god by whom he is killed in the end'<sup>188</sup> Schjødt's theory may look bold, but examples from the sagas reinforce it, and it can be further supported by a similar episode from *Qrvar-Odds saga* and *Hervarar saga* (see chapter 5).

## 6. HRÓLFR'S CHAMPIONS AS THE 'TWELVE BERSERKIR'

In Book II of Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum* Biarco kills a certain Agner — a clear parallel for Agnarr the *berserkr* mentioned in *Hrólfs saga kraka* (HSK 102, GD I, 38-39). Saxo also mentions the blood-drinking episode, in this text the monster killed by Biarco being a gigantic bear (GD I, 168-169). The variant of *Hrólfs saga kraka*, where Bøðvarr kills a winged dragon, betrays its later origin with its chivalric sort of monster.<sup>189</sup> Though there is no mention of Biarco's bear nature in Saxo, who definitely used *Bjarkamál* and probably *Skjöldunga saga*,<sup>190</sup> the bear-slaying motif may reflect the character's connection with ancient bear cults and consequently with *berserkir* figures. If we assume that there is indeed connection between *berserkir* and bears, it is possible to argue that Bøðvarr's killing of the monster is a kind of reduplication of the *berserkir*-fighting episode, if we take it that *berserkir* are somehow connected to bears (1.2).<sup>191</sup>

One could even argue that it is because of this association with bears that the Bear's Son folkstory later got attached to Bjarki's character, though earlier this champion had been regarded merely as a *berserkir*-slayer. The character's name, meaning 'bear-cub', could also be a point of departure. As proposed by Axel Olrik,

<sup>188</sup> Jens Peter Schjødt, 'Óðinn, Warriors and Death', in *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World: Essays in Honour of Margaret Clunies Ross*, ed. Judy Quinn and others (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 147.

<sup>189</sup> Oscar Ludwig Olson, *The Relation of Hrólf's saga kraka and Bjarkarímur to Beowulf: A Contribution to the History of Saga Development in England and in the Scandinavian Countries* (Marston Gate: Hard Press, 2012), 39-40. Jesse Byock also assumes that the fact that the monster was winged is a late Icelandic innovation: *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, ed. and trans. Jesse L. Byock, Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998), 84.

<sup>190</sup> As argued by Hilda Ellis Davidson; see GD Fisher I, 38-39.

<sup>191</sup> Parallels between Bøðvarr's slaying of *berserkir* and of a bear in various sources and his bear-nature in *Hrólfs saga kraka* were made by a number of scholars: A. Margaret Arent, 'The Heroic Pattern: Old Germanic Helmets, *Beowulf*, and *Grettis saga*', in *Old Norse Literature and Mythology: a Symposium*, ed. Edgar C. Polomé (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969), 192, Oscar Ludwig Olson, *The Relation of Hrólf's saga kraka and Bjarkarímur to Beowulf: A Contribution to the History of Saga Development in England and in the Scandinavian Countries* (Marston Gate: Hard Press, 2012), 37, *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, ed. and trans. Jesse L. Byock, Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998), xxix.

the idea of a ‘cub’ or ‘little bear’ would suggest that the hero had a father who shared this bear nature, as the story goes in *Hrólfs saga kraka*. As a result, Bjarki, originally the character’s name, becomes his cognomen in the text of the saga, and Bøðvarr, which could originally be just a character’s cognomen with the meaning ‘warlike’, becomes his given name (HLD 255-256).

There are several reasons to consider *Hrólfs saga kraka* as another development of the doomed *berserker*-slayer motif. To start with, the final battle with Queen Skuld’s army demonstrates certain features that are very similar to the episode of Hjálmar and Qrvar-Oddr’s battle with Angantýr and his brothers (and it is *Hrólfs saga kraka* that Schjødt refers to in his article, though, ironically, it is possible that *Hervarar saga* and *Qrvar-Odds saga*, unmentioned by Schjødt, demonstrate his ideas better). First of all, all the protagonists die an explicitly Odinic death. The saga heavily implies that the reason for the final catastrophe was king Hrólfr’s falling into the god’s disfavour by refusing his gifts and therefore patronage. Quite a few of them are also famous for their victories over *berserker*. Svipdagr and Bøðvarr get involved into encounters with warbands of *berserker* (Svipdagr does so twice), and Bøðvarr is especially famous for slaying a certain *berserkr* called Agnarr, which he recalls in the last battle: ‘Ek drap Agnar breserk ok eigi síðr konungr’ (HSK 102), ‘I killed Agnarr the *berserkr* who was no less a king’.

One could notice how the theme of resentment against Óðinn’s will reduplicates itself in *Hrólfs saga kraka*. On the one hand, the final episode includes Bøðvarr’s curses to the god (HSK 105), which is reminiscent<sup>192</sup> of Biarco’s resentment against Óðinn in the corresponding episode in Saxo’s retelling of *Bjarkamál* (GD I, 186-187). On the other hand, it is Hrólfr himself, not Bøðvarr Bjarki, whom the saga presents as Óðinn’s antagonist in the first place. When the king denies Hrani’s gift, he metaphorically separates himself and his followers from ‘pagan’ ethics that in the saga are characteristic of negative characters like Aðils and Skuld, and this separation is unambiguously regarded as the cause of King Hrólfr’s fall, even if the defeated protagonists are granted moral victory.

This tradition of depicting *berserker*-slayers in saga literature may throw a new light not only upon the meaning of *Hrólfs saga kraka*’s final chapters where Hrani’s curse fulfils itself, but also upon the whole composition of the saga. Many critics

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<sup>192</sup> Axel Olrik argues that this motif of Bøðvarr Bjarki’s confrontation with Óðinn goes back to pre-Christian times when *Bjarkamál* was created. See HLD 151-158.

noted that *Hrólfs saga kraka* had an episodic structure, which is sometimes understood as a weak structuring.<sup>193</sup> This scholarly attitude is explicable. On the face of it, separate stories about Svipdagr, Bøðvarr and Hǫttr-Hjalti are unified only by the fact that all of their protagonists finally make their way to Hleiðargarðr and become Hrólfr's champions. Moreover, *Svipdags þáttr* and *Bøðvars þáttr* contain repeated elements like the hero's confrontation with a troop of hostile *berserkir* in a king's hall (in Svipdagr's case, this occurs twice in succession, first at king Aðils's hall in Sweden and then in king Hrólfr's Hleiðargarðr). Such a reduplication can be regarded as unoriginality or a careless compilation of oral sources where such repetitions are natural. This dissertation, however, observes *Hrólfs saga kraka* as a whole text that indeed is made from different episodes — but these parts are united by a common idea and corresponding motifs.<sup>194</sup> After all the confrontations with *berserkir* are finished, in the final battle Hrólfr's warriors are presented as twelve ferocious warriors themselves:

Þá stókk up Hrómundr harði ok Hrólfr skjóthendi, Svipdagr ok Beigaðr ok Hvitserkr hinn hvati, Haklangr hinn setti, Harðrefill hinn sjaundi, Haki hinn frækni hinn áttundi, Vǫttr hinn miklaflaði hinn níundi, Starólf hét hinn tíundi, Hjalti hinn hugþruði hinn ellepti, Bøðvarr bjarki hinn tólpti, ok var hann því svá kallaðr, at hann rýmði á burt ǫllum berserkjum Hrólfs konungs vegna þeira ofsa ok ójafnaðar, en drap suma, svá at engi þeira þreifz fyrir honum... (HSK 98)

Then started up Hrómundr the stern and Hrólfr the swift-handed, Svipdagr and Beigaðr and Hvitserkr the quick, Haklangr [was] the sixth and Harðrefill the seventh, Haki the brave the eighth, Vǫttr the strong the ninth, Starólf was the name of the tenth, Hjalti the magnanimous the eleventh, Bøðvarr Bjarki the twelfth; and he was called thus because he had driven away all king Hrólfr's *berserkir* because of their arrogance and injustice, and slew some of them, so that none of them could withstand him...

It can be seen from this quote how Hrólfr's twelve champions are opposed to the twelve negatively presented *berserkir* who are reminiscent of Angantýr and his brothers in the battle of Sámsey narrative (5) or the *berserkir* in *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*. On the other hand, even if these characters are opposed to each other, there is a peculiar connection between them. As we have seen, many of

<sup>193</sup> For different opinions on this question see, e.g., Stephen A. Mitchell etc, 'Interrogating Genre in the *Fornaldarsögur*: A Round-Table Discussion', *Viking and Medieval Studies* 2 (2007), 275-96. Episodic structure is considered a common feature of *fornaldarsaga* as a genre, though this genre itself is not uniform and has diverse variations.

<sup>194</sup> Lars Lönnroth's opinion on the structure of *Hrólfs saga kraka* is that it was influenced by that of *Karlamagnús saga*. See Lars Lönnroth, 'Charlemagne, Hrolf Kraki, Olaf Tryggvason: Parallels in the Heroic Tradition', *Les relations littéraires Franco-Scandinaves au moyen Age: Actes du Colloque de Liege* (Paris: Societe d'edition Les Belles Lettres, 1972), 32.

Hrólfr's champions have Odinic traits, especially manifestly Svipdagr, and similar allusions appear from time to time in connection with Hrólfr himself and his family, starting with his uncle Hróarr once disguised as Hrani, which is Óðinn's name later in the saga, and up to the actual encounter with Óðinn.

Since the motif of a band of twelve warriors holds a dominating position in the saga and is directly connected to its main theme, particular attention must be paid to it. As noted already, the twelve champions are referred to in *Hrólfs saga kraka* and in *Bjarkarímur*, that is, in Icelandic sources (HSK 98, 134, 143, 161). These are the most recent part of the Hrólfr kraki legendarium; the motif is not found elsewhere, including Saxo's detailed account of the events. One objection may be raised against the idea that Hrólfr's twelve champions are a late invention. The above list of Heiðargarðr's champions belongs to chapter thirty-three of *Hrólfs saga kraka* (HSK 99-104), which is generally assumed to be based on *Bjarkamál*,<sup>195</sup> possibly the oldest surviving representative of this legendary tradition. However, no other preserved version of *Bjarkamál*, other than the free prose rendering in the saga, features twelve warriors — neither Saxo's account nor the stanzas preserved in *Heimskringla* and in the *Prose Edda*, so this motif quite possibly emerged when the legendary material was being reworked into saga narrative. This idea was emphasised by Axel Olrik:

Comparing the *Biarkamal* with the lay which is most closely related, *The Lay of Innstein*<sup>196</sup> [from chapter XI of *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka* — E.M.], we appreciate at once the significance of its negative testimony; for in this lay now one and one the other of Half's warriors, or else now half, now all of the twelve champions are named. The same is to be observed in the old *Chanson de Roland* about the twelve paladins. But the *Biarkamal* is indifferent to all of Hrolf's champions except these two. There is but one possible explanation: the circle of twelve warriors did not exist at the time when the *Biarkamal* was first composed, and it never did exist in Danish tradition, but was added only in the Norn<sup>197</sup> account.  
(HLD 198-199)

It should also be noted that, as Lars Lönnroth argued, 'twelve followers' is a very widespread motif found in a number of important texts starting with the four Gospels, not to mention Charlemagne's followers, as well as the adversaries of Dietrich von

<sup>195</sup> Axel Olrik provides the surviving *Bjarkamál* stanzas and their parallels from *Gesta Danorum* and *Hrólfs saga kraka* with a commentary on these texts' relation to each other; see HLD 99-136.

<sup>196</sup> In *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*, ed. A. Le Roy Andrews, Altnordische Saga-Bibliothek (Halle: Verlag von Max Niemeyer, 1909), 99-111.

<sup>197</sup> According to Axel Olrik wish, the term 'Norn' is used in the English edition of *Heroic Legends of Denmark* to denote Norway and settlements to the West (Iceland, the Faroes, Orkneys and others). Olrik consistently contrasts this later literature with Old Danish tradition, in which, as Olrik argues, much of good Medieval Icelandic literature originated; see HLD xiv.

Bern and Walter of Aquitania.<sup>198</sup> The exact origin of this motif in *Hrólfs saga kraka* is hardly possible to define; however, its parallels in saga literature testify to the theory that it occurred in *Hrólfs saga kraka* and probably not earlier. What is left of *Skjöldunga saga*<sup>199</sup> supports this assumption: the account of Hrólfr's champions is not any more detailed than in *Gesta Danorum*, and no mention of twelve warriors is made.

In fact, the connection of the heroes to Odinic myth and — on the other hand — their confrontation with this god may be seen as a metaphor for the characters' relationship with the pagan world overall. They cannot help belonging to it, yet they oppose it, trusting in their might and main instead of worshipping the pagan gods. Their enemies are *berserkir* who may be regarded as ferocious warriors consecrated to Óðinn as the god of war, and evil sorcerers like Aðils and Skuld who practise *seiðr*, also associated with Óðinn as the god of wizardry and delusion.<sup>200</sup> The depiction of characters who find themselves in such an ambiguous situation is based on a long literary tradition that goes back to the times when paganism was alive, and the ancient image of Óðinn as a deceptive god. This deceptive nature is, however, understood in a simpler and broader way in this late saga (this is what Jesse Byock calls the 'Christian rationalisation of the evil nature of pagan creatures').<sup>201</sup> According to this view, not only can Óðinn not be trusted because he lets down his chosen warriors, but the whole world where Óðinn is a supreme deity is corrupt and hostile to the positive characters. Surprisingly, even though the saga is very consistent in creating a very negative image of paganism, Christian beliefs are not opposed to it directly. Positive values are rather represented through several characters who, not being obviously Christian, deny paganism together with the vices that the saga associates with it.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Following the definition of the Odinic hero complex in 1.2, it is evident that it is

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<sup>198</sup> Lars Lönnroth, 'Charlemagne, Hrolf Kraki, Olaf Tryggvason: Parallels in the Heroic Tradition', *Les relations littéraires Franco-Scandinaves au moyen Age: Actes du Colloque de Liege*, avril 1972 (Paris: Societe d'edition Les Belles Lettres, 1972), 32.

<sup>199</sup> *Skjöldunga saga i Arngrim Jonssons udtog*, ed. A. Olrik (Aarbøger: 1894), xi, 83-164.

<sup>200</sup> See, e.g., Ármann Jakobsson, 'Óðinn as mother: The Old Norse deviant patriarch', in *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 126 (2011), 5-16, Thomas Andrew DuBois, *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 136-138.

<sup>201</sup> *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, ed. and trans. Jesse L. Byock, Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998), 85.

present in *Hrólfs saga kraka* in a very complete form, even more so than in *Völsunga saga*. The Odinic hero plot is not reduplicated in *Hrólfs saga* as it is in the *Völsunga saga*,<sup>202</sup> but its only occurrence is crucially important for the development of the events as well as for the ideological statement made in the end of *Hrólfs saga kraka*. The secondary motifs (1.2) are present abundantly. There are instances of bear shapeshifting that in *Gesta Danorum* is paralleled by bear-fighting and in *Bjarkarímur* by wolf-fighting; there are at least three battles with groups of *berserkir*, meanwhile Hrólfr's retinue is presented as an Odinic warband of twelve. We can see a clear connection between the Odinic hero complex and initiation structures here as, starting with *Svipdags þáttur*, initiatory structures dominate the plot.

These all are observations rather than findings, because *Hrólfs saga kraka* pretty and *Völsunga saga* have pretty much codified the Odinic hero complex. Structurally similar approach to Óðinn-related material in *Völsunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka* has been a scholarly commonplace since early twentieth century (1.1), and when it comes to the connection between Óðinn, his gifts and death inflicted by him, and the *berserkir* (shapeshifters or members of a *Männerbund*), *Hrólfs saga kraka* is a starting point as much as it is research material. It is of great importance, though, that *Völsunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka* demonstrate this structural parallelism, because these two texts have helped to define the Odinic hero complex and suggest its use in other saga material.

The most important feature in *Hrólfs saga kraka* is not the mere presence of the Odinic hero complex, but how the saga approaches the narrative elements of the Odinic hero plot. If in i.e. *Völsunga saga* the Odinic hero is an object (helped by Óðinn, killed by Óðinn), in *Hrólfs saga kraka* he becomes an active agent who opposes Óðinn, death and the 'pagan' value system together with that. Set against the negative image of the pre-Christian world, impersonated by 'the evil Óðinn', is the protagonists' heroism and their trust in their own might and main, seen as something that foregoes the Christian morality. It is clear from other sources, such as *Ólafs saga helga*, that the image of Hrólfr kraki as an almost Christian, 'anti-Odinic' hero is a traditional one (3.1), and it is most likely based on an even earlier pre-Christian sentiment of resentment against Óðinn as the deity inflicting defeat (3.3.5). It will be demonstrated how this theme of resentment against Óðinn tends to attach itself to

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<sup>202</sup> Compare 2.3. where encounters with Óðinn are multiple, and 3.4-3.5 where there are only three but all meaningful.

narratives containing the Odinic hero complex (compare 4.7, 5.5.1-5.5.2, 6.2.5).

Now, having looked at the two clearest examples of the Odinic hero complex in saga literature, this dissertation will move on to those where it is present in a less evident form. So, in *Hálfs saga ok hálsrekka* Óðinn does not directly influence Hálfir's career as he does in the cases of the Vǫlsungs and Hrólfr kraki. It will be demonstrated, however, that Óðinn-related imagery can also effectively form an Odinic hero complex, which will be accompanied by the same initiation structures and secondary motifs as the two texts observed so far.

## CHAPTER 4

## HÁLFS SAGA OK HÁLFSREKKA

1. *HÁLFS SAGA OK HÁLFSREKKA'S PLACE IN THE DISCUSSION*

It is unlikely to be a coincidence how much *Hálfs saga ok hálfrekka* shares in common with *Hrólfs saga kraka*. A point of contact that is the most important for the current research is that both storylines deliver an explicitly Odinic theme that is associated, as in the case of *Völsunga saga*, with the idea of sacrificial death. The similarity goes much further than this, though. There are obvious parallels between the storylines and imagery of the two texts; not less importantly, parallels may be drawn on the levels of composition and genre. Unsurprisingly perhaps, there is a long tradition of associating the two sagas with each other that goes back to the times when both stories were circulating in medieval Icelandic society, a beautiful illustration of this interconnection being *Tóka þáttur Tókasonar*, a story where the protagonist tells about his visits first to king Hrólfr's court and then to king Hálfr's, and then St. Olaf makes the following comparison between the two rulers: 'Auðsét er þat... at miklu sterkari hafa verit rekkar Hálfs konungs, en engi þykki mér verit hafa konungrinn samtíða orvari ok betr at sér en Hrólfr kraki' ('It is evident... that Hálfr's warriors are the strongest, but no king in those times was more magnanimous and generous than Hrólfr kraki'). Today the tradition of connecting those stories is reflected in editorial practice, e.g. when the two sagas were published together in W. Bryant Bachman and Gudmundur Erlingsson's translation.<sup>203</sup>

It is therefore very tempting for a saga researcher to assume a genetic connection between the traditions and the two written sagas that belong to them. Points of resemblance are numerous enough to form a system; many of them lie on the surface, starting with quite similar titles, and both stories being *fornaldarsaga* narratives with a very similar set of characters and more or less the same plot. A closer analysis, however, reveals that the idea of a relation between the two texts is problematic due to their different origin: while *Hrólfs saga kraka* is primarily in prose, with extremely rare poetic quotes and one short fragment based on *Bjarkamál*,

<sup>203</sup> *The sagas of King Half and King Hrolf*, trans. W. Bryant Bachman, Gudmundur Erlingsson (University Press of America, 1991).

*Hálfs saga ok hálfrekka*'s prose seems to be heavily dependent on the verse. Taking the very probable but problematic relation between *Hrólfs saga kraka* and *Hálfs saga ok hálfrekka* into consideration, this chapter will consider how the Odinic sacrificial theme is developed in the latter text in contrast to *Hrólfs saga*.

One could regard *Hrólfs saga kraka* as the more elaborate of the two narratives, with more a integrated storyline (despite its episodic structure) and a consistent development of the main theme, as was demonstrated in the previous chapter. The analysis on *Hálfs saga ok hálfrekka* will, therefore, depend on the phenomena observed and conclusions made in the previous chapter.

Since the analysis will take as a starting point the Odinic implications of the twelve *berserker*-related figures of *Hrólfs saga kraka*, as well as their fall, it is essential to articulate how exactly to link *Hálfs saga ok hálfrekka* to *Hrólfs saga kraka*. Their connection will support a hypothesis on how those texts are related to create an appropriate background for looking at the Odinic theme in *Hálfs saga ok hálfrekka*. This will be done by surveying the texts' parallels and contrasting features, starting with the broadest and the most abstract and then going into more detail. So we will first consider the dating and genre of the sagas, then their structure, characters, main themes as well as minor details shared in common.

## 2. STRUCTURE OF HÁLFS SAGA OK HÁLFSREKKA

The most representative common feature of the texts is that the structure of both is to a great extent episodic, with many narrative offshoots that, on the face of it, do not seem to contribute to the main plot (that is, the storyline identified in the title, connected with king Hrólfr or king Hálfr and their retinues). In both cases the narrative does not focus on the exploits of the eponymous kings until quite late, by the middle or even end of the saga. Those culminations are preceded by an account of the lives of the kings' predecessors, and by stories about their champions.

Although *Hrólfs saga* is divided into *þættir* and *Hálfs saga* is not, parallels may be drawn between the distribution of the material in both texts. In doing this, one should keep in mind that *Hálfs saga* is about a fifth of the length of *Hrólfs saga*, and contains long poetic quotations. Even if in terms of composition some parts may be similar, the account of *Hrólfs saga* will inevitably be more detailed and structured in a more complex way.

Chapters 1 — 9 of *Hálfs saga* centre around the lives of the eponymous king's ancestors and his father, corresponding briefly to *Fróða þátr* and *Helga þátr* of *Hrólfs saga kraka*. The story of Hjörleifr inn kvensami (chapters 5-8), the protagonist's father, forms an independent storyline in the same way as *Helga þátr* does; Hjörleifr's character also has much in common with Helgi's image and role in the story, which will be discussed further. —

Chapter 10 gives an account of Hálfr's group of devoted warriors. This kind of information is never provided in *Hrólfs saga* concisely but is rather dispersed over the narrative. A characterisation of king Hrólf and his retinue is given in chapter 22 of *Hrólfs saga kraka* in Svipr's words. Stories about the king's champions, similar to the anecdotes of Innsteinn and Útsteinn of *Hálfs saga*, are in *Hrólfs saga* numerous, long, overloaded with detail and occupy the whole *Svipdags þátr*, *Boðvars þátr* and the sometimes singled out *Hjáta þátr*, compared to one short chapter in *Hálfs saga*. On the other hand, however, chapter 10 in *Hálfs saga* and the two large *þættir* in *Hrólfs saga* have the same narrative function — they introduce the eponymous kings and their bands of followers. Structurally, in both sagas these parts come after the account of the king's ancestors but precede the burning hall episode.

Chapters 11 — 13 tell about the fall of king Hálfr and his warriors, in which respect they are parallel to *Hrólfs saga's* *Skuldarbardagi*, though the storyline and imagery are more reminiscent of *Hrólfs saga's* previous *þátr*, *Uppsalafor*. This will be looked at in some detail below.

Finally, chapters 14 — 16 tell about the vengeance for king Hálfr, like the last chapter of *Hrólfs saga kraka*. Chapter 17 forms an independent episode.

It can be seen in this context that the structures of the sagas are more or less parallel. This can be explained partly by the fact that they both follow to an extent a typical formula, but some of the common features are, however, less conventional — for example, the fact that the main character is not introduced before the middle of the narrative.

### 3. CHARACTERS AND THEIR FUNCTIONS

Much more than the structure of the sagas, their characters, the relations between the characters and roles that they play in the story offer many points of resemblance. The protagonists and eponymous heroes of the sagas are a legendary Scandinavian king

and a company of his devoted warriors. All or a majority of them are named, but there is a character who plays the most dramatic part in the defence of his king before the main characters perish at the end of the saga. In *Hálfs saga*'s case this is Innsteinn who is also the main narrator of *Innsteinskviða*; in *Hrólfs saga*, this part is assigned to Þoðvarr bjarki and Hjalti, who are (perhaps not incidentally) the two speakers in *Bjarkarímur*, the poem behind *Hrólfs saga kraka*'s culmination.

The king's father-in-law is the main antagonist in both stories; in both cases, he plots against the king and tries to destroy him by treachery when the king is visiting his house. The king's mother and the antagonist's wife, Hildir in mjóva in *Hálfs saga* and Yrsa in *Hrólfs saga*, is characterised in much more detail, as is usual, in the much longer and more detailed *Hrólfs saga kraka*. Finally, the king's father, who in both stories perishes just before the main character is introduced, is the most problematic and even tragic hero in both stories: both Hjørleifr and Helgi are depicted as erring and often unfortunate but at the same time noble characters. The last feature is especially stressed in *Hrólfs saga kraka* that in general tends to give more spectacular and romance-like versions of all events in comparison with *Hálfs saga*. It may be too early to draw any weighty conclusions at this stage but even these two examples testify to more extensive fictionalisation and probably to a more pronounced entertaining element in *Hrólfs saga*, and, by contrast, *Hálfs saga*'s more traditional way of representing the material.

#### 4. THE MOTIFS OF FIRE ORDEAL AND FIRE FUNERAL

The hall-burning episode is central to both sagas, and comparison between the two accounts reveals intersections in the general course of events as well as in minor details. In the beginning, the stories in the two texts go as follows:

1. The king and his warband visit the king's ominous father-in-law. Aðils in *Hrólfs saga* is characterised as an evil sorcerer and sacrificer while Ásmundr of *Hálfs saga* does not have equally pronounced supernatural features.
2. Before they go there, there are prophecies about the outcome: in *Hrólfs saga*, Óðinn ensures Hrólfr's victory; in *Hálfs saga*, Innsteinn foresees Hálf's fall.
3. In the hall and feast, their enemy makes an attempt to burn them inside (in *Hrólfs saga* twice, and both times without any success).
4. The heroes break down the wall of the burning house and engage in a battle.

In the following fight, Hálfir and his warriors perish — unlike in the account given by *Hrólfs saga*. Hálfir's death is the core part of the narrative, culminating in *Innsteinskviða*, which is generally agreed to be the oldest part of the text. Whatever is the sequence in which different parts of the text were composed, Hálfir's fall is central to the narrative. The importance of the death episode is stressed by an extensive use of poetic quotations, as well as by its place nearly at the finale of the saga, followed only by an account of its aftermath. *Uppsalaþor*, the *þáttir* in *Hrólfs saga kraka* where the similar episode is given, is also stressed both structurally and thematically.<sup>204</sup> Structurally, it comes after a row of quite similar episodes centered around Hrólfr's champions, and involves all of them as a warband for the first time. Furthermore, it is the first time we see the eponymous king as an active protagonist who is leading this warband. Thematically, *Uppsalaþor* crowns the idea of consecration and initiation that has been developed in the preceding episodes, and gives this theme an unexpected twist as Hrani's gift is rejected by Hrólfr, which breaks his connection to the pagan world and directly leads to the *Skuldarbardagi*'s catastrophe. In this respect, *Uppsalaþor* is a key episode in the saga, as *Innsteinskviða* and its accompanying prose is for *Hálfs saga ok hálfsrekka*.

Systematic parallels and points of contact between the death scene in *Hálfs saga ok hálfsrekka* and *Uppsalaþor* in *Hrólfs saga kraka* draw particular attention to their contrasting features, especially to the fact that their finales are opposite to each other. *Uppsalaþor* virtually repeats *Hálfs saga*'s account with the exception of the fact that the actual death-scene is absent from *Uppsalaþor*. The matter is made even more complicated by the following *þáttir* of *Hrólfs saga*, *Skuldarbardagi*, that gives an account of Hleiðargarðr's fall that is surprisingly similar to Hálfir's death in many aspects; and the other important point of contact between *Hálfs saga* and *Skuldarbardagi* is that both episodes are based on heroic poetry (which makes Olrik suggest that *Innsteinskviða* was influenced by *Bjarkamál*; HLD 170-171).

Leaving for a while the hypothesis of contacts between the continental heroic songs, one could say that *Hrólfs saga* splits the story from *Hálfs saga* into two separate episodes, one about visiting a hostile king's hall and the fire ordeal undergone there, and the other about the king and his warband's death. The other possibility is that, vice versa, *Hálfs saga* gives a shorter variant of the story in *Hrólfs*

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<sup>204</sup> *Uppsalaþor* was in more detail observed as the culmination of *Hrólfs saga kraka* in the previous chapter. It is also emphasized by poetic quotations that are, overall, rare in the saga.

saga.

There are, therefore, two important parallels between the texts:

1. Chapters 11-13 of *Hálfs saga ok hálfrekka* and chapters 43-44 of *Hrólfs saga kraka* that are a part of *Uppsalafor*. These are the hall-burning episodes, sharing the structure and a number of important motifs, as demonstrated above. *Hálfs saga* gives a poetic account of the hall-burning and brief prose commentary. *Hrólfs saga*'s chapters are more complex in terms of plot and are written in prose, though there is one stanza dedicated to breaking away from the fire. This could lead to the suggestion that *Hálfs saga* gives an earlier and more primitive variant of the story, though at this point it can be no more than a suggestion.
2. Chapter thirteen of *Hálfs saga ok hálfrekka* and the whole last *þáttur* of *Hrólfs saga kraka* titled *Skuldarbardagi*. These are the two death-scenes. The account of *Hálfs saga* is in verse, *Innsteinskviða*; there is also a brief prose commentary. *Hrólfs saga* is, as usual, in prose, though it is commonly accepted that *Skuldarbardagi* is based on the lost *Bjarkamál*. However, those stanzas of *Bjarkamál* that would contain parallels to *Innsteinskviða* do not survive in the original, and it is an open question whether the similarities in the sagas can be explained by the older poems' similarities, or later cross-influence in saga-age Iceland.

There may be various reasons for the later resemblance, one of which is the possible (though impossible to prove) relation between *Innsteinskviða* and *Bjarkamál* suggested by Axel Olrik (HLD 171). Olrik finds the similarities between *Innsteinskviða* and what is left of *Bjarkamál* consistent enough to establish close relationship and interconnection between the traditions. On the one hand, this chapter generally shares Olrik's hypothesis that the traditions behind *Hálfs saga* and *Hrólfs saga* are related, and that numerous similarities between the narratives should be explained by one of the narratives' influence upon the other, and not just by their use of common motifs and topoi shared by heroic poetry and mythical-heroic sagas. On the other hand, even though many of Olrik's points of departure are reasonable, his conclusions are often problematic. For example, similarities between *Innsteinskviða* and *Bjarkamál* (or rather, in fact, *Hrólfs saga*'s retelling of *Bjarkamál*), observed e.g. by Olrik, can be attributed not to their relationship but rather to heroic poetry commonplaces. The analysis in Olrik's monograph is made even more problematic by

the fact that today there is no full text of *Bjarkamál*, and one has to rely on *Hrólfs saga kraka*'s account. It is also possible and even very probable that some of the points of resemblance between *Innsteinskviða* and *Skuldarbardagi* can be explained by interconnection between the sagas or oral narrative traditions behind them, more recent than the era when *Innsteinskviða* and *Bjarkamál* were supposedly composed considering the popularity of both sagas.<sup>205</sup>

As can be seen from the outline, the main story of *Hálfs saga*, as well as in the culminating parts of *Hrólfs saga* (*Uppsalaþór* and *Skuldarbardagi*), centres upon more or less the same motif. While Ásmundr of *Hálfs saga* generally succeeds in his plan, Aðils of *Hrólfs saga* suffers a shameful defeat, but a death episode quite similar to the account of *Innsteinskviða* immediately follows Hrólfr's exploit at Aðils' court and is logically connected to it by the Hrani episode. The heroes undergo a *Grimnismál*-like trial by fire, first in Hrani's house and then in Aðils' hall; by enduring it first in an initiatory situation and then in reality, they become consecrated to Óðinn, but king Hrólfr breaks this relationship and thus condemns himself and his followers. This story has its own rather rhetorical logic, as was demonstrated in the chapter on *Hrólfs saga*. The *Uppsalaþór/Skuldarbardagi* account is much more complex, and corresponds much less to what can be called 'saga style', than the traditional 'death by burning' saga motif present in *Hálfs saga ok hálfsrekka*, or any *Völsunga saga* episode that features the idea of consecration and death.<sup>206</sup> The circumstances of *Hrólfs saga*'s death episode are more complex, and, one could argue, more literary, more 'written', than the simpler account of Hálfr's fall: the idea of battle with fate is symbolically reflected in the name of the antagonist, Queen Skuld, and the title *Skuldarbardagi*. Nothing like this is ever found in *Hálfs saga ok hálfsrekka*. Instead of *Hrólfs saga*'s two episodes connected by an Odinic framework and the idea of initiation, we have a very clear example of the traditional motif of death by burning in the hall, that also traditionally culminates with the protagonists' death,<sup>207</sup> instead of *Hrólfs saga*'s more complicated sequence of events.<sup>208</sup>

<sup>205</sup> The first thing that testifies to popularity here is the sheer number of manuscripts in which the two sagas are preserved.

<sup>206</sup> E.g. Sigmundr's sword or Grani given to Sigurðr in *Völsunga saga* chapters 4 and 19.

<sup>207</sup> On connection between fire funerals, Odinic rites of sacrifice and the saga motif of hall-burning see H. Munro Chadwick, *The Cult of Othin: an essay in the ancient religion of the north* (London: C. J. Clay and sons, 1882), 23-24.

<sup>208</sup> The motif of hall-burning, with two future avengers who manage to escape the fire, is also found in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, not in the Uppsala Raid episode but rather in *Fróða þáttur*.

Let us look in more detail at how the hall-burning plot is delivered in both sagas. In *Hálfs saga* the narrative is, in the first place, poetical. The following stanzas from chapter 12 contain the motifs also found in a similar scene from *Hrólfs saga kraka*:

Hrindum heilir  
hallar bjóri.  
Nú taka súlur  
í sundr þoka.  
Æ mun uppi,  
meðan öld lifir,  
hálsrekka fyrir  
til hertoga.

Hart skulum ganga  
ok hliða ekki við,  
verðr vísir lið  
at vega með soxum.  
Þeir skulu sjálfir  
á sér bera  
blóðgar benjar,  
áðr braki létti.

(HSH 12)

Let us completely break to wall of this house. Now the columns are already unstable. It will always be remembered, while people live, how the *hálsrekkar* visited the ruler [Ásmundr].

We shall exit the house steadfastly and not retreat; we will fight with short swords, the king's followers. Let them inflict bloody wounds on themselves before the chaos will stop.

It is with these words that Innsteinn urges the warriors to break the wall and fight their enemies instead of being burned inside. After doing so, they enter their last battle with superior enemy forces. In *Hrólfs saga*, the warriors' escape from the burning hall is also preceded by a speech of the king's most famous champion, this time Bǫðvarr bjarki:

Bǫðvarr mælti: 'Illr dauðdagi er þetta, ef vér skulum hér inni brenna, ok kǫra ek heldr at falla fyrir vǫpnum á sléttum velli, ok ill verða þá ævilok Hrólfs konungs, ef svá skal til ganga. Sé ek nú ekki annat ráð vænna en ganga svá fast á, at undan gangi þilin, ok brjótumst vér svá burt ór húsinu, ef þat má leikast, — en þat var þó ekki barnaspil, húsit var rammyggiliga smíðat, — 'ok hafí svá hverr mann fyrir sér, er vér komum út, ok munu þeir þá enn skjótt blotna.' 'Þetta er þjóðráð,' segir Hrólfr konungr, 'ok þetta mun oss fullvel duga'.  
(HSK 43)

Bǫðvarr said: 'It will be a bad death if we burn here, and I would rather choose to die from a weapon in the open field; and it will be an ill end to king Hrólfr if that happens. Now I see no other choice than push so hard that the wood panels will go loose; and so we will break out from the house, if this works,' — and it was no child's play, as the house was built soundly, — 'and when we get out, each of us will fight one of them, so they will quickly get wet'. 'This is good advice', said king Hrólfr, 'and it suits us very well'.

Although the stylistic differences are apparent, a few important parallels can be drawn between this quotation and the preceding poetical fragment from *Hálfs saga*. Firstly, the two utterances share their function (an appeal to the warband before they break away) and attribution (both are delivered by a character who is clearly the first and best of the champions, Innsteinn and Bøðvarr respectively). Secondly, they have similar imagery: both fragments feature a positive image of battle (and probably death in battle) that is contrasted to death in the burning house, and both contain a more or less graphic image of parts of the building being destroyed (‘Nú taka súlur í sundr þoka’ (HSH 12), ‘Sé ek nú ekki annat ráð vænna en ganga svá fast á, at undan gangi þilin, ok brjótumst vér svá burt ór húsinu, ef þat má leikast...’ (HSK 43), ‘Nú taka þeir þetta til ráðs, at þeir hlaupa á þilin svá hart ok heimsliga, at þau brotna í sundr, ok komast svá út’ (HSK 44)). The call to fight after breaking out of the house is also similar, albeit probably more optimistic in *Hrólfs saga kraka*.

There is another detail that could imply a connection between the two texts. Immediately after the breaking away episode, *Hrólfs saga kraka* mentions the king’s hawk flying around as if proud of a victory, which is later explained by the fact that he had slain all king Aðils’ hawks:

Ok í þessum harða bardaga kemr haukr Hrólfs konungs fljúgandi ór borginni ok sezt á oxl Hrólfs konungs svá látandi, svá sem hann eigi miklum sigri at hrósa.  
Bøðvarr mælti: ‘Svá lætr hann nú sem hann hafí nokkurn frama unnit.’  
Sá maðr skundaði til eins lopts, sem haukana átti at annast ok þeir vǫru í geymdir, ok þykkir honum undarligt, at haukr Hrólfs konungs er í burtu, en hann finnr dauða alla hauka Aðils konungs.  
(HSK 44)

During this hard-fought battle king Hrólfr’s hawk came flying around the city, and he landed on the king’s shoulder so triumphantly as if he was celebrating a great victory.  
Bøðvarr said: ‘He looks like he has committed something great.’  
The man who was taking care of the hawks ran to the loft, and it seemed strange to him that the king’s hawk had flown away, but then he found all the king Aðil’s hawks dead.

This episode is reminiscent of a motif in the opening stanza from chapter twelve in *Hálfs saga* and its accompanying prose. The prose text states at the moment when the house has caught fire:

En sá, er fyrst vaknaði af Hálsrekkum, sá hollina nær fulla af reyk. Hann mælti: ‘Rjúka mun um hauka vára nú,’ sagði hann. Síðan lagðist hann niðr ok svaf.  
(HSK 12)

But he woke up first of the *hálsrekkar*, and the hall was almost full of smoke. ‘Now the hawks will get sooted’, he said. Then he lay down and fell asleep.

The same image can be seen in the poetical part uttered by Innstein:

Rýkr um hauka  
í hǫll konungs.  
(HSH 12)

The hawks in the king's hall are getting sooted.

Although the mere presence of the hawk motif in both scenes cannot testify to a connection between them on its own, it qualifies as a supporting argument. The short episode in *Hrólfs saga* does not seem to contribute to the action in any other way than laying emphasis on Hrólfr's triumph; it achieves a new meaning, though, if we compare the scene with *Hálfs saga ok hálfrekka's* similar scene where the image of (supposedly) Hálfr's dead hawks is clearly associated with his fall. If we assume that the audience of *Hrólfs saga* had the Innsteinn poetry in mind, these two hawk episodes could make an effective contrast, especially considering all the other similarities between the scenes.

The view presented here may be opposed by Hubert Seelow's argument that, in the quoted passage from *Hálfs saga*, *haukr* is a poetic word for 'warrior' (he supports this by the usage of the word *haukmaðr* referring to a brave person later in the text). In *Hrólfs saga kraka*, on the other hand, the story clearly features an actual hunting hawk. Even though Seelow's argument sounds reasonable, if the *Hrólfs saga* episode is a case of reception, the reception could easily be accompanied by a literal interpretation of poetic terms. It is tempting to propose that the much more optimistic account of *Hrólfs saga* could have been composed as a reaction to the solemn picture of heroic death of *Hálfs saga*. It is possible to argue that the difference between the hall-burning episodes in *Hrólfs saga* and *Hálfs saga* emphasises the line between sagas dependent on heroic tradition, and a later saga type, markedly fictional, dependent on its commonplaces and, last but not least, essentially written in form.

Another objection may be raised against von Seelow's argument in the light of the Odinic background of the hall-burning scenes, which will be looked at in more detail below, and the general importance of the sacrificial theme in both sagas. Considering the well-studied connection between funerals, especially fire funerals, and rites of sacrifice,<sup>209</sup> one could regard the death scene in *Hálfs saga* as a saga paraphrase of a sacrifice myth. In this case, the presence of hunting hawks makes

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<sup>209</sup> Munro H. Chadwick, *The Cult of Othin: an essay in the ancient religion of the north* (London: C. J. Clay and sons, 1882), 22-23.

perfect sense in the scene since hawks as well as dogs, wolves and horses, according to the evidence we have,<sup>210</sup> were once birds typically used for Odinic sacrifices as well as in fire funerals:

...At all events at the great nine-yearly sacrifices [...] animals were offered together with men; these were, in fact, not edible animals such as offered as a meal to Frö and other gods, but precisely the same animals which were usually burned upon the pyre at funerals, namely horses, dogs and hawks.<sup>211</sup>

It is important that the slaying of hawks links funerals to sacrifices and thus can be seen as a key element introducing the sacrificial theme. The hawk-scene in *Hrólfs saga kraka* could, therefore, not only be foiling *Hálfs saga ok hálsrekka*'s account, but also foreshadowing Hrólfr's confrontation with Hrani. There was no sacrifice, implies the saga. Even the king's hawk was not sacrificed but, on the contrary, has killed Aðils' hawks. Hrólfr's victory is absolute, and he does not depend, at least morally, on the pagan gods. If he has to perish because of this — and the tradition has it that he perished — this will happen afterwards, but the tale of the raid to Uppsala is a tale of triumph, both over actual enemies and over fate or *skuld*, which will still overcome the heroes in the future. This explanation of the hawk-scene in *Hrólfs saga* is, of course, no more than guesswork, though it fits quite well with Hrólfr's role as the ideal hero of the heathen era, opposed to the heathen gods.

*Hrólfs saga*, it must be emphasised, itself has a long oral tradition behind it and therefore cannot be simply regarded as 'derived' from *Hálfs saga*. The question is whether certain scenes in *Uppsalafor* could be influenced by *Innsteinskviða* and related poetry preserved in *Hálfs saga*. If the hypothesis is correct and some elements of *Hrólfs saga kraka* really have been influenced by the tradition connected to *Hálfs saga ok hálsrekka*, *Uppsalafor* and *Skuldarbardagi* should be regarded as a whole, as corresponding to the same episode. *Innsteinskviða* and, therefore, *Hálfs saga*'s culmination are dominated by one prevailing theme — heroic death. *Hrólfs saga kraka*, before bringing the heroes down, first emphasises the heroic, glorious element of the story. Chapters 11-13 of *Hálfs saga* describe a catastrophe; *Uppsalafor*, on the

<sup>210</sup> Chadwick, in the course of his monograph, gives commentary to two examples from Saxo Grammaticus, one from Adam of Bremen and one from *Thietmari Chronicon*. See Munro H. Chadwick, *The Cult of Othin: an essay in the ancient religion of the north* (London: C. J. Clay and sons, 1882), 16-18, 24-25.

<sup>211</sup> H. Munro Chadwick, *The Cult of Othin: an essay in the ancient religion of the north* (London: C. J. Clay and sons, 1882), 24.

other hand, is a triumph, and its contrast with Hálfir's fall must have made the triumph even brighter in the eyes of the audience who knew both traditions. This triumph, however, does lead to a catastrophe that breaks out in *Skuldarbardagi*. In terms of the plot, *Uppsalafor* and *Skuldarbardagi* are connected to each other by the two Hrani episodes, exactly as Óðinn's image generally connects the ideas of glory and death. Let us then contrast the development of the Odinic theme in *Hrólfs saga kraka* with the situation in one of its assumed sources, *Hálfs saga ok hálfrekka*.

## 5. THE ODINIC THEME IN *HÁLFS SAGA OK HÁLFSREKKA*

The previous chapter has demonstrated that in *Hrólfs saga kraka* the theme of Óðinn's warriors is developed gradually and implicitly, becoming more evident in *Böðvars þátr* as the action achieves culmination — in the Hrani episodes and immediately after them. *Hálfs saga ok hálfrekka*, being basically a collection of poetry with accompanying prose, does not really develop any themes by working them into the plot.

The main point of departure is that the Odinic theme is present in the saga rather extensively for such a short text, and is always introduced in the aspect that is central for this research, i.e. in connection with doomed heroic figures. On the surface of it, this may be seen as another point of resemblance with *Hrólfs saga kraka* where this theme is, as it has been shown, essential for the main conflict. A problem arises when we look upon the specific quotes from *Hálfs saga ok hálfrekka*, all of which concern poetical fragments and almost never (with the exception of chapter one) have any parallels in the accompanying prose. The use of Odinic themes in heroic poetry is often conventional and traditional, while in later saga narratives it can be reconsidered and introduced purposefully, as in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, which may be regarded as a general tendency in a written text that distances itself from the oral tradition behind it (HLD 213). The poetical evidence should, therefore, be taken with caution.

Poetic tradition and especially Eddic poetry is, of course, very important background for the type of *fornaldarsögur* that some scholars define as 'mythical-heroic sagas'.<sup>212</sup> *Völsunga saga* is a relevant example here, but not very typical, since the parallels between saga episodes and fragments of older poems are rarely as clear

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<sup>212</sup> Stephen Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas and Ballads* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991), 10-13.

as in the case of *Völsunga saga* and the *Sigurðr* poems.

It has been shown that theme of dying by fire is very explicit in *Hálfs saga*, but in *Hrólfs saga kraka*'s similar episode, *Uppsalafor*, this theme is blurred: the danger of death in the burning hall is just one of the adventures of the protagonists, neither the culmination of the saga nor even something that happens to any of the characters.

Let us now, leaving aside the fire ordeal episodes and their possible Eddic connections, consider the quotations from *Hálfs saga ok hálsrekka* that assume a connection to the theme of Óðinn's warriors. One of them, quite similar in spirit to Þoðvarr's resentment in *Skuldarbardagi*, is found in chapter thirteen where Innsteinn says about Hálf's fall:

Eigum Óðni  
illt at gjalda,  
er hann slíkan konung  
sigri rænti.  
(HSH 13)

Evil should be done to Óðinn because he took victory from such a king.

A similar sentiment is then echoed by Útstein:

Ek hefi hjarta  
hart í brjósti,  
síz mér í æsku  
Óðinn framdi.  
(HSH 15)

My heart is hard in my breast since Óðinn helped me in my youth.

This stanza is of particular interest for us because Útsteinn connects with Óðinn not Hálf's death, as in the previous example, but rather his own fate in which heroic might is tied to misfortune, and blames the god for bestowing this fate on him. Exactly this dichotomy, as we have seen in the examples of *Völsunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka*, is characteristic of the Odinic hero theme. If the first quoted half-stanza, though it fits our framework very well, may be an accidental reference to common mythological knowledge about Óðinn causing the death of warriors, the Útsteinn stanza simply implies too much to refer to a general background. In fact it tells a story of Útsteinn receiving from Óðinn the (fatal) gifts of non-human strength and extraordinarily long life, as was articulated by Hubert Seelow regarding this particular stanza:

Schicksal hat ihm ein langes Leben zugebracht und Óðinn schenkte ihm schon in jungen Jahren ein tapferes Herz. Hier wird [...] die übermenschliche Tapferkeit Útsteins [...] mit dem Walten Odins erklärt, doch anders als in den beiden genannten Beispielen, wo Odin für die negative Entwicklung der Dinge verantwortlich gemacht wird, schreibt Útstein hier seine Heldehaftigkeit der ganz besonderen Gunst Odins zu.<sup>213</sup>

Fate has bestowed on him a long life, and Óðinn gave him a brave heart at an early age. Útstein's superhuman strength is explained by Óðinn's influence, and unlike the two other examples [in the poetry of *Hálfs saga ok hálsrekka*] where Óðinn is blamed for the negative development of the events, Útsteinn explains his own heroism by Óðinn's special favour.

The two quoted passages, especially the last one, fit perfectly the framework of the Odinic hero theme, and it can be assumed from the last one that somewhere back in the transmission Útsteinn (or any other character the last quoted stanza was attributed to) could once have been a protagonist of the same type as Sigmundr and Sigurðr or king Hrólfr's champions, even if only hints to this are made in the poetical parts of *Hálfs saga ok hálsrekka*.

## 6. THE PROTAGONIST AND THE NATURE OF CONFLICT

As it has been demonstrated in the chapter on *Hrólfs saga kraka*, throughout most of the storyline the eponymous hero is an idealised king-figure, static and even lacking initiative, rather than an active hero. The latter role is taken on by Þoðvarr, Hjalti, Svipdagr and other champions of Hrólfr's court. This situation is reminiscent of the chivalric literature model, most significantly the Charlemagne cycle and the *Karlamagnús saga*, or — typologically — with the Arthurian cycle. King Hálfr, however, is never presented as a king ruling in his hall, with the exception of *Tóka þátrr Tókasonar* where he is contrasted to Hrólfr kraki. *Hálfs saga*, however, gives us a figure of warband chieftain, not a feudal ruler. Hálfr, pretty much like Sigmundr and Sigurðr is a hero who happens to be a king, the 'heroic' aspect of the character being dominant.

The conflict between Hrólfr and Aðils, as well as between Hálfr and Ásmundr, may be seen as a late manifestation of a fundamental theme in epic literature and heroic poetry — the confrontation between a 'settled king' and an 'intruder hero'.<sup>214</sup> It is remarkable that both Hrólfr, excessively represented exactly as a 'settled king', and

<sup>213</sup> Hubert Seelow, 'Zur Rolle der Strophen in den Fornaldarsögur', *Fourth International Saga Conference* (München, 1979), 132.

<sup>214</sup> W.T.H.Jackson, *The Hero and the King: an Epic Theme* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 15.

Hálfr, represented this way at least in *Tóka þáttur Tókasonar*, clearly play the hero's part:

The hero arrives at a court, usually of which he has at least heard, accompanied by a band of warriors. This band is rarely large enough to be called an army and never strong enough to overwhelm the settled community by sheer force... The most important fact to be determined is the purpose of the visit, and in this regard there is a good deal of difference between the epics...<sup>215</sup>

A king's hall, either the one in Uppsala or Hleiðargarðr, is the setting for most of *Hrólfs saga kraka*, and indeed the conflict of virtually every single episode involves a static sovereign (either Hrólfur or Aðils), who reigns in the hall, and a stranger champion, who is a guest or intruder in the same hall, and changes the situation there by his deeds, while the king is regarded as a preserver of stability. The main theme of the episode is that the arriving hero faces some challenges in the king's hall, like fighting *berserkir*<sup>216</sup> or monsters<sup>217</sup> (those types of antagonists, as has already been shown in the previous chapter, can be interchangeable in the tradition, especially when the *berserkir* are substituted by bear figures). Anybody or anything the hero opposes, however, is a part of the static king's reign, and therefore any conflict described is essentially a conflict between the hero and the king.

The pattern of conflict between settled king and intruder-hero is thus essentially a study of transfer of power or, in other terms, the problem of kingship. In none of the major classical and medieval epics are we presented with a 'normal' king, that is, with a king at the peak of his physical prowess, fully in control of his kingdom, with no problems, actual or potential, in his relations with his subjects or within himself. The sovereign may be powerful, with a slight flaw, or be guilty of temporary weakness or aberration, or he may be weak and totally unworthy of his office.<sup>218</sup>

From this point of view Hrólfur kraki's figure is ambiguous (which, from a critical point of view, could be seen as inconsistency). In most of the saga he is, in Jackson's terms, a 'settled king' and 'preserver of stability',<sup>219</sup> and then he acts as an intruder-hero in *Uppsalafor*, with Aðils presented as the flawed sovereign. Before *Uppsalafor*, Hrólfur's image as a settled ruler is very consistent. He does not ever leave

<sup>215</sup> W.T.H.Jackson, *The Hero and the King: an Epic Theme* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 14-15.

<sup>216</sup> Svipdagr both in Uppsala and Hleiðargarðr, Bǫðvarr and Hjalti in Hleiðargarðr.

<sup>217</sup> Bǫðvarr and Hjalti in Hleiðargarðr, the entire Hrólfur's band in Uppsala.

<sup>218</sup> Jackson 15.

<sup>219</sup> Jackson 13.

Hleiðargarðr, and his main virtues are generosity and justice (and not bravery, though it is implied he is ideal in every respect). Furthermore, he plays the part of the static ruler, as contrasted to a ‘dynamic intruder’ hero, at least thrice. The first episode of this kind is when Svipdagr, who has already visited Aðils’ court, encounters Hrólfr’s *berserkir*. The second episode, structurally divided into two, is Bøðvarr and Höttr-Hjalti’s confrontation with the same band of *berserkir*. Finally, there is the troll-dragon’s attack upon the lands around Hleiðargarðr, and the story of Bøðvarr and Hjalti’s fighting this dragon. Despite being an undoubtedly positive figure, in all these three cases Hrólfr is portrayed as a passive ruler who needs the active hero’s help, while Aðils is always presented as a negative variant of the same image, a flawed ruler who is challenged by the hero who comes to his hall.

Hrólfr’s image is, therefore, rather contradictory. One could suppose that it is his playing the opposite narrative roles that made some scholars wonder whether the audience was supposed to take Hrólfr as a hero seriously, when in fact he does not very much contribute to the action compared to active heroes like Bøðvarr and Svipdagr.<sup>220</sup> This contradiction could be solved by the hypothesis that *Hrólfs saga kraka* initially existed in the oral tradition in a form that was more or less similar to the Charlemagne or Arthurian model, that is, a cycle of narratives dealing with champions at a static and idealised king’s court. The idea of Hrólfr as an active hero could be a result of the saga’s conscious reworking and introduction of new episodes, based on *Hálfs saga ok hálsrekka* as well as on independent tradition.

## 7. CONCLUSION

*Hálfs saga ok hálsrekka* is an essential piece of evidence for this discussion because it proves that the Odinic hero complex actually works. In *Hrólfs saga kraka* and *Völsunga saga*, the theme of Óðinn’s help and betrayal is so well-developed that it would be unrepresentative to base the argumentation just on the analysis of these two very special texts. In particular, *Hrólfs saga kraka* has become for Jens Peter Schjødt something like a codifier of the Odinic warrior myth that includes initiation, death and a distorted memory of *berserkir* as Óðinn’s consecrated warriors.<sup>221</sup> Since the Odinic

<sup>220</sup> E.g. Valgerður Brynjólfsson, ‘A valiant King or a Coward? The Changing Image of King Hrólfr kraki from the oldest sources to *Hrólfs saga kraka*’, *Fornaldarsagornas struktur och ideologi*, ed. Ármann Jacobsson (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2003), 141-156.

<sup>221</sup> See in particular Jens Peter Schjødt, ‘Óðinn, Warriors and Death’, in *Learning and Understanding*

hero complex is essentially a formalised and simplified form of this semantic system, it is necessary to see if this unity is present in a wider range of sources. *Hálfs saga ok hálfisrekka* is one such source. Formally speaking, it only contains one element of the Odinic hero plot, namely the Odinic death, and the secondary motif of the warband of twelve (see 1.2). Furthermore, the Odinic death is not so clearly defined in *Hálfs saga ok hálfisrekka* as it is in *Hrólfs saga kraka* and *Völsunga saga*, where Óðinn is present as an actual character destroying the protagonists, while in *Hálfs saga* he is only referred to in poetic stanzas. However, a closer look at the stanzas reveals that the motif of Óðinn's help is also present in Útstein's poetic narrative about his life, as he suggests that Óðinn has given him bravery and long life. Together with another reference to Óðinn in the poetic stanzas this gives a picture of an Odinic heroic life that is not too different from the accounts of *Hrólfs saga kraka* and *Völsunga saga*. Óðinn bestows on Útsteinn the gift of bravery and long life, similar to Starkaðr (see 6.2, 6.4), but then betrays him, which leads to resentment against Óðinn. Innsteinn even expresses the desire to take vengeance on Óðinn for the death of his king, similar both to Bøðvarr bjarki in *Hrólfs saga kraka* and Starkaðr in *Gautreks saga*, who also lost his king Víkarr because of Óðinn's actions (see 6.2 for the comparison of the three characters). In order to reinforce the theme of Óðinn's fickleness, as well as his sinister nature, the author-compiler of *Hálfs saga ok hálfisrekka* even found it appropriate to start the saga with an account of Óðinn's deceit of Geirhildr and Víkarr's birth, even though plot-wise it has no connection with the rest of the events. It is possible that the account of Víkarr's birth in the beginning of the saga was meant not only to remind the audience of Óðinn's treacherous nature, but also to draw a parallel between Útstein's situation in the end of *Hálfs saga ok hálfisrekka* and Starkaðr mourning the death of Víkarr in *Gautreks saga*. In either case, it is clear that the author-compiler of *Hálfs saga* demonstrates a very conscious approach to structuring, which goes far beyond simple transmission of material. Since the analysis of *Völsunga saga* has led to similar conclusions (2.5), it is safe to suggest that *fornaldarsögur* are consistently self-reflective in their treatment of Odinic material, even when it is not evidently reinterpreted from the Christian perspective as it is in *Hrólfs saga kraka*.

The obvious structural parallelism between the finale of *Hálfs saga ok*

*hálfrekka* and the last two *þættir* of *Hrólfs saga kraka* suggests an influence of one of the texts on the other, most probably *Hálfs saga* influencing *Hrólfs saga*. More importantly for this discussion, the parallelism between the two hall-burning episodes reinforces the initiatory, presumably Odinic background of this sequence in *Hálfs saga ok hálfrekka*. The liminality of the fire ordeal in *Hálfs saga* is echoed both by a similar passage's interpretation in *Uppsalafor* (*Hrólfs saga kraka*), where it is essentially an Odinic initiation, and by the transgressive and also clearly Odinic imagery of *Grímnismál*. Once again, as it was also the case in chapters 2-3, initiatory structures prove to be closely associated with the Odinic hero complex. On the one hand, this supports the argumentation of Schjødt's *Initiation between Two Worlds and Óðinn, Warriors and Death*, suggesting that the principles described there are fundamental in Old Icelandic cultural-mythological memory. On the other hand, the analysis in chapters 2-4 brings forth an important factor which was not taken into consideration by Schjødt: the author-compilers' active and conscious reworking of the material with the Odinic theme in mind.

This is the preliminary conclusion we can make in the basis of analysis undertaken in chapters 2-4. *Hálfs saga ok hálfrekka* in the last text analysed in this dissertation in whole; in contrast, chapters 5-7 will deal with individual episodes or *þættir*. So far, we have looked at two texts demonstrating full versions of the Odinic hero complex, and one text with only a part of the complex, following the principles described in 1.2. *Hrólfs saga kraka* contains the whole complex, including the complete Odinic hero plot and all the secondary motifs. *Völsunga saga* also contains the complete Odinic hero plot and many of the secondary motifs, although it does not have the motif of twelve warriors or *berserkir*. *Hálfs saga ok hálfrekka* contains a rather pronounced Odinic death and references to Odinic help, which arguably qualifies for the complete Odinic hero plot; it also features the 'twelve warriors' motif. In the next text, or rather two interconnected texts, the presence of the Odinic hero complex is even more fragmentary than in *Hálfs saga*, but the structural situation is similar: the *Sámsey* complex, on which chapter 5 will focus, contains a rather well-pronounced Odinic death, as does *Hálfs saga*, and it also deals heavily with the 'twelve warriors or *berserkir*' motif. However, this time the twelve *berserkir* are not the characters themselves, but rather their adversaries. Jens Peter Schjødt has argued that the idea of fighting the *berserkir*, who are in certain *fornaldarsögur* a literary reflection of Óðinn's consecrated warriors, is a reversal of the protagonist's *berserkir*

identity: 'a vague memory of some legendary hero who had a special relationship with Óðinn during an initiation which made him an Odinic hero – an initiation which consisted in 'killing' one or more *berserkir* who would sacrifice him, that is, initiate him to the god by whom he is killed in the end'.<sup>222</sup> Chapter 5 will consider this notion in relation to new material.

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<sup>222</sup> Jens Peter Schjødt, 'Óðinn, Warriors and Death', in *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World: Essays in Honour of Margaret Clunies Ross*, ed. Judy Quinn (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 147.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE SÁMSEY COMPLEX

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#### 1. DEFINITION OF THE BATTLE OF SÁMSEY COMPLEX

In contrast to the previous discussion, this chapter will consider not a whole saga but rather an episode that is found, in more or less the same form, in two different *fornaldarsögur*. The story of the battle on Sámsey is found in *Saga Heiðreks konungs ins vitra* (also known as *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*) and *Qrvar-Odds saga*; there is also an account of the same episode in Book VI of *Gesta Danorum*, as well as a rich ballad tradition which will not be considered here because of its late origin. The episode is an account of a battle between the sworn brothers Hjálmar and Qrvar-Oddr on the one side, and the twelve sons of Arngrím on the other. Although Hjálmar is not a prominent character in either of the sagas, this episode, culminating in his death, focuses on him much more than on Qrvar-Oddr or the sons of Arngrím — despite their major parts in the narratives as a whole. Furthermore, both saga versions of the episode are built around a long poem usually referred to as *Hjálmar's Death-Song*,<sup>223</sup> as well as several separate stanzas.

The battle on Sámsey episode is a one of the clearest manifestations of the ‘battle against a band of *berserkir*’ theme that has already been discussed in chapter 3 of this dissertation, and has been labeled as a secondary motif in the Odinic hero complex (1.2). The following analysis, therefore, will be partly developed from the chapter 3 analysis of *Hrólfs saga kraka*. A group of motifs, connected by a common theme and a common Odinic protagonist, manifests itself quite similarly in *Hrólfs saga kraka* and in the texts belonging to the Sámsey complex. It will be shown in the discussion below that Odinic hero imagery works in this episode in pretty much the same way as in the last *þáttur* of *Hrólfs saga kraka*, and that this parallel can shed new light on the problematic but frequently suggested connection between *berserkir*, the theme of *berserkir*-fighting and Odinic motifs in the sagas.

Another aspect of the episode that will be considered in this chapter is its

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<sup>223</sup> For the analysis of the ‘Eddic’ nature of this poem, which seems to be significantly older than the text, see e.g. Lars Lönnroth, ‘Hjálmar's Death-Song and the delivery of Eddic poetry’, *Speculum* 46:1 (1971), 10-20.

location on Sámsey in most sources except some ballads. Samsø, called Sámsey in Old Norse sources, is an island in the Danish bay of Kattegat that is associated with pagan worship in a number of Old Norse texts.<sup>224</sup> The question of Sámsey's supposed heathen 'background' is important for the analysis of this episode because it could be an evidence for the connection between the motif and the *berserker*-fighting, Odinic imagery and actual Odinic cults, which Jens Peter Schjødt was taking for granted.<sup>225</sup> His important but speculative theory has already been discussed in connection with *Hrólfs saga kraka*, and will be addressed throughout the dissertation. The Sámsey complex contains all the elements crucial for Schjødt's theory and, as it will be demonstrated, is thematically and structurally quite similar to the last *þáttr* of *Hrólfs saga kraka*, which is crucial to Schjødt's discussion. In this light, Sámsey's pagan associations provide valuable material for putting to test the supposed mythological roots of the 'Odic hero' complex in Icelandic sagas. A bit disappointingly perhaps, the existing evidence fails to provide unambiguous arguments for or against the Sámsey battle's ritual pretext. At first sight, the evidence seems to support Schjødt's argument, but serious counter-arguments emerge when the historical and literary background of the sources is considered.

## 2. THE CHOICE OF MATERIAL

This chapter deals with *Qrvar-Odds saga* and *Heiðreks saga*, which contain other Odinic material than the Sámsey complex, such as the famous episode with Gestumblindi's riddles. It has already been clarified that the Odinic theme in general, and even the theme of Óðinn's disguise as a mortal, is broader than the theme of this research, which only deals with narratives demonstrating the Odinic hero complex (1.2). So, this chapter only looks at an individual episode that is present, with some variations, both in *Qrvar-Odds saga* and *Heiðreks saga*. It is worthwhile, therefore, to consider briefly the material in the two sagas that is connected to Óðinn but not featured in this discussion.

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<sup>224</sup> In this chapter, the Old Norse form Sámsey will be generally used to refer to this island as it is presented in literary tradition, but the modern name Samsø will be used when geographical and historical features of the actual island are brought into discussion. The same concerns Hlésey (modern Læsø).

<sup>225</sup> Jens Peter Schjødt, 'Óðinn, Warriors and Death', in *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World: Essays in Honour of Margaret Clunies Ross*, ed. Judy Quinn (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 145-147.

Apart from the Gestumblindi sequence, an Óðinn-related storyline that is present in the source sagas but is not discussed in this chapter is *Qrvar-Oddr's* dealings with Rauðgrani, who is said in the saga to be disguised Óðinn. Unlike Gestumblindi's riddles, the Rauðgrani episode is of some interest for this dissertation: firstly, it is one of the examples of disguised Óðinn trying to conduct the hero's life and especially his battles; secondly, it gives the element 'Grani' in Óðinn's alias, similar to the Hrosshárs-Grani of *Gautreks saga*. References to this episode are made where it is relevant for the discussion. It should be noted, however, that Rauðgrani is a part only of the later manuscript tradition of *Qrvar-Odds saga*.<sup>226</sup> The Sámsey episode, by contrast, is likely to be one of its oldest components, with a parallel in *Gesta Danorum* and apparently independent versions in *Heiðreks saga* and *Qrvar-Odds saga*, most probably recorded independently from oral tradition.<sup>227</sup> Furthermore, there is quite strong evidence that the story of the battle on Sámsey was transmitted separately, which can be observed in a large number of later ballads on the subject.<sup>228</sup> It seems logical to suggest that the Rauðgrani and Sámsey episodes, although both a part of *Qrvar-Odds saga* (or, more precisely, one of its later variants), are not in fact connected to each other and give no reason to see Oddr as an 'Odinic hero' in the context of the whole saga, which is fragmentary in structure and in development of which Rauðgrani plays no crucial role.

### 3. THE BATTLE ON SÁMSEY COMPLEX IN OLD NORSE-ICELANDIC LITERATURE

By the 'Battle on Sámsey complex' I mean the whole Medieval Scandinavian tradition dealing with the battle between Hjálmar and Angantýr, both the surviving sources and the assumed tradition of transmitting this plot in oral or written form. *Heiðreks saga* and *Qrvar-Odds saga* are of particular interest for this dissertation because it focuses specifically on how saga narratives are constructed, and they both will be discussed below in more detail.

Besides the two sagas, the most important text for this discussion is an episode

<sup>226</sup> Stephen Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas and Ballads* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991), 62.

<sup>227</sup> Lars Lönnroth, 'Hjálmar's Death-Song and the delivery of Eddic poetry', *Speculum* 46:1 (1971), 10-11.

<sup>228</sup> Stephen Mitchell, 'The *fornaldarsögur* and Nordic Balladry: The Sámsey Episode across Genres', *Fornaldarsagornas struktur och ideologi*, ed. Ármann Jacobsson, Annette Lassen, Agneta Ney (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2003), 245-256.

given by Saxo Grammaticus in Book V of *Gesta Danorum* (GD I, 350-353). As it is often the case, Saxo's narrative is brief, probably a summary of his source. However, the most important elements of the saga account (discussed below) are present: twelve sons of Arngrimus (Arngrímr) are listed; Hialmerus and Aruarodd (Hjálmar and Qrvar-Oddr) fight them on Sampso (Samsø), in the course of which only Aruarodd survives. The story of the wooing of Ingibjörg is absent from the narrative, and the adversaries apparently meet each other by chance, whereas in both sagas Sámsey is arranged as the place of battle beforehand. The dialog between Hjálmar and Qrvar-Oddr, which is of primary importance for this chapter, is absent from *Gesta Danorum*. The main importance of this episode in Saxo for this thesis is, therefore, that it simply exists and bears witness to early oral transmission of the Sámsey story outside Iceland. We are dealing, therefore, with old and widespread legendary material, popular enough to spawn a rich ballad tradition. Of primary interest for us, however, is the Icelandic version of the story and the treatment of Hjálmar and Oddr's images in the two sagas that give an account of the Sámsey battle.

Although there are important variations, the accounts of the Sámsey battle in *Heiðreks saga* and *Qrvar-Odds saga* are quite similar. The following key elements are given in both texts in the same order.

Hjálmar and Qrvar-Oddr arrive at Sámsey with two ships to fight Angantýr and his brothers. They both leave the ships for a while, and upon returning find the whole crew killed by the twelve sons of Arngrímr.

In *Hervarar saga*, Hjálmar and Oddr exchange stanzas before the battle, the most important of which are the 'Óðinn's guests' dialogue: Hjálmar suggests that he and Oddr are going to 'become Óðinn's guests' the same evening and Oddr answers with a structurally similar stanza where he predicts the same fate for the *berserkir*. *Qrvar-Odds saga* repeats the same two stanzas and then develops the same theme even further, introducing two more stanzas: one is uttered by Angantýr and condemns Hjálmar and Oddr, and the second is, once again, Oddr's structurally similar answer. In *Heiðreks saga*, Oddr argues with Hjálmar's fatalistic attitude to the forthcoming battle; in *Qrvar-Odds saga*, Oddr with his stanzas stands against the same death imagery, but this time it is associated with both Hjálmar and Angantýr. Such a situation is perfectly logical in the light of the battle's finale, where Hjálmar and Angantýr kill each other and Oddr is the sole survivor. Ironically, the ideological conflict underlying the Sámsey episode is not between the actual enemies,

Hjálmar/Oddr and the *berserkir*, but rather between Oddr, who expresses the will to live in the stanzas, and everybody else starting with Hjálmar. Qrvar-Oddr is, of course, exactly the type of character whose primary function is to miraculously survive whatever the story will throw him into: this is determined in the very beginning of *Qrvar-Odds saga* where a sorceress predicts he will live for three hundred years. Various plot devices typical for a late *fornaldarsaga*, such as an impenetrable silk shirt or the magical arrows, support Oddr's invulnerability, and indeed it is the magical shirt that saves him this time. The character of Hjálmar is drastically different and much more traditional. When Oddr gets involved in the conflict between Hjálmar and Angantýr, he, metaphorically speaking, gets into an earlier *fornaldarsaga* subgenre, a mythical-heroic narrative instead of his usual sequence of voyages and adventures.

#### **4. PARALLELS BETWEEN THE BATTLE ON SÁMSEY COMPLEX AND SKULDARBARDAGI (HRÓLFS SAGA KRAKA)**

There are at least three important features that the Sámsey episode and *Skuldarbardagi* share in common:

1. The 'Óðinn's guests' dialogue;
2. The use of *trúa á mátt sinn ok megin* formula;
3. The treatment of the theme of *berserkir*.

##### **4.1. The 'Óðinn's guests' dialogue**

This is an argument between two allied and closely related characters who are going to enter a decisive battle: one of them brings forward the 'Óðinn's guests' rhetorical figure (Hjálti, Hjálmar) and the other deconstructs it (Böðvarr Bjarki).

|  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| Feature in common  | The Battle on Sámsey complex  | Hrólfs saga kraka  |
| The dialogue takes place before or during an important battle where the characters are likely to die.                                | The dialogue takes place before a battle between the sworn brothers (Hjálmar and Orvar-Oddr) and the sons of Arngrím.   | The dialogue takes place during a battle between the defenders of Hleiðargarðr and Skuld's army (the <i>Skuldarbardagi</i> ).  |
| The two speakers are closely related to each other.  | Hjálmar and Orvar-Oddr are friends and <i>fóstbræðr</i> (sworn brothers).   | In <i>Hrólfs saga kraka</i> , Bøðvarr saves Hjalti (Hötrr) and helps him to become a warrior. (Bøðvarr) Bjarki and Hjalti are traditionally connected because they are the two speakers-protagonists in <i>Bjarkamál</i> .<br><br>Hjalti addresses Bøðvarr as <i>fóstbróðir</i> (sworn brother, HSK 104).  |
| One of the speakers expects they will die, and the idea of becoming 'Óðinn's guests' is introduced as a rhetorical figure for dying. | <i>Heiðreks saga</i> has Hjálmar make this statement in prose, and then a stanza is given below:<br><br>Þá mælti Hjálmar til Odds, 'Sér þú nú, at fallnir eru menn okkrir allir, ok sýnisk mér nú líkast, at vér munum allir Óðin gista í kveld í Valhöllu'.<br><br>(...)<br><br>Fara halir hraustir<br>af herskipum,<br>tólf menn saman<br>tíralausir;<br>vit munum í aptan<br>Óðin gista<br>tveir fóstbræðr,<br>en þeir tólf lifa. <sup>229</sup> | Hjalti says:<br><br>...En eigi skal nú við hlífast, ef vér skulum í Valhöll gista í kveld, ok víst höfum vér aldri hitt slík undr fyrir sem hér eru nú, ok hefir oss lengi fyrir boðat þessum tíðendum, sem nú eru fram komin. <sup>231</sup><br><br>(HSK 104)<br><br>Note the fatalism of Hjalti's last remark: the situation has been predicted long ago (arguably by Hrani, or by the <i>álfkona</i> to Helgi); it could not be avoided. It is also Hjálmar's conviction that death in the forthcoming battle cannot be avoided. Hjalti and Hjálmar both provide the fatalistic thesis, and Orvar-Odd and Bøðvarr the antithesis. |

<sup>229</sup> Then Hjálmar told Oddr, 'Do you see that all our men have fallen? I think it is most likely that **we will all be Óðinn's guests in Valhöll tonight.**'

|   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
|   | <p>(Herv.5-6)</p> <p>In <i>Qrvar-Odds saga</i> Hjálmar recites a half-stanza containing two lines very similar to the quotation above:</p> <p>skolom í aptan Óþen gista<br/>tveir fóstbróþr, þeir tolf lifa.<sup>230</sup></p> <p>(QRV. 53)</p>   |   |
| The other character argues with the previous statement. | <p>Again, <i>Heiðreks saga</i> gives both Qrvar-Oddr's answer to Hjálmar in prose and the stanza:</p> <p>Oddr svaraði, 'En ek nenni eigi at gista Óðin í kveld, ok skulu þessir allir dauðir berserkir, áðr kveld sé, en vit tveir lifa.'</p> <p>(...)</p> <p>því mun orði<br/>andsvor veita:<br/>þeir munu í aptan<br/>Óðin gista<br/>tólf berserkir,<br/>en vit tveir lifa.<sup>232</sup></p> | <p>In <i>Hrólfs saga</i>, Bøðvarr is even more radical than Oddr:</p> <p>Hér er nú margt manna saman komit á móti oss ríkra ok tíginna, er ór qlum áttum at drífr, svá at eigi má rønd við reisa, en Óðin kann ek ekki at kenna hér enn. Mér er þó mesti grunr á, at hann muni hér sveima í móti oss, herjans sonrinn inn fúli ok inn ótrúi, ok ef nokkurr kynni mér til hans at segja, skylda ek kreista hann sem annan versta ok minnsta mýsling, ok þat illa eitrvikindi skyldi verða svívirðiliga leikit, ef ek mætti hann høndum taka, ok hverjum mundi vera meiri heipt í hug, ef hann sæi sinn lánardrottin svá út leikinn sem vér sjáum nú?<sup>234</sup></p> |

(...)

Strong warriors are leaving the warships, twelve wicked men together; **we will be this evening Óðinn's guests**, two sworn brothers, and those twelve shall live.

<sup>231</sup> But we should not hold anything back **if this night we are going to be guests in Valhøll**. Certainly we have never seen such a wonder as what we now have encountered, although he have been warned of this long ago, and so it happened.

<sup>230</sup> **This evening we will be Óðinn's guests**, two sworn brothers, and they twelve will live.

<sup>232</sup> Oddr answered: **I do not incline to spend this evening with Óðinn**. All those *berserkir* will be dead before evening, and we two will live'.

|  | (Herv.6)   | (HSK 98-99) |
|--|--|-------------|
|  | <p>Similarly, <i>Qrvar-Odds saga</i> gives Oddr's answer in a briefer poetic form:</p> <p>En því eino orþe hnektak:<br/>skolo í aptan Óþen gista<br/>tolf berserkir, vit tveir lifa.<sup>233</sup></p> <p>(Qrv. 53-54)</p> |             |

As can be seen from the table, the Sámsey battle episode and *Skuldarbardagi* show considerable structural parallelism: similar couples of characters in similar situations have very similar dialogues, in which the same mythological imagery is used in the same way. Moreover, there are other points of contact that will be discussed in subchapters below. This parallelism hardly makes it possible to securely argue for one tradition's influence on the other (in the light of dating, it would be the Sámsey episode on *Hrólfs saga kraka*), but it helps to establish a relationship between the ideas that underlie both texts.

#### 4.2. The use of *trúa á mátt sinn ok megin* formula

The character who speaks against the perspective of becoming 'Óðinn's guest' (Boðvarr Bjarki, Qrvarr-Oddr) is in both cases associated with the *trúa á mátt sinn ok megin* formula.

(...)

I say in answer to your words: **they will be Óðinn's guests this evening**, those twelve *berserkir*, and we two will live.

<sup>234</sup> There are many men assembled here against us, mighty and powerful, coming from all directions, so that there is no defence against them; **but I do not see Óðinn among them. I suspect, however, that he must be hovering here and plotting against us, this foul and untrue son of Herjan [the Devil]; and I tell you that if I ever spot him I will squeeze him as a despicable little mouse. That poisonous creature will be put to shame if he falls into my hands.** Everyone would feel great wrath if he saw his king treated so badly as we now see ours.

<sup>233</sup> And I reproach your words: this evening, the twelve *berserkir* **will be Óðinn's guests**, and we two will live.

|   |   |
|---|---|
| The Battle on Sámsey complex  | Hrólfs saga kraka   |
| Aldri vildi Oddr blóta; trúði hann á mátt sinn ok megin... Ingjaldr var eigi enn mesti blótmaðr.<br><br>(QRV. 6)<br><br>Oddr did not care about sacrifices and rather trusted in his own might and main... Ingjaldr, at that same time, was a great man for sacrifices. | En ekki er þess getit, at Hrólfr konungr ok kappar hans hafi nokkurn tíma blótat goð, heldr trúðu þeir á mátt sinn ok megin...<br><br>(HSK 96)<br><br>But it is not told that king Hrólfr and his champions had ever sacrificed to the gods, they rather had faith in their own might and main. |

It can be seen that in both cases *trúa á mátt sinn ok megin* is directly contrasted to pagan worship and sacrificing. It was demonstrated in Chapter 4 how *Hrólfs saga kraka* contrasts the protagonists' belief 'in one's own might and main' to negatively connoted imagery of heathenism and death, of which Óðinn-Hrani is emblematic. No similar conflict is evident in the Sámsey episode, although the sons of Arngrímur are not without connections to Odinic imagery (see the subchapter *The theme of berserkir* below). In the framework of the whole *Qrvar-Odds saga* it can be argued that Oddr is a character who is opposed to fate and death in general (see especially Qrv. 10-11).

#### 4.3. The theme of *berserkir*

The themes of berserker-slaying, *berserkir* in general and, more specifically, a band of twelve *berserkir* are prominent both in *Hrólfs saga kraka* and the Sámsey complex. The connection is much more complex than the mere presence of *berserkir* in the episodes, and is presented in the table below.

| Feature common in                 | The Battle on Sámsey complex   | <i>Hrólfs saga kraka</i>   |
|-----------------------------------|--|--|
| The protagonists are presented as | In both saga versions, Hjalmar kills Angantýr, and Qrvar-Oddr kills Angantýr's | In <i>Skuldarbardagi</i> , Bøðvarr boasts about slaying Agnarr the berserker: 'Ek drap Agnar |

|   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| slayers of <i>berserkir</i> .   | eleven brothers.<br><br>According to <i>Qrvar-Odds saga</i> , Hjálmar and Qrvar-Oddr earlier defeated a band of <i>berserkir</i> in Sælund (QRV. 35-36).  | breserk ok eigi síðr konungr' (HSK 102), 'I killed Agnarr the berserker who was no less a king'.<br><br>Svipdagr and his brothers, Bøðvarr and Hjálti have fought bands of <i>berserkir</i> earlier in the narrative.   |
| There is a tendency to present berserker-slayers as <i>berserkir</i> themselves.  | In all saga versions, Hjálmar recites a stanza that contrasts him and Qrvar-Oddr, 'the foster-brothers', with the <i>berserkir</i> :<br><br>Fara halir hraustir<br>af herskipum,<br>tólf menn saman<br>tíralausir;<br>vit munum í aptan<br>Óðin gista<br><b>tveir fóstbræðr,</b><br>en þeir tólf lifa.<br>(Herv.6)<br><br>The R version, however, gives 'tveir berserkir' instead of 'tveir fóstbræðr', so identifying Hjálmar and Qrvar-Oddr as <i>berserkir</i> as well (Herv.6). | After Bøðvarr, Hjálti, Svipdagr and Svipdagr's brothers defeat bands of twelve <i>berserkir</i> , they themselves become a band of this kind. <sup>235</sup><br><br>In <i>Hrólfs saga kraka</i> and <i>Bjarkarímur</i> , Bøðvarr Bjarki can transform into a bear, while in <i>Gesta Danorum</i> Biarco is famous for killing a bear. |
| There is a band of twelve <i>berserkir</i> or warriors, and the list of their names appears in the battle episode as a literary device. | A stanza containing the names of Armgrím's sons is recited by Hjálmar in <i>Qrvar-Odds saga</i> (QRV. 52).<br><br>H and U versions of <i>Heiðreks saga</i> give the list of Armgrím's sons earlier in the prose, and R lists six of them (Herv.3, 69).  | A list of Hrólf's twelve followers is given in <i>Skuldarbardagi</i> (HSK 98).  |
| The band of twelve <i>berserkir</i> has Odinic origin.  | In H and U versions of <i>Heiðreks saga</i> , the twelve sons of Armgrím are Óðinn's descendants of the fourth  | Hrólf kraki's band of twelve is Óðinn's creation, because the rest of Hrólf's followers cannot endure his tests with  |

<sup>235</sup> See, e.g., Jens Peter Schjødt, 'Óðinn, Warriors and Death', in *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World: Essays in Honour of Margaret Clunies Ross*, ed. Judy Quinn (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 145-147.

|  |  |                                    |
|--|--|------------------------------------|
|  | generation: their mother is Eyfura, daughter of Svafrlami the son of Óðinn (Herv.2). | fire, cold and hunger (HSK 75-78). |
|--|--|------------------------------------|

The tendency to describe *berserki*-slayers as *berserki* is very much in the line of Jens Peter Schjødt's discussion of a fight with *berserki* as an (Odinic) ritual, where he mostly used the evidence of *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana* and *Hrólfs saga kraka*.<sup>236</sup> As was mentioned in connection with *Hrólfs saga kraka*, this view is problematic for two reasons: firstly, it relies on the image of *berserki* as warriors consecrated to Óðinn, which is problematic itself, and secondly, it does not take into account that the meaning of *berserki* had become rather broad by the time most *fornaldarsögur* were written.

It can be seen from the examples above that the *berserki* are indeed presented as supernatural figures, often with Odinic connections, and the importance of fighting them receives structural emphasis in the sagas, even though it cannot be said for sure whether the motif of such battle has a ritual pretext or not.

## 5. ÓÐINN AND SÁMSEY

It has been demonstrated that the Sámsey episode, especially according to saga evidence, fits very well Jens Peter Schjødt's theory about ritual and specifically the Odinic pre-text of the 'battle with a band of *berserki*' literary theme. This storyline, both in *Qrvar-Odds saga* and in *Heiðreks saga*, contains the same elements that were essential for his analysis of *Hrólfs saga kraka*, as shown in the table.

The most famous example here is *Lokasenna* 24, where Óðinn is associated with Sámsey as a place where he practised *seiðr*. Such a connection, however, will stay speculative, especially given Samsø's central location in Kattegat: an island that is important for navigation is quite likely to feature in many independent traditions. Arguments may be made both for and against Samsø's supposed Odinic connections; the most noteworthy supporting argument is the generally accepted interpretation of Onsbjerg, now a village on Samsø in Onsbjærg Sogn, as 'Óðinn's mountain'.<sup>237</sup> On

<sup>236</sup> Jens Peter Schjødt, 'Óðinn, Warriors and Death', *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World: Essays in Honour of Margaret Clunies Ross*, ed. Judy Quinn (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 145.

<sup>237</sup> *Samsøs stednavne*, ed. Stednavneudvalget (København: I Kommission Hos G.E.C.Gad, 1922), 48.

the other hand, place-names derived from Óðinn's name (or names) are quite widespread in Scandinavia and there may be nothing significant in Onsbjerg's location on Samsø. Eric Christiansen, for example, sees Onsbjerg as one of the Óðinn place-names in Denmark that supposedly have been centers of royal power and makes a connection between kingly power and Odinic cults, in which context Onsbjerg is not very different from, say, Odense, Oddense, Vojens, Onsved and Onsild, to mention Danish place-names only. If Christiansen's explanation is correct, the connection between Onsbjerg and *Lokasenna*'s evidence becomes significantly weaker.

More uncertainties emerge if we consider *Lokasenna* 24 from the literary point of view. In the Poetic Edda, Danish place-names are not very common, and their usage is limited to a few texts.<sup>238</sup> There is also a tendency to connect activities of the gods with these locations. The *Kommentar zu der Liedern der Edda*, along with *Lokasenna* 24, quotes *Hárbarðsljóð* 37, which is particularly similar to *Lokasenna* 24 in that it sets Þórr's fight with 'brides of *berserkir*' on another Danish island Hlésey (modern Læsø, situated also in the Kattegat, as well as Samsø, but further to the north). In this context, the mention of Sámsey/Samsø may be seen as a literary device of connecting mythological characters with real Danish locations. If *Lokasenna* here follows the same pattern as *Hárbarðsljóð*, it is natural to conclude that *Lokasenna* 24 does not provide sound reasons to connect Sámsey with Óðinn worship or the Odinic myth. Sámsey (and not any other Danish island) could be mentioned there either because it was associated with Óðinn or simply because it was a well-recognised place-name.

Further evidence of Sámsey being regarded a worship place, definitely heathen if not necessarily Odinic, is *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*'s mention of a *trémaðr* ('wooden man') located on the island. This *trémaðr* was 'worshipped with sacrifices, in the south of Sámsey, to bring about the deaths of men':

þá vark blótinn  
til bana mönnum  
í Sámseyju  
sunnanverðri.

This connects Sámsey at least with pagan worship in general, though attempts can be made to connect Sámsey's 'wooden man' to Óðinn worship — mostly on the basis of

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see also Eric Christiansen, *The Norsemen in the Viking Age* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002), 264.

<sup>238</sup> Klaus von See, Beatrice la Farge, Eve Picard, *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, 7 vols. (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1993-2012), II, 227.

*Hávamál* 49's idea is giving clothes to such 'wooden men' that are echoed by the *trémaðr*'s complains about his nakedness in *Ragnars saga*. The *trémenn* of *Hávamál* are also been interpreted as idols.<sup>239</sup> This supposed connection between the *trémenn* and Óðinn, however, is even more speculative than in the case of *Lokasenna*, which at least connects Sámsey with Óðinn's own actions. In the case of *Hávamál* and *Ragnars saga*, all a scholar has is the presence of the same motif (the naked or clothed *trémaðr*) in two texts, one of which is connected with Óðinn and the other set on Sámsey. The idea of *bana monnum* could be theoretically connected with Óðinn's function as a death-god, but again, this assumption is too obscure and impossible to prove.

It can be seen that both cultic connections, considered above, of Sámsey are ambiguous. On the one hand, they make it possible to suggest that the setting of the battle with Angantýr on this particular island could be connected with the traditional 'Odinism' of this location. On the other hand, there are sound arguments against this. We will move to the next section bearing the Sámsey evidence in mind.

## 6. THE DEATH OF INGIBJÖRG

'The voluntary death of the widow or betrothed of a king or a hero who has fallen in battle is found in many heroic stories and also in the legendary sagas, particularly in the case of heroes associated with Odin', remarks Hilda Ellis Davidson concerning the story of Gunnhild's death from Book I of *Gesta Danorum*, and supports this by a reference to Ibn Fadlan's account of a young woman's sacrifice (GD Fisher II, 33). Although Davidson does not mention the Hjálmar of the Iceladic sagas, it could be tempting to connect her thesis with the story of Hjálmar and Ingibjörg, who either died of grief (*Orvar-Odds saga*) or committed suicide (*Heiðreks saga*) upon the news of Hjálmar's death. As has been shown above, Hjálmar, although never dealing with Óðinn directly, fits very well the Odinic hero paradigm. However, Davidson's assumption seems problematic on a few levels. On the one hand, the motif of a beloved woman's suicide does not seem particularly associated with Odinic heroes in the sagas. The Brynhildr of *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* (and, therefore, *Völsunga saga*) is probably the only one to come to mind immediately, and

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<sup>239</sup> *Hávamál*, ed. David A.H. Evans (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1986), 54.

she seems to be a good example, given the connection with the fire funeral suggested by Davidson. However, as has been shown in detail by Theodore Andersson, the case of Brynhildr is complicated; the scholar brings up convincing evidence, for example, that Brynhildr's suicide is not a traditional motif, and was probably modelled on the death of Virgil's Dido.<sup>240</sup> And although this 'idiosyncratic deviation from the common version' found its way to *Völsunga saga*, it is well-known how dependent the author of *Völsunga saga* was on his source material in terms of plot development. It is hardly possible, therefore, that Brynhildr's suicide is connected in any way with Sigurðr's supposed Odinic nature, bearing in mind especially that, from what we observed in Chapter 2, most of the Odinic motifs connected with Sigurðr are most likely the author-compiler's innovative treatment of the theme rather than a traditional feature of the character.

The 'suicide of a dead warrior's beloved' motif is widely represented in heroic tradition (as Hilda Ellis Davidson notes herself), and the critical majority of cases have nothing to do with Odinic imagery. Most similarly to *Qrvar-Odds saga*, Aude of *La Chanson de Roland* collapses and dies from grief upon hearing of Roland's death. *Girl kills herself after lover's death* is T81.6 in Stith Thompson's motif-index; it is attested in traditions from all over the world.<sup>241</sup> In the light of this, despite Davidson's argument, it is hardly possible to build Ingibjörg's death into the Odinic hero framework.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This chapter has observed the parallels between *Skuldarbardagi*, the last *þáttr* of *Hrólfs saga kraka*, and the battle on Sámsey episode in *Qrvar-Odds saga* and *Heiðreks saga*. It was found that the dichotomy of heroic fatalism and will to live is presented in the three texts in a strikingly similar way, involving the same type of double protagonist (Hjálmar — Qrvar-Oddr and Hjalti — Bǫðvarr), very similar dialogue with recurring imagery and the same plot situation, involving the *berserkir*-fighting theme. In both cases, the myth of Valhǫll and Odinic imagery had the same functions and connotations, although the Odinic theme is more prominent in *Hrólfs*

<sup>240</sup> Theodore Andersson, *The Legend of Brynhild* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 240-241.

<sup>241</sup> Stith Thompson, *Motif-index of folk-literature*, 5 vols (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1955), v, 346.

*saga kraka* than in the Sámsey complex.

The chapter also looked at possible external evidence for the Sámsey episode's Odinic connections to find whether there is immediate mythological tradition behind the Sámsey complex (and therefore, apparently, *Skuldarbardagi*) or not. The evidence seems to be unconvincing, especially the supposed connection of T81.6 motif with 'Óðinn-heroes'. As was the case with *Vǫlsunga saga* (Chapter 2 of this thesis), the Odinic hero theme appears, both in *Heiðreks saga* and in *Qrvar-Odds saga*, to be a late saga-age Icelandic construct. This assumption, however, will be tested on further material.

## CHAPTER 6

### GAUTREKS SAGA

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#### 1. INTERPRETATION OF THE ODINIC THEME IN *GAUTREKS SAGA*

When discussing the Odinic hero theme in the sagas, there are probably only two ways to consider *Gautreks saga* and the famous episode of Víkarr's sacrifice to Óðinn. The first one would be to start the discussion with this episode and define it as a typical example of the 'Óðinn — mortal warrior' relationship. This episode is still often referred to in this context; in this respect, not much has changed since Chadwick who suggested that Starkaðr 'was a typical worshipper of Othin'.

The other way, taken by this dissertation, is to postpone the discussion of Víkarr and Starkaðr until almost the very end of the discussion exactly for the reason that it has been given such significance. When arranging the material of this dissertation in a particular order, the decision was made to start with the texts where the theme of the relationship between Óðinn and a mortal warrior is the main theme of the narrative, and the conflict is clear-cut. As it will be seen, this is not the case with *Gautreks saga*, a text with a complicated episodic structure, obscure editing history and, most importantly for this thesis, a complicated treatment of mythological tradition behind it which attracted the attention of Dumézil, his followers and critics.

No attempt has been or will be made here to enter the vast field of Dumézilean scholarship as the theme of this thesis lies in the field of literary, rather than mythological, criticism. As contrasted to Dumézilean mythocritical studies, the scholarship on *Gautreks saga* itself, as a product of the Icelandic Middle Ages, is not an old phenomenon. This study will focus on a very specific topic, the use of the 'Odinic hero' structure in *Vikars þáttur*, the second *þáttur* of the saga included only in the second, presumably younger version of the text.<sup>242</sup>

Given the abundant scholarship on the Starkaðr tradition, it will be useful to articulate what this chapter does not seek to cover:

- The image of Starkaðr in the whole vast body of material dealing with this

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<sup>242</sup> For an overview of the saga's manuscript tradition see Massimiliano Bampi, 'What's in a Variant? On Editing the Longer Redaction of *Gautreks saga*', *On Editing Old Scandinavian Texts: Problems and perspectives*, ed. Fulvio Ferrari, Massimiliano Bampi (Università degli Studi di Trento, 2009), 57-69.

character — or, to borrow Jan de Vries' term, *die Starkadsage*.<sup>243</sup> Although I will address a number of works in this field, most importantly Georges Dumézil's, it is the saga *Starkaðr* and his role in *Víkarr*'s career that is the focus of this discussion. *Víkarr*'s story is paralleled in Book VI of *Gesta Danorum*, and other evidence will be brought in as well, but its role is merely supportive.

- The analysis of *Gautreks saga* as a whole in any of its two variants, since the material relevant to the theme of the thesis is found only in *Víkars þáttir*. This chapter relies, with some reservations, on Dennis Cronan's recent analysis that also provides an overview of the earlier scholarship.<sup>244</sup> Cronan's is one of the first systematic studies of the text as a whole, except for Elizabeth Ashman Rowe's research, and provides a close reading of all the three *þættir*.

## 2. THE ODINIC HERO COMPLEX IN *VÍKARS ÞÁTTIR*

*Víkars þáttir* and chapter 1 of *Hálfs saga ok hálsrekka* contain the complete Odinic hero plot. The Odinic death is, obviously, *Starkaðr*'s sacrifice of *Víkarr*. The Odinic help is present in two episodes: first in *Hálfs saga*, when Óðinn helps Geirhildr win the brewing contest, and then in *Víkars þáttir* when Óðinn bestows his many gifts on *Starkaðr*. *Víkars þáttir* also features a warband of twelve which, as it will be seen, shares much in common with the warbands in *Hrólfs saga kraka* and *Hálfs saga ok*

<sup>243</sup> A useful overview of the sources featuring *Starkaðr* is given in Marlene Ciklamini, 'The Problem of *Starkaðr*', *Scandinavian Studies* 43 (1971), 169-188, and of his image in *Gesta Danorum* in K. Malone, 'Primitivism in Saxo Grammaticus', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 19 (1958), 94-104 and Russell Poole, 'Some Southern Perspectives on *Starcatherus*', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 2 (2006), 141-166. For a view of a \**Starkaðs saga* version in the light of earlier tradition see Massimiliano Bampi, 'Between Tradition and Innovation: The Story of *Starkaðr* in *Gautreks Saga*', *The Fantastic in Old Norse/Icelandic Literature – Sagas and the British Isles*, ed. David Ashurst, John McKinnell (Durham: The Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006), 88-96.

For an analysis of *Starkaðr*'s figure in connection to Georges Dumézil's trifunctional theory, see Georges Dumézil, *The Fate of the Warrior*, trans. Alf Hiltebeitel (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1970) and Georges Dumézil, *The Stakes of the Warrior*, ed. Jaan Puhvel and David Weeks (Berkeley and Los Angeles: UC Press, 1983). Examples of criticism and reinterpretation of Dumézil's work in relation to *Starkaðr* are R. I. Page, 'Dumézil Revisited', *Saga-Book*, 20 (1978-81), 49-69 and Dean Miller, 'Functional Operations and Oppositions in the Thought-World of the Sagas', *History of Religions*, 29 (1989), 115-158.

For an early attempt to see *Starkaðr* as a uniform character in a variety of sources see Jan de Vries, 'Die Starkadsage', *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift* 36 (1955), 281-97.

A recent analysis of the historical-cultural background was carried out in William Layher, 'Starkaðr's Teeth', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 108 (2008), 1-26.

<sup>244</sup> Dennis Cronan, 'The Thematic Unity of the Younger *Gautreks Saga*', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 106 (2007), 81-123.

*hálfrekka*. It is clear, therefore, that *Víkars þáttr* qualifies for the analysis. However, in order to get a better grasp of common features in texts from chapters 2-6, the following discussion will consider the important parallels between the narratives independently from the Odinic hero complex, as it has routinely been done throughout chapters 3-5.

When looking back at the sources analysed in the previous chapters, one can see at least six common elements present in *Víkars þáttr* and chapter 1 of *Hálfs saga* on the one side, and the previously analysed material on the other side. The meaning of these motifs in the context of the saga may be problematic and will be discussed later, but the mere presence of them in the text, where they presumably build a system, will be a point of departure. Number one is found in *Hálfs saga ok hálfrekka*, the rest of material in the younger *Gautreks saga*.<sup>245</sup>

1. **Víkarr's parentage.** Although this episode is absent from *Gautreks saga* itself, chapter 1 of *Hálfs saga ok hálfrekka* has Óðinn involved in the circumstances of Víkarr's birth and his parents' marriage. At the same time, he also determines Víkarr's later death in an Odinic sacrifice that takes place in *Gautreks saga*. As has been shown in chapter 2, Óðinn's ambivalent connection both with the birth and death of a protagonist underlies the discourse of *Völsunga saga*. Although the episode is found in a text different from *Gautreks saga*, it is clearly a part of the Víkarr narrative in saga tradition.
2. **Structures of initiation.** Víkarr is to Starkaðr, roughly, what Bǫðvarr is to Hjálti and Sigmundur to Sinfjǫtli — he initiates him into being a warrior. In the case of *Hrólfs saga*, the similarity with the Víkarr-Starkaðr episode is of special importance because, as in *Hrólfs saga*, the initiation precedes the

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<sup>245</sup> It could be tempting to include in the list the episode from *Gesta Danorum* that describes Starkaðr's fight with a band of *berserkir*, especially considering how important a part of the Odinic hero complex, i.e. the *berserkir*-fighting motif, has proved to be in *Hrólfs saga kraka* and the Battle of Sámsey complex presented in *Qrvar-Odds saga* and *Heiðreks saga*. This episode is, however, left out of the discussion for three reasons. Firstly, the chapter, as its title suggests, is centred on the Víkarr narrative, and to consider all the extensive and complicated Starkaðr material that is not connected to the story of Víkarr would be a transgression of the aims of this study. Secondly, not only is it from *Gesta Danorum* rather than an Icelandic saga but also from an episode that has no parallel in any preserved saga text, which makes the supposed connection to *Gautreks saga* even weaker. Finally, as will be seen, the Odinic hero narrative simply does not function outside the story of Víkarr as the saga presents it. A thorough investigation of Saxo's prose is required to show whether Starkaðr's fight with the *berserkir*, a widespread motif per se, can be worked into this dissertation's argument or not; the dissertation itself, building its discussion almost entirely on the analysis of saga text, lacks the methodological scope to answer this question.

An encounter between Starkaðr and twelve *berserkir* is mentioned in *Gautreks saga* (GS 25), but no fight takes place, and it is hard to say whether the presence of the band is significant or accidental.

creation of the king's warband.

3. **The twelve champions.** Like Hálfr (*Hálfs saga ok hálfrekka*) or Hrólfr (*Hrólfs saga kraka*), Víkarr becomes a leader of a warband. As has been shown in chapter 4, the band of twelve can function as an adversary figure while maintaining its connection to the myth of Valhøll; however, the examples of *Hrólfs saga* and *Hálfs saga* are more immediate parallels to the use of the motif in *Gautreks saga*.
4. **The leader.** The warband has a prominent leader on whom the narrative tends to be focalised — in Víkarr's case this is Starkaðr, in Hálfr's case Innstein, in Hrólfr's case Bøðvarr bjarki. Interestingly, all the three figures are associated with the heroic verse that is a part of the corresponding sagas: Innsteinn is the speaker in *Innsteinskviða*, Bøðvarr bjarki, together with Hjálti, recites *Bjarkamál* (in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, a prose paraphrase of *Bjarkamál* is given), and, finally, *Vikarsbalkr* is attributed to Starkaðr. All three poems describe the death of a great king (Hrólfr kraki, Hálfr or Víkarr) and contain the motif of blame to Óðinn. The crucial contrast between the theme of fidelity, which is central for *Innsteinskviða* and *Bjarkamál*, and Starkaðr's unwilling betrayal, is of key importance for the understanding of the *þáttr*, and can be also seen as a point of connection between the figures exactly because the contrast between Innstein's and Bøðvarr's loyalty and Starkaðr's betrayal is so clear-cut, and the themes of loyalty and betrayal are presented with the same dramatic effect in the poetry as its main theme. It can be argued that the texts examine the same problem approaching it from opposite sides.
  - **Loyalty in *Skuldarbardagi* (the last *þáttr* of *Hrólfs saga kraka*).** In respect of *Hrólfs saga kraka*, the prose retelling of *Bjarkamál* in chapters 50 and 51 is for this discussion of primary importance for two reasons: firstly, we are looking at saga discourse rather than the whole corpus of texts that belong to the Hrólfr kraki tradition; secondly, *Bjarkamál* does not survive, and the use of Saxo's paraphrase is attended by additional difficulties.

Having said that, the theme of loyalty seems to be no less central to the prose of *Skuldarbardagi* than it is to *Bjarkamál* as we know it from *Gesta Danorum* and surviving verses. Firstly, most of the text of the chapters is made up by the dialogue between Bøðvarr and

Hjálti, which is also the structural basis of *Bjarkamál*, and their dialogue is essentially a narrative of their life at Hrólfr's court. The dialogic narrative suggests that serving Hrólfr was the meaning of their life, and death for him in *Skuldarbardagi* is the only acceptable end.

- In *Innsteinskviða* the same retrospective narrative is presented in a similar way, more dramatically perhaps in that it takes place not before the king's death but immediately after it. Its form is a monologue rather than a dialogue, as in *Bjarkamál*, but the imagery is similar — Innsteinn tells how he had served Hálfir immediately before his own death (HSH 13).

*Innsteinskviða* and *Bjarkamál* share the same elegiac tone due to apparent genre similarities, both belonging to the type of heroic 'death poems' that share mode and imagery (such as the 'laughter of death' in the statement that 'Hálfir konungr hlæjandi dó') with such texts as *Krákumál* and *Atlakviða*.<sup>246</sup> At the same time, it has been suggested by Axel Olrik that there is an immediate connection between the two poems: the Danish scholar finds the similarities between *Innsteinskviða* and what is left of *Bjarkamál* consistent enough to establish a close relationship and interconnection between the traditions (HLD 171). Interrelated or not, *Innsteinskviða* and *Bjarkamál* stand out from similar poetic works due to their specific mode in which a follower speaks about his king (and not, as it is more usual, the hero about his own life, as happens in *Krákumál* or *Hjálmarr's Death-Song*). Surprisingly perhaps, the same attitude is shared by the *Víkarsbalkr*, although its background is strikingly different, perhaps the opposite to *Bjarkamál* and *Innsteinskviða*.

5. **Blaming the gods.** As was mentioned, in all the three cases the leader figure (Boðvarr, Innsteinn and Starkaðr) blames Óðinn for the death of their king (Hrólfr kraki, Hálfir and Víkarr, respectively). While being in the first place a rhetorical figure for grief over a warrior's death, in these three cases its use qualifies as a *topos* because it appears in the same situation: the warband

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<sup>246</sup> See, e.g., Kirsten Wolf, 'The Unconquered Dead in Norse-Icelandic tradition', *Heroes and Saints: The Moment of Death in Cross-cultural Perspectives*, ed. Phyllis Granoff, Koichi Shinohara (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 17.

leader figure delivers a speech about their king's defeat; *Hrólfs saga* and *Hálfs saga* also share with each other the situation of battle. On the generic-structural level, the use of the rhetorical figure of blaming Óðinn is also similar: in *Hálfs saga ok hálfisrekka* and in *Gautreks saga* it belongs to a quotation from pieces of heroic poetry attributed to the speaker, *Innsteinskviða* and *Víkarsbalkr*, and in *Hrólfs saga kraka* to a clear paraphrase of *Bjárkamál*, where [Böðvarr] bjarki is the speaker, although the *Bjárkamál* stanza is not quoted itself (and, sadly, does not survive outside this paraphrase and Saxo's figurative Latin paraphrase).

- We have already seen that in *Víkarsbalkr*, Starkaðr has not just to witness the death of his king, but he is personally responsible for it. It is clear from the text that Óðinn, disguised as Hrosshárs-Grani, brings the situation along; Starkaðr refers to the sacrifice without mentioning Óðinn directly and also refers to Þórr's curses:

Þess eyrendis,  
**at Þórr** um skóp  
 mér níðings nafn,  
 nauð margs konar;  
 hlaut ek óhróðigr  
 illt at vinna.

Skylda ek Víkar  
 í viði hávum  
 Geirþjófsbana  
**göðum of signa;**  
 lagða ek geiri  
 gram til hjarta,  
 þat er mér harmast  
 handaverka.  
 (GS 25)

Then it was that Þórr created for me a wicked name, all kinds of misfortunes. I was forced, infamous, to commit villainous acts.

I had to consign Víkarr, the bane of Geirþjófr, to the gods on the high tree; I drove the spear through his heart; that was my most hateful deed (deed of my hands).

Although Óðinn is not blamed directly in the stanzas, he is mentioned earlier under his alias Hrosshárs-Grani, and the plural 'gods' in the second stanza, as noted by Georges Dumézil, should imply his involvement in the events (Stakes 27-29). In any case, the idea that Óðinn is guilty of Víkarr's death is recurrent in *Hálfs saga* and *Gautreks saga*, and this parallel between the texts cannot be ignored.

6. **The catastrophe.** The role of Starkaðr left aside, Víkarr's end is quite similar

the death of most of the Vǫlsungs, which Óðinn tends to arrange. In *Hrólfs saga kraka*, Óðinn also stands behind the defeat of Hleiðargarðr culminating in the death of Hrólfr kraki and his twelve followers; although in *Gautreks saga* the fate of the warband after Víkarr's death is unknown, it is clear that Víkarr's end also means the end of everything that was connected with him. Neither of the parallels involve a literal sacrifice to Óðinn, as *Gautreks saga* does, but his involvement is always clearly articulated.

The mere presence of each of the listed motifs individually could not testify to any parallels because of how easily individual motifs are transmitted. However, the presence of five elements in a row bears, in the light of analysis from the previous chapters, almost indisputable witness to their interconnection, as also observed in the other texts. Even more noteworthy is the fact that, considered together, the five motifs that have parallels with the other Óðinn-hero narratives correspond to all the important events of the Víkarr narrative: the king is born, he gets established as a war leader, and eventually is driven to a catastrophe. After Víkarr's death, the story does not get any further because it is centered around him. Chronologically and structurally, the events are limited to Víkarr's life, and it is Víkarr (and not Starkaðr) whose fate determines the narrative.

### 3. ODINN AND ÞÓRR'S CONNECTION TO STARKARÐR

Dean Miller, in his typically Dumézilean study, brings the dual opposition of Óðinn and Þórr to a fundamental level. Looking at various types of king-warrior relationships, Miller divides the Old Norse warrior figures into four types. These are based, firstly, on the nature of the warrior character himself ('the axis of control'), and, secondly, on the warrior's attitude towards the king figure ('the axis of support'). The character's position on the axis of control shows whether he leans towards rationality or culture or, on the contrary, towards irrationality and nature. Further, the axis of support indicates whether the character opposes himself to figures of power (negative pole) or is supportive towards them (positive pole). Miller puts the Starkaðr type on the lower side of the 'axis of control', associated with nature and irrationality, and on the positive side of the 'axis of support'.



king's champion a *Þórr-warrior* is. Starkaðr's connection — and, inseparably, confrontation — with Þórr is here for Miller of special significance: Starkaðr is, following his logic, also a 'Þórr-warrior', i.e. a loyal follower, but a flawed one. Finally, the diagram assumes affiliations between the figures not only vertically and horizontally, but diagonally as well: the *berserkr* and *Þórr-warrior* are presented as unquestioning in either opposition to the king or loyalty to him, and tending to die early, either in service or as an adversary, meanwhile Egill and Starkaðr are critical towards power figures (like Eiríkr blóðøx and Ingelus) and live to old age — in Starkaðr's case supernaturally long. While not being the first scholar to draw parallels between Egill and Starkaðr, Miller puts their similarities in a completely different context.<sup>250</sup>

It is noteworthy that Miller, while associating the support-positive right side of the pole with Þórr, consistently describes both figures on the left pole of the axis of support as 'Odinic'. This is perfectly logical in the light of well-studied Odinic connections of both Egill Skallagrímson and *berserkir*, suggested first and foremost by direct references to Óðinn in *Egils saga* and *Ynglinga saga*.<sup>251</sup> More problematic in this respect is that it is a commonplace in *Egils saga* scholarship that Egill himself, as well as his ancestors and most importantly his grandfather Kveldúlf, have distinctive bestial features that make them similar to *berserkir* — or, more precisely, to *úlfrhéðnar* — because of Kveldúlf's assumed ability to shapeshift into a wolf.<sup>252</sup> Miller, however, places Egill on the rational-cultural pole of the control axis because of his 'high degree of intellect and manipulative skill', opposing him to the chthonic and irrational *berserkr* despite the fact that no such opposition is apparent in the source material.<sup>253</sup> However, since the cultural-natural opposition is an essential part of the researcher's approach, it has to be accepted as a hypothesis to consider the theory as a

<sup>250</sup> Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, 'Starkaðr, Loki, and Egill Skallagrímsson', *Sagas of the Icelanders: A Book of Essays* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1989), 146-59, William Layher, 'Starkaðr's Teeth', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 108 (2008), 16.

<sup>251</sup> For the investigations of Egill's Odinic connections see, e.g., Jens Kristian Lindhart Boll, 'Starkad og Egil Skallagrímsson som Odinshelte', *Religionsvidenskabeligt tidsskrift*, 9 (1986), 33-47; for a comparative study of *Sonatorrek* and *Hávamál* see Klaus von See, 'Sonatorrek und Hávamál', *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur*, 99 (1970), 26-33; see also Kaaren Grimstad, 'The Giant as a Heroic Model: the Case of Egill and Starkaðr', *Scandinavian Studies*, 48 (1976), 284-98.

<sup>252</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, 'Beast and Man: Realism and the Occult in *Egils Saga*', *Scandinavian Studies*, 83 (2011), 29-44. Arwen van Zanten-Utrecht lists *Egils saga* among the most important sources on Old Norse *berserkir*: Arwen van Zanten-Utrecht, 'Going Berserk: in Old Norse, Old Irish and Anglo-Saxon Literature', *Amsterdamer Beiträge Zur Älteren Germanistik*, 63 (2007), 44.

<sup>253</sup> Dean Miller, 'Functional Operations and Oppositions in the Thought-World of the Sagas', *History of Religions* 29.2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 145.

whole.

Another difficulty with Miller's scheme is the whole *Thorr-warrior* type. As the researcher states himself, it is not based on any particular characters in Old Norse literature except for Þórolfr in *Egils saga*, which is mostly motivated by the contrast with Egill. Miller justifies his decision by putting it into a wider context:

[Although] the Thorr-warrior is a construction devised in and taken from *Egil's saga*... I have no doubt that the type is widely seen, and individualised, for example, as a king's standard-bearer, always a dangerous occupation or, in sea fights, the king's forecastle man, who is often the same man as the standard-bearer. This standardbearer/forecastle man is the synecdochical image of the king or chieftain standing before the warrior mass and must obviously be related to the king's champion, seen in other I-E contexts.<sup>254</sup>

While the type described above is undoubtedly well-attested in Old Norse as well as Indo-European tradition, a number of questions becomes necessary here, most importantly whether the connections with Þórr are consistent in the Old Norse version of this character. Þórolfr's name is hardly a weighty argument here because of the high frequency of the 'Þór-' element in personal names. The level of generalization we see in Miller's scheme is, of course, acceptable for a widely comparative study, while reminding us of the approach's inevitable limitations. It should be stated explicitly here that, for Miller, as well as for Dumézil, Þórr is primarily a second-function militant deity, and the definition of a king's loyal follower as a 'Þórr-warrior' relies heavily on this understanding. Dealing with Starkaðr's case, however, Miller addresses concrete saga material like Þórr's enmity towards Starkaðr in *Gautreks saga*. Miller's argumentation as a whole, in fact, relies on the Dumézilean mythocritical model, which no attempt will be made here to test or evaluate. At the same time, it is clear that the methodology of Dumézilean criticism, including Miller's work, is drastically different from the approach employed in this dissertation. Miller's findings will, therefore, be used only as supporting evidence here, unless supported by other evidence.

Although the Óðinn-Þórr opposition is never articulated directly in relation to the scheme, Miller consistently stresses Odinic features in the *Egill* and *berserkr* types, as contrasted to the right side of the diagram which appears to be Þórr-dominated. This aspect of the system seems to reflect the 'tension... between the

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<sup>254</sup> Dean Miller, 'Functional Operations and Oppositions in the Thought-World of the Sagas', *History of Religions* 29.2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 144.

obedient warrior type ‘of Thorr’ and the disruptive type ‘of Odhinn [sic]’ that the scholar finds elsewhere in his material.<sup>255</sup> From this point of view, Starkaðr’s figure is especially controversial, given the confrontation between the two gods concerning Starkaðr’s fate in *Gautreks saga*, and Óðinn’s plan to make Starkaðr betray Víkarr. The controversial interconnection of loyalty and betrayal, characteristic of Starkaðr’s character, Miller explains by the fact that Starkaðr’s service ‘seems to be cast in an Odhinnic mold [sic]’, unlike the idealised loyal service of the *Þórr-warrior*.<sup>256</sup> At the same time, Starkaðr shares with *Þórr-warrior* the nature of the servant-hero, as contrasted to the *berserkr* and *Egill* types that Miller describes as explicitly Odinic.

Despite some of the questionable features that are described above, Miller’s theory provides a clear picture of the ambivalence that is always a part of Starkaðr’s character in the tradition. The connection of Starkaðr with the figures of Óðinn and Þórr are primarily the subject of debate, with some scholars trying to define Starkaðr as an Óðinn-hero and the others as a Þórr-hero. One could perceive that, when Georges Dumézil reconsidered his understanding of Starkaðr from a purely second-fuction ‘héros de Thor’ to ‘héros odinique’, the following criticism got separated between his two ideas (Destiny 83, 85-86, Stakes 12-19). It is understandable in this light that many scholars, like Miller, have tried to reconcile the contradictions of Starkaðr and tried to show how his image balances more than one identity. Most recently, William Layher proposed a syncretic understanding of Starkaðr’s character. The scholar assumes that, although the sources from before the saga age are not consistent with each other, in *Gautreks saga* Þórr and Óðinn act like metaphysical parents towards Starkaðr, creating his controversial, to an extent monstrous, heroic identity:

In the end, the oppositions do not cancel each other out. Instead, they work to transform Starkadr [sic] into a new, hybrid creature that is riven by irresolvable – even arbitrary – contradictions. Thus the saga author responds to longstanding inconsistencies in the Starkadr tradition by offering up a tidy explanation for that which had previously resisted easy explication. This episode in *Gautreks saga* asserts that Starkadr’s many transgressions of ethical, heroic, and somatic boundaries were not the fault of his bloodline or his lineage, that is, not caused by natural means, but were rather the result of an ill-fated and contentious ‘second birth’ at the hands of the gods.<sup>257</sup>

Layher concludes that, since ‘the bloodline of the offspring is blessed by the seed of the Norse god (here it is Óðinn), while from the Other (i.e., Þórr) comes strength and

<sup>255</sup> Dean Miller, ‘Functional Operations and Oppositions in the Thought-World of the Sagas’, *History of Religions* 29.2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 138.

<sup>256</sup> Miller 146.

<sup>257</sup> William Layher, ‘Starkaðr’s Teeth’, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 108 (2008), 20.

cunning, but also treachery, unpredictability',<sup>258</sup> the very nature of Starkaðr is determined by the interaction of conflicting deities that shape his fate. A very similar picture can be seen in Miller's scheme, achieved by methodologically very different research but also explaining Starkaðr's tragical contradictions by the fact that the service of a 'Þórr-warrior' is cast in an 'Odinic mold'.

As the interest in *fornaldarsögur* arose in the end of the last century, hardly any part of *Gautreks saga* attracted more scholarly attention than the assembly of the gods where Óðinn and Þórr define the fate of Starkaðr — or Óðinn does that alone, depending on the interpretation. The *þing* of the gods is the key episode that determines the action of the whole *Víkars þáttur*: in the words of Georges Dumézil, 'here it is the gods who direct the action, free to disappear afterward and to disinterest themselves, at least apparently, in the career they have arranged for the hero' (Stakes 21). The question of what roles Óðinn and Þórr play in determining Starkaðr's fate, either in the saga or in tradition, is a complicated one, and it is therefore not clear what was the author-compiler's understanding of the conflict, and even less what narrative tradition underlied the creation of *Víkars þáttur*.

It is a well-studied controversy in scholarship that in *Gautreks saga*, Óðinn and Þórr apparently engage in an open conflict with each other bestowing on Starkaðr their gifts and curses, while in *Gesta Danorum*, Óðinn and Þórr never meet.<sup>259</sup> Furthermore, in contrast with *Gautreks saga*, in *Gesta Danorum* Othinus is represented as mainly malevolent and Thor as unexpectedly benevolent, because Saxo regards his tearing off of Starkatherus' superfluous four arms as a good deed that turns the hero from a monster into a human being. Georges Dumézil, however,

<sup>258</sup> William Layher, 'Starkaðr's Teeth', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 108 (2008), 20-21.

<sup>259</sup> The folktale connections of the *þing* episode may throw further light on Óðinn and Þórr's influence on the fates of Víkarr and Starkaðr. Stith Thompson (and, after him, Inger Boberg) quote *Curse given to negate good wish* as motif M416. Thompson gives the example of Starkaðr and connects this motif to F316.1, *Fairy's curse partially overcome by another fairy's amendment* – this motif is found in Aarne-Thompson type 410, the best-known example being *Sleeping Beauty* and its variants. Thompson also lists two immediate variations of M416; M416.1 is *Curse: appetite of twelve men*, which is given with the gift of twelve men's strength, and M416.2 *Curse: eternal life without eternal youth*. Even given the conventionality of Thompson's index, it is clear that the story of Starkaðr at the gods' council makes use of a widespread narrative element characteristic of folk-literature, which can be described, in outline, as 'if a curse is bestowed on hero, a blessing negates it; if a blessing is bestowed, a curse negates it'. Often there are both malevolent and benevolent supernatural beings who argue over the hero or heroine's fate this way, but in some cases (M416.1, M416.2) the subversion is just an innate part of a blessing or a curse. Given the flexibility of folktale structures, versions where Óðinn and Þórr exchange blessings and curses, or where both are ascribed to Óðinn alone, could simply coexist. See Ingrid M.Boberg, *Motif-index of early Icelandic literature* (Copenhagen: Munsgaard, 1966), Stith Thompson, *Motif-index of folk-literature*, 5 vols (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1955).

believes Saxo's account to be an idiosyncratic interpretation of a source narrative, which must have been closer to *Gautreks saga* than to *Gesta Danorum*'s version. There are two main arguments that support this interpretation, both from inside the saga and from earlier poetic sources. From the latter of special importance is Vetrliði Sumarliðason's *Lausavísa* that lists giants defeated by Þórr:

Leggi brauzt Leiknar,  
lamdir þrivalda,  
steypdir Starkeði,  
stett of Gjǫlp dauða.<sup>260</sup>

You broke Leikn's limbs, thrashed Þrivaldi, overthrew Starkaðr, caused the death of Gjǫlp.

Dumézil notes that the verb *steypa*, meaning 'to hurl down, to overthrow', definitely implies killing the giant Starkaðr and not simply 'correcting him according to a better model' (GD I, 380, Fisher I, 170), especially in the context of Þórr's other victories over giants (Stakes 20-21). Shortly after Dumézil, John Lindow added an important contribution to the discussion of this stanza in connection to Starkaðr, showing that every giant or giantess mentioned there is connected, through either narrative context or name interpretation, with certain parts of the body — heads, legs, reproductive organs or, in Starkaðr's case, arms.<sup>261</sup> As William Layher later pointed out, the abnormality of those giants is exactly what makes them Þórr's enemies: 'while Vetrliði's stanza praises Þórr for killing giants, on a deeper level Þórr's rage seems to be directed at specific giants whose monstrous deformities made them even more threatening'.<sup>262</sup> Deformity is overall a good word to describe the human Starkaðr, who is believed in *Gautreks saga* to have on his body scars from the arms torn from his giant grandfather, and who naturally draws Þórr's hatred as well.

Secondly, from an in-text perspective, Dumézil offers an interpretation of a passage in Book VI of *Gesta Danorum*, which immediately precedes the story of Othinus' fatal gifts to Starkaðr and has no apparent function in the narrative. In this passage is provided an opposing description of Othinus and Þórr:

Olim enim quidam magicę artis imbuti, Thor uidelicet et Othinus aliique complures miranda p̄stigiurum machinatione callentes, obtentis simplicium animis, diuinitatis sibi fastigium arrogare coeperunt. Quippe Noruagiam, Suetiam ac Daniam uanissimę credulitatis laqueis circumuentas ad cultus sibi pendendi studium concitantes p̄cipuo ludificationis suę contagio

<sup>260</sup> Ernst Albin Kock, *Den norsk-islandska Skaldedigtningen* (1946), I, 7.

<sup>261</sup> John Lindow, 'Addressing Thor', *Scandinavian Studies* 60 (1988), 119-136.

<sup>262</sup> William Layher, 'Starkeðr's Teeth', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 108 (2008), 13.

resperserunt.  
(GD I, 380)

At one time certain individuals, initiated into magic arts, namely Thor, Odin and a number of others who were skilled in conjuring up marvellous illusions, clouded the minds of simple men and began to appropriate the exalted rank of the godhead. Norway, Sweden and Denmark were ensnared in a groundless conviction, urged to a devoted worship of these frauds and infected by their gross imposture.  
(Fisher 170-171)

This passage is followed by a rather lengthy passage concerning the naming of days of week after Óðinn and Þórr and their equivalents in Latin and Greek pantheons. After this interlude Saxo returns to Starkatherus and the story in which Othinus makes him kill Wikarus. The irrelevance of this passage to the narrative is self-evident:

If the interventions of Thor and Othinus are successive and without any element of rivalry and conflict, one point in Saxo's composition arouses suspicion, namely the parallelism of the two gods, of their natures and their Latin interpretations, which, placed as it is between the birth and the career of the hero, constitutes a parenthesis within the story and interrupts it to no advantage. For what advantage is there in defining two gods in this way, one in terms of the other, in opposition to each other, when their interventions are entirely independent and not even complementary?  
(Stakes 22)

Using the same approach to analysing the text of *Gesta Danorum* that he employed earlier is his discussion of Hadingus and Saxo's interlude about the war of Æsir and Vanir in Book I, Dumézil suggests that in Saxo's source there could have been present a conflict between Óðinn and Þórr, which Saxo reworked into the interlude containing general information about those two deities:

If Saxo has inserted here a contrastive definition of Thor and Othinus which is in no way necessary to the action as he describes it, it is undoubtedly because, in the Scandinavian saga of Starkaðr which he used, the character opposition of Thor and played at this point an important role.  
(Stakes 33)

This is a plausible interpretation, although it could be argued that, because the passage is set exactly between the episode in which Thor tears off Starkatherus' arms and the episode where Othinus manipulates Starkatherus into killing his king, Saxo could feel it appropriate to provide the reader with some background about those two deities. That could be the reason why he dwells upon general information, and not on the theme of rivalry between Óðinn and Þórr, which could be theoretically known to him from poems like *Hárbarðsljóð*. As Dumézil himself agrees, the role of Othinus in the story of Starkatherus and Wicarus is very characteristic of the traditional image of

Óðinn the deceiver and manipulator, the god who requires an unexpected price for his gifts (Stakes 24-26). One could even draw a parallel with chapter 1 of *Hálfs saga ok hálfrekka*, where Óðinn requires the same price — the life of Víkarr — from his mother Geirhildr in exchange for his help, which makes Víkarr ‘sold’ twice in the tradition: by his mother and by his follower.

It may be because of these considerations that there is a tendency in recent *Gautreks saga* scholarship to emphasize the role Óðinn is playing in the narrative to the extent that Þórr’s connection with Starkaðr is being downplayed. Most notably, Dennis Cronan argues in his analysis of the saga that Óðinn manipulates the events of the *þing* to his own profit:

Although Dumézil... presents an excellent discussion of Odin’s long preparations for the sacrifice, he completely overlooks Odin’s manipulation of Thor’s hostility towards Starkad and his use of this hostility to control the events of the *þing*. On the other hand, his argument that Thor could have responded to the gift of three lives with a different curse is certainly valid. But the curse of three *niðungsverk* is the most likely response, since it strikes directly at Starkad’s identity through his honor as a warrior. Although the other curses suggested by Dumézil — three misfortunes or physical setbacks — are certainly plausible responses, they would not be nearly as effective. In any case, Odin had as many tries as he needed in order to elicit such a curse; if he had not succeeded with the gift of a triple lifespan, he could have presented other gifts (e.g. great honor that increases with each lifespan, undying fame, etc.) that could have provoked such a curse from Thor.<sup>263</sup>

It is probably an overestimation to say that Dumézil ‘completely overlooks’ the interpretation of the saga where Óðinn has the assembly carry out his will; in fact, Dumézil muses upon the idea that ‘the crafty, Machiavellian Odin manipulated Thor, a character all of a piece, as a toreador ‘works’ the bull, announcing the gift of ‘three lives’ only to draw the response ‘with a dishonor in each’, and in the end, achieve his final aim — the sacrifice of Víkarr (Stakes 27). Later on, Dumézil evaluates arguments for and against this understanding, which he finds plausible but attended by a few difficulties which cannot be completely resolved. Dumézil draws the reader’s attention to the fact that both Þórr and Óðinn are mentioned in *Víkarsbálkr*. So, if *Víkarsbálkr* is *Gautreks saga*’s source, the complex influence of the two gods was the case of the source material as well. In the end, Dumézil leaves the question open while Cronan insists on the Óðinn-centred interpretation.

It is important to remember, however, that, while involved in the same discourse, Cronan and Dumézil discuss slightly different subjects. While Dumézil

<sup>263</sup> Dennis Cronan, ‘The Thematic Unity of the Younger *Gautreks Saga*’, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 106 (2007), 103.

looks upon *Gautreks saga* as a document in which the Víkarr and Starkaðr story has been preserved, for Cronan the saga is a much more independent text, and the context of other *þættir* of *Gautreks saga* is for Cronan as important as earlier evidence of the narrative, like *Gesta Danorum* and skaldic poetry. The conclusions of the two scholars are also different. Dumézil tries to evaluate Óðinn's role overall in the Starkaðr tradition — or, in Wilhelm Ranisch's words, *die Starkadsage*. Cronan, at the same time, limits his view to the *fornaldarsaga* alone, and therefore can allow himself much more conclusive arguments.

The Odinic theme is prominent in both *Dalafífla þáttr* and *Víkars þáttr*, while the final *Gjafa-Refs þáttr* 'contrast[s] the cost of gifts from Óðinn with the rewards of the gift of grace'.<sup>264</sup> The negative image of Óðinn has been introduced only into the younger redaction of the saga, which involved the introduction of black-comical references to Óðinn and Valhöll in *Dalafífla þáttr* as well as the inclusion of the whole *Víkars þáttr* in the saga.<sup>265</sup> As we can see, the author-compiler of the younger *Gautreks saga* reinforces the theme of Óðinn's influence to achieve his own artistic goals, and this context inevitably affects the way the events of *Víkars þáttr* are understood.

*Víkars þáttr* is especially noteworthy because it is built around the scheme of the Odinic hero complex we have observed in the previous chapters. In this sense, and in the terminology of this thesis, the 'Odic hero' is Víkarr rather than Starkaðr, and, as Figure 3 shows, even if Starkaðr was completely taken out of the story the basic plot would remain, quite similar to the peripeteias of *Völsunga saga*. It is also telling that the conflict of the *þáttr* is resolved after Víkarr's death, and what follows is simply the tragical aftermath, although *Gesta Danorum* and other sources suggest that the Starkaðr material must have been abundant in the Icelandic Middle Ages.

#### 4. ODINIC HERO ELEMENTS IN THE IMAGE OF STARKAÐR IN VÍKARS ÞÁTTTR

Despite the fact that the story centres around Víkarr, it is the reinterpretation of traditional material, connected mostly to the image of Starkaðr, that mostly contributes to the saga's development.

<sup>264</sup> Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, 'Cultural Paternity in the Flateyjarbók Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar', *Alvíssmál* 8 (1998), 22, see also Cronan, 'The Thematic Unity', 106-108.

<sup>265</sup> Dennis Cronan, 'The Thematic Unity of the Younger *Gautreks Saga*', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 106 (2007), 98-100.

It has already been pointed out that *Víkars þáttr* demonstrates a very clear and well-cut example of the Odinic hero complex, involving the warband of twelve and Starkaðr as the warband's leader, which makes Starkaðr similar to such characters as Bǫðvarr bjarki and Innstein. As was shown in the analysis of *Hrólfs saga kraka*, initiatory structures and Odinic traits are characteristic motifs relating to prominent members of the warband. All those motifs are present in *Víkars þáttr* in connection to Starkaðr, most notably the following:<sup>266</sup>

**1. Víkarr makes Starkaðr a warrior.**

It is noteworthy that clothes and weapon are mentioned twice in the short episode, stressing the change that Starkaðr is undergoing. Víkarr acts towards Starkaðr in a manner similar to how Bǫðvarr (and, to a lesser extent, Hrólfr kraki) treat Hǫttr, meanwhile the gift of a weapon as literary rudiment of initiatory practices has been discussed in connection to both *Vǫlsunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka*.

**2. Starkaðr is a member and the leader of the warband of twelve.**

It has been observed in chapters 3 and 4 that it is characteristic of the Odinic hero to either lead a group of twelve berserkir or fight against it, which in *Hrólfs saga kraka* constitutes a kind of unity and struggle because both motifs are widely represented.

**3. Starkaðr is, similar to Svipdagr in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, connected to Óðinn through his foster-father Hrosshárs-Grani.**

In *Gautreks saga* this connection is even more pronounced than in *Hrólfs saga kraka* due to the fact that Hrosshárs-Grani is Óðinn. Svipr, however, is a similar figure in that he possesses magical powers and instructs Svipdagr in such a way that he fights the *berserkir* and ultimately becomes Hrólfr kraki's champion. Thus, Hrosshárs-Grani is an initiator to Starkaðr in the same way that Svipr is an initiator to Svipdagr.

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<sup>266</sup> Theoretically, Starkaðr's 'berserk-like' nature, as Miller puts it, could be worked into the argument, especially in connection with his fight against Angantherus (inarguably Angantýr) leading the band of *berserkir* in Book Six of *Gesta Danorum*. This could represent the berserkr/berserkr-fighter complex as Schjødt describes it in connection to other texts (see Chapter 1). However, comparative study of the whole Starkaðr narrative tradition including *Gesta Danorum* falls beyond the scope of this discussion, and although it may be tempting to understand Starkaðr's imminent monstrosity as relating him with *berserkir*, it is methodologically dubious. While the rough comparison worked well for Miller's study where only the position on the 'nature / irrational' pole mattered, in more concrete text criticism the connection would be insufficiently justified.

Needless to say, in the light of Starkaðr's betrayal all those elements take opposite meanings from those in *Hrólfs saga kraka*. One could say that Starkaðr is here a deconstruction of the ideally loyal follower like Þoðvarr Bjarki — which could remind us of Miller's *Þórr-warrior* and this image's relation-opposition to Starkaðr if not for the numerous Odinic connections that are characteristic of characters like Þoðvarr and Svipdagr (as discussed in Chapter 3).

Both thematically and structurally, *Gautreks saga* is a more heterogeneous text than *Völsunga saga* or *Hrólfs saga kraka*, and therefore it is not dominated by a single theme such as the career of one or more Odinic heroes (like the Völsungs or Hrólfr kraki's warband). Instead, *Gautreks saga* makes use of the Odinic hero complex in one of the *þættir*, *Vikars þáttir*, to demonstrate how Óðinn's gifts lead to misfortune. In quite a different manner, the disasters and misery of those serving Óðinn are presented in *Dalafífla þáttir*, while *Gjafa-Refs þáttir* gives a picture of an alternative, more harmonious engagement with power and society.

## 5. THE AFTERLIFE OF SOME MOTIFS IN THE VÍKARR NARRATIVE

The following folktale was written down in England at the beginning of the last century:

Some years ago, when driving past a gallows standing in a field at Melton Ross, an old man told me a curious tale. He said, 'Some hundred of years ago, three or four boys were playing at hanging, and seeing who could hang the longest in a tree. Just as one of them got up and put the noose on, a three-legged hare (the devil, sir) came limping past, and off the other lads ran after him, and forgot their comrade. They very nearly caught the hare several times, but he got away. And when they came back the lad in the tree was dead. That's what the gallows was put up for'.<sup>267</sup>

A similar story, but featuring beheading, is recorded in Germany and Poland: in the same way, the devil tricks the boys into actually executing their friend instead of just mocking the execution.<sup>268</sup> The parallelism of these stories with Víkarr's mock-sacrifice, turning out to be an actual sacrifice, is evident. However, the presence of the narrative in *Gesta Danorum* clearly shows that Víkarr's mock-sacrifice is not a late folktale insertion made by the author-compiler, as it is, e.g., the case with the wolf-skins story in *Völsunga saga*, but rather the form in which the story was transmitted.

<sup>267</sup> *County Folk-Lore, v. 5: Examples of Printed Folk-Lore Concerning Lincolnshire*, ed. Eliza Gutch, Mabel Peacock (London: David Nutt, 1908), 349.

<sup>268</sup> 'Knaben probiren das Köpfen', *Volkssagen, Erzählungen, Aberglauben, Gebräuche und Märchen aus dem östlichen Hinterpommern*, ed. Otto Knoop (Posen: Verlag von Joseph Jolowicz, 1885), 24-25.

Although hardly possible to prove, it is more than likely that stories of this kind circulated in Iceland and continental Scandinavia after the younger *Gautreks saga* was created, which adds to the close association between Óðinn and the devil, characteristic of the period.<sup>269</sup> Although an association between Óðinn and the devil is a commonplace in saga literature, in *Gautreks saga* this tendency, always in connection with folktale elements, becomes so consistent that it is worth looking at.<sup>270</sup>

For example, although it is a commonplace in saga literature that Óðinn cannot be trusted and that he is a betrayer deity, it is not characteristic of Óðinn elsewhere to demand a price for his gifts. As a rule, the receiving of a gift initiates the character into the Odinic hero (like Sigmundur, Sigurðr, Siward digri and to an extent Hrólfr kraki; in *Gesta Danorum* Hadingus may be the best example). Although being an Odinic hero inevitably means violent death, it is always the death of the gift's recipient, not anyone else presented as a price for this payment. However, in connection to Víkarr this motif is encountered twice, in *Hálfs saga ok hálfrekka* and in *Gautreks saga* (paralleled by *Gesta Danorum* Book VI). When Óðinn tells Starkaðr that he has to repay his gifts, this is uncharacteristic but still recognizable because Starkaðr is a warrior, and defining a warrior's fate is an activity closely associated with Óðinn.

In the commentary to *Gesta Danorum*, Hilda Ellis Davidson argues that in chapter 1 of *Hálfs saga ok hálfrekka*, which gives an account of Víkarr's birth, Óðinn acts in the uncharacteristic role of a fertility god, as he also does in *Völsunga saga*:

[The story of Gurith's son in Book VI] agrees with the tradition of *Gautreks saga* that a son was promised to the mother of Vikar, and dedicated to Odin before his birth, and also with the incident at the beginning of *Völsunga saga*, when Rerir and his wife prayed for child and their request was granted by Odin and Frigg. It may be noted that in each case when a son is born as a result of an appeal to Odin, the boy becomes a great warrior, but meets his death by violence or in battle.

(Fisher, II, 119)

It is tempting to follow this observation and to connect the character type, characterised by Odinic death, also to an 'Odic birth'. On closer examination it can be seen, however, that the connection between the episodes, proposed by Davidson, is

<sup>269</sup> Stephen Mitchell, 'Odin, Magic and a Swedish Trial from 1484', *Scandinavian Studies* 81 (2009), 263-286.

<sup>270</sup> In nineteenth-century Europe, the motif of mock-execution is very closely connected with the theme of infernal powers. E.g., in Victorien Sardou's 1887 drama *La Tosca* a mock-execution takes place, catastrophically turning out to be a real one and organised by the explicitly infernal antagonist. The same consistency is found in the recorded folktales. However, the chronological distance does not allow us to make any conclusive arguments and only proves that there is a strong connection between the two motifs.

problematic. In *Völsunga saga*'s case, Óðinn answers a prayer of a childless couple and grants them a child; no subsequent sacrifice or payment is implied at the moment. In *Hálfs saga ok hálferekka*, there is no couple and no prayer for a child; the child, Víkarr, is rather a payment to Óðinn for helping Geirhildr in completing the task Alrekr had given her. It seems appropriate to quote the episode in full before continuing with the analysis:

Alrekr hét konungr, er bjó á Alreksstöðum. Hann réð fyrir Hǫrðalandi. Hann átti Signýju, dóttur konungs af Vǫrs. Kollr hét hirðmaðr hans, ok fylgdi hann konungi norðr í Sogn ok sagði konungi allmikit frá vænleik Geirhildar Drífsdóttur, því at hann hafði sétt hana við mungátsgerð, ok kveðst honum unna þess ráðs. Til fundar við Geirhildi kom Hǫttr, er Óðinn var reyndar, þá er hún var at léreptum. Hann keypti því við hana, at Alrekr konungr skyldi eiga hana, en hún skyldi á hann heita til alls. Konungr sá hana, er hann fór heim, ok gerði brúðlaup til hennar it sama haust.

Konungr launaði Koll vel trúleik sinn ok gaf honum jarlsdóm ok atsetu í Kollsey fyrir sunnan Harðsæ, ok er þat fjölbyggt herað.

Alrekr konungr mátti eigi eiga þær báðar fyrir ósamþykki þeira ok kveðst þá þeira eiga skyldu, er betra ǫl gerði mót honum, er hann kæmi heim ór leiðangri. Þær kepptust um ǫlgerðina. Signý hét á Freyju, en Geirhildr á Hǫtt. Hann lagði fyrir dregg hráka sinn ok kveðst vilja fyrir tilkvámu sína þat, er var milli kersins ok hennar. En þat reyndist gott ǫl. Þá kvað Alrekr:

Geirhildr, getta,  
gott er ǫl þetta,  
ef því andmarkar  
engir fylgja.  
Ek sé hanga  
á hávum gálga  
son þinn, kona,  
seldan Óðni.

Á þeim misserum var fæddr Víkarr, sonr Alreks ok Geirhildar.  
(HSH 1)

Alrekr was the name of the king who lived at Alreksstaðir. He ruled Hǫrðaland. He married Signý, the daughter of the king of Vǫrs. Kollr was the name of one of Alrekr's retainers, and he went to the king north to Sogn and talked to the king a lot about the beauty of Geirhildr Drífsdóttir, whom he had seen making ale. He told the king it would be a good match. When Geirhild was weaving, Hǫttr came to see her, but he was really Óðinn. He made a bargain with her that she should always call for his assistance, and then king Alrekr would marry her. The king saw her when he was returning home, and married her the same autumn.

The king rewarded Kollr for his loyal service, made him a jarl and gave him an estate in Kollsey, which is to the south of Harðsæ. That is a well-populated area.

King Alrekr could not keep both [wives] because of conflicts between them, and he said he would keep the one who would make better ale for him when he returned from an expedition. They competed with each other at brewing. Signý invoked Freya, and Geirhildr invoked Hǫttr. He spat into the yeast and said he would be back for what was between the cauldron and her. That indeed was good ale. Then Alrekr said:

Geirhildr, girl,<sup>271</sup> this ale is good, I cannot complain unless there is a trap. I see hanging on the high gallows your son, o woman, sold to Óðinn.

The same half-year Víkarr was born, the son of Alrekr and Geirhild.

<sup>271</sup> Cleasby-Vígfusson suggests that *getta* is probably the same word as *genta*.

This particular type of story is widely present in folklore and categorised as number 500 in Aarne-Thompson catalogue (the most popular of this type is Brothers Grimm's folktale number 55, 'Rumpelstilzchen'). While existing in numerous variants, the story tends to be built of the following elements:

- The heroine is to marry a king, or some other high-status person — here Geirhildr to Alrekr;
- To get married, she has to complete a task that is connected to domestic activities, which is in most cases spinning or knitting, but here beer-brewing. Note that Geirhildr is weaving when Hǫttr comes to visit her;
- A supernatural helper, in most cases a dwarf, assures that the task is completed, but demands the heroine's child as payment (or sometimes the woman's soul). Here this part is played by the disguised Óðinn;
- In most folktales, but not in *Hálfs saga ok hálfrekka*, the heroine can get around the agreement by guessing the supernatural helper's name.

As can be seen, chapter one of *Hálfs saga* contains all the characteristic traits of Aarne-Thompson 500 except for the last part. Another minor but characteristic folktale motif can be seen in Hǫttr's phrase where he asks for payment: 'Hann... kveðst vilja fyrir tilkvámu sína þat, er var milli kersins ok hennar', which is Geirhildr's unborn son Víkarr, even though she does not yet understand that. In one of the variants of the *Rumpelstilzchen* story, the dwarf quite similarly asks that the woman gives him 'what she has under her apron', and she readily agrees, not knowing she is pregnant and thinking she has nothing there.<sup>272</sup> A slightly remoter parallel (not involving the unknown pregnancy motif) is found in the Grimms' *Das Mädchen ohne Hände*, where the Devil, in exchange for riches, asks the miller to give him what is behind his mill. The man agrees, not knowing that his daughter is there at the time sweeping the yard.<sup>273</sup>

Those parallels cast doubt upon Óðinn's supposed role as a fertility god in relation to Víkarr's birth in *Hálfs saga* (although in *Vǫlsunga saga*, as we have observed earlier, this theme is well-developed). He rather plays here the role of a

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<sup>272</sup> 'Zirkzirk', *Sagen, Gebräuche und Märchen aus Westfalen*, ed. Adalbert Kuhn (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1859), 298-299.

<sup>273</sup> 'Das Mädchen ohne Hände', *Kinder- und Hausmärchen, gesammelt durch die Brüder Grimm*, ed. Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, I (Göttingen: Verlag der Dieterichschen Buchhandlung, 1857), 162-68.

Rumpelstilzchen, a trickster who offers a bargain and plays with the wording of the agreement to deceive a person into giving their child to him.

It is natural that in folktales this figure is often associated with the Devil: thus, in an English variant of Aarne-Thompson 500, when the heroine supposes the dwarf's name is Lucifer of Beelzebub, he laughs and says he is only remotely related to them.<sup>274</sup> In some variants, the supernatural helper is directly introduced as the Devil.<sup>275</sup> The connection with the Devil is, in fact, a recurring theme in folklore material that is connected to the Víkarr story in *Gautreks saga*: we have seen, for example, that in a few parallels to the mock hanging/beheading game the Devil is always responsible for one of the boys' death. Although the mentioned folktale material was written down as late as the nineteenth century, the connection between Óðinn and the devil in *Gautreks saga* is quite possible as it is a generally well-attested theme in saga literature, most famously perhaps in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, where the devil in Óðinn's form visits the king and tries to drive the king to oversleeping God's service by his all-night tales about ancient times. *Fornaldarsögur* also provide a vast body of evidence of Óðinn's demonization in Christian times, and so does translated literature. Furthermore, if we consider continental Scandinavian material as background, it is interesting to note that in Sweden, from late Medieval to Modern times, there was a particularly strong popular belief that one could acquire riches and prosperity by serving 'the devil Óðinn', which is reflected in several accounts of witchcraft trials. The examples, collected and analysed by Stephen Mitchell, are of particular interest of this discussion, because the theme of a bargain with Óðinn is a key theme in the Víkarr narrative: in *Hálfs saga*, his mother sells him to the god in exchange for help, and in *Gautreks saga* Starkaðr betrays Víkarr to Óðinn in a similar way; both receive Óðinn's help in return, although the help is always ambiguous and the price is manipulated both from Geirhildr and Starkaðr rather than given willingly. On the one hand, we have seen how this ambivalence of help is characteristic of the Devil's (or the Rumpelstilzchen's) help in the traditional folktale. On the other hand, the folktale model is in the Víkarr narrative deeply intertwined with Óðinn's mythological features: he is a god who cannot be trusted; he bestows both victories in battles (on Starkaðr) and death (on Víkarr). Finally, his help

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<sup>274</sup> 'Duffy and the Devil', *Popular Romances of the West of England: or, The Drolls, Traditions, and Superstitions of Old Cornwall*, ed. Robert Hunt (London: John Camden Hotten, 1871), 247.

<sup>275</sup> 'Jungser Schön', *Kinder- und Volksmärchen*, ed. Heinrich Pröhle (Leipzig: Avenarius und Mendelssohn, 1853), 76.

to Geirhildr to brew the ale, as Annette Lassen justly observes, should be seen against the background of the myth of the skaldic mead in *Snorra Edda*, especially given that

When Alrekr tastes the brew, he composes a verse about the beer and his vision of his son hanging as an Óðinn-sacrifice... Apparently the drink, fermented by the spit of Óðinn, has granted Alrekr visionary powers, for this is indeed the way his son, Víkarr, is sacrificed to Óðinn later in *Gautreks saga*.<sup>276</sup>

It has already been observed how in *Völsunga saga* folktale motifs were intertwined in the episodes of Sigmundr and Sinfjötli's transformation into wolves, and then Sinfjötli's death and resurrection (see Chapter 2). Similarly, the Bear's Son folktale type found its way into *Bǫðvars þáttr* in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, as discussed in Chapter 3. It has been shown how in those texts, especially in *Völsunga saga*, the folktale motifs are most likely to be late interpolations, which stand out of the narrative and sometimes disagree with the remaining narrative, e.g. Sinfjötli's death and resurrection have no importance for the development and have to be forced into the conventional saga prose. We have seen, however, how differently from that are treated the narrative elements that open and close Víkarr's sacrifice: firstly, the brewing of ale by Geirhildr; secondly and finally, the actual sacrifice scene. Both these episodes seem to be traditional, and the sacrifice is referred to in sources earlier than the sagas and independent from them, such as *Gesta Danorum* and arguably *Víkarsbalkr*. Further, both episodes are closely intertwined with mythological imagery, which underlies the action and sustains its narrative logic: Óðinn is associated with supernatural wisdom and the mead of poetry in the Geirhildr episode, while the absence of wind, which would require the sacrifice of Víkarr, brings to mind Óðinn's powers over weather, as well as the fact that he appears both to Sigurðr and Hadingus during a storm. Finally, both the birth and the death of Víkarr, featuring Óðinn's direct interference, have multiple parallels with folktales featuring the devil stealing children or destroying human lives. Based on those notable similarities, both thematic and generic, I suggest that the story of Geirhildr's brewing must have been a stable and traditional part of the Víkarr narrative, and there could have existed a saga which included both those episodes and features Víkarr the Odinic hero as the main protagonist.

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<sup>276</sup> Annette Lassen, 'Óðinn in Old Norse Texts other than The Elder Edda, Snorra Edda and *Ynglinga saga*', in *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 1 (2005), 99-100.

## 6. CONCLUSION

*Gautreks saga* is a complicated text in general, and even more so when Óðinn-related material is concerned. It does not help that *Víkars þáttr*, the text containing the well-known account of king Víkarr's sacrifice to Óðinn, is found only in the younger version of the saga, and is only thematically connected to the rest of the narrative while clearly breaking plot continuity. Making no pretense to definite conclusions on the Odinic theme's development throughout all three *þættir*, this dissertation focuses on *Víkars þáttr*. Even in this individual *þáttr*, the comparative analysis based on the evidence of chapters 2-5 reveals a much more complex situation than in any of the previously considered sagas.

In bare outlines, *Víkars þáttr* blends together two narratives, which are likely to have existed more or less independently before that point. First of all, there is the rich Starkaðr material paralleled by *Gesta Danorum* and other texts. If all these sources are considered as a complex unity, then Starkaðr's unnaturally long life, his conflicted character, his unhuman strength and physical ugliness both attributed to giant origins all result in a unique image that is, in James Milroy's words, impossible to 'pigeonhole'.<sup>277</sup> While clearly associated with Óðinn, Starkaðr is also connected to Þórr, which caused much scholarly confusion, especially in the light of Georges Dumézil's inconsistent theories.

However, if *Víkars þáttr* is considered independently from other sources on Starkaðr like *Gesta Danorum* and *Norna-Gests þáttr*, it becomes clear that Víkarr and not Starkaðr is the centre of the narrative. As a narrative about Víkarr, the *þáttr* demonstrates a surprisingly well-defined Odinic hero complex with Víkarr himself as the Odinic hero, and Starkaðr playing more or less the same functional role as Bǫðvarr bjarki in *Hrólfs saga kraka* and Innstein/Útsteinn in *Hálfs saga ok hálsrekka*. The Odinic hero plot (1.2) is represented fairly completely, especially if chapter 1 of *Hálfs saga ok hálsrekka* is taken into consideration. Then Óðinn's support of Geirhildr, Víkarr's mother, qualifies as Odinic help, as do to some extent Óðinn's gifts to Starkaðr. Víkarr's sacrifice is a very clear example of Odinic death. The secondary motif of twelve warriors is well-pronounced in the *þáttr*, and structural

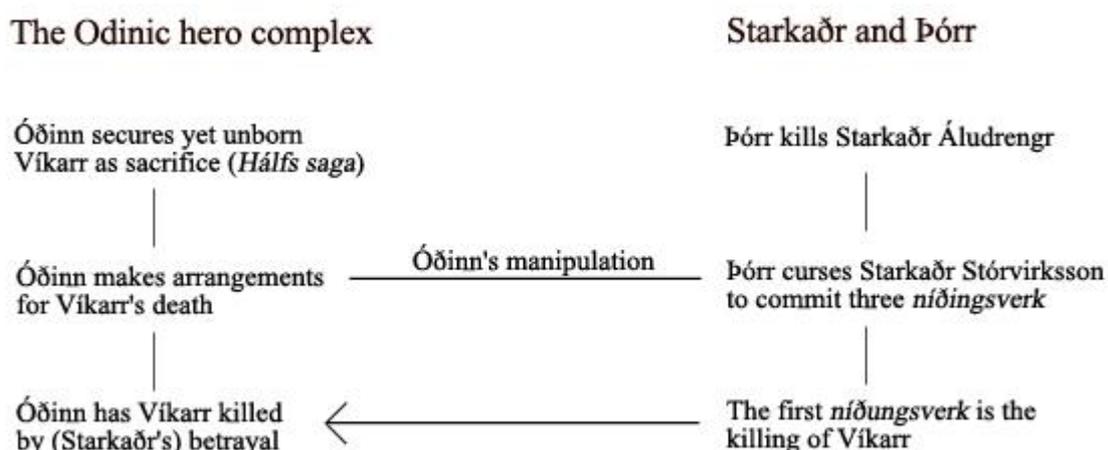
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<sup>277</sup> James Milroy, 'Starkaðr: An Essay in Interpretation', *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* 19 (1975–76), 129.

analysis demonstrates several features in common with *Hrólfs saga kraka* and *Hálfs saga ok hálfrekka* (6.3, 6.4).

Although the mere presence of the Odinic hero complex in *Víkars þáttr* is easy to establish, further analysis shows that the use of its elements drastically contrasts with the rest of the saga material considered in chapters 2-5. Firstly, both of the Odinic gifts in *Víkars þáttr* do not follow the paradigm well-established by *Hyndluljóð*, *Völsunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka*. All Odinic gifts considered so far have been either weapons or pieces of military advice, given to the Odinic hero himself, and the two examples in chapter 7 will continue this tendency. In *Víkars þáttr* and chapter 1 of *Hálfs saga ok hálfrekka*, Óðinn helps other people than Víkarr, even though this help leads directly to Víkarr's death. Furthermore, it has been shown that both episodes featuring Óðinn's help, as well as the sacrifice episode, have extensive folklore parallels that are commonly associated with the devil. This is untypical and shows that the material in *Gautreks saga* is genetically different from the rest of the sources. Even *Hrólfs saga kraka* with its Christian pathos adheres to the simple and recognisable paradigm 'one-eyed old man presents military advice or a weapon to the hero'.

A plausible explanation for these irregularities would be that the author-compiler of the younger *Gautreks saga* adapted whatever material he had for *Víkars þáttr*, so that it would fit a familiar paradigm. He then structured the narrative so that it formed an Odinic hero plot, introduced the twelve warriors motif and initiatory episode with Víkarr and Starkaðr that is so reminiscent of *Bǫðvars þáttr*. This transformation of the material can be roughly depicted as follows:



*Figure 4: The use of traditional narrative elements in Víkars þáttur*

The use of the Odinic hero complex in texts like *Gautreks saga*, *Ǫrvar-Odds saga* and *Hervarar saga* shows that the Odinic hero complex was a productive narrative structure that, even without being at the structural and ideological centre of the text, works as a solid literary device. It will be demonstrated in the next chapter how the smaller bits of the structure find their way into mostly later sagas without sustaining the original meaning of this peculiar unity of character and plot structure.

## CHAPTER 7

## THE ODINIC HERO IN LEARNED LATIN TRADITION

**1. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH TO NON-SAGA TEXTS FEATURING THE ODINIC HERO COMPLEX**

It has been shown that the Odinic hero complex is mostly a saga phenomenon. This determines two essential features of this plot. Firstly, it can be seen as a product of Icelandic, rather than continental, literature. Secondly, because of the apparent lack of the Odinic hero complex in the sources of the sagas, it is most likely a relatively late construct that reflects Christian views on Óðinn, Óðinn worship and the pagan era in general. Such is, in very brief outline, the outcome of the analysis performed in chapters 2-6, which look at manifestations of the Odinic hero complex in saga texts.

This last chapter looks at two texts that contain the Odinic hero plot but stand aside from the rest of the material for a number of reasons. The main one is that both texts — *Gesta Danorum* and *Vita et Passio Waldevi* — are very different from the *fornaldarsögur* both in terms of language and genre as they belong to the learned Latin culture (and, for that matter, to very different subgenres of it). There is also a significant chronological gap between the Latin texts and the sagas analyzed earlier, with *Gesta Danorum* confidently dated late twelfth century and different parts of *Vita et Passio Waldevi* written in the early thirteenth century, while most of the *fornaldarsögur*, although difficult to date, are usually considered to be much later. Finally, *Gesta Danorum* and *Vita et Passio Waldevi* come from Danish and English backgrounds respectively (the latter apparently influenced by the culture of the Danelaw), which also substantially separates them from the Icelandic material.

In Saxo's case, it has to be mentioned that any comparative study of *Gesta Danorum* and Icelandic material is attended by specific methodological difficulties as well that arise from the nature of this text. The most important problem arises from the lack of material and therefore uncertainty in the questions of influence and transmission. It is the subject of a scholarly debate that stretches over more than a century, whether the mythological and heroic material in the first nine books of *Gesta Danorum* was based on Icelandic or continental sources, and, if the latter were made use of, whether they were mostly Norwegian or Danish. With *Vita et Passio Waldevi*,

the situation is even more controversial because this text comes from a mixed Anglo-Scandinavian background, and it may be hard to distinguish between different types of the surviving variant's sources.<sup>278</sup>

The status of those two texts in this thesis is, therefore, controversial. In terms of material, they provide important scholarly evidence, but in order to properly evaluate this evidence, a new methodological apparatus is required that could adequately consider the discourse typical of learned Latin culture. It should also consider the individual cultural backgrounds of *Vita et Passio Waldevi* and *Gesta Danorum* and, most importantly, the nature of any connection between these texts and oral narrative tradition of the Scandinavian world. This analysis falls out of the scope of the rest of this dissertation in many ways but, on the other hand, the research's framework would be incomplete if Latin sources were not taken into consideration.

The connection between *Vita et Passio Waldevi*, *Gesta Danorum* and the Icelandic sagas may be emphasised by the fact that both narratives featured in this chapter, although technically quite remote from saga literature, are both known in scholarship as 'sagas': Georges Dumézil titled his monograph focused on the Hadingus narrative *From Myth to Fiction: The Saga of Hadingus*, and researchers have consistently characterised pieces of information on Siward digri as '*dissecta membra* [scattered pieces — E.M.] of a *Siwards saga*'. In both cases, the reason for this is the assumption that a pre-existing traditional narrative or 'saga', otherwise not surviving, had found its way into the Latin text. It should be noted, however, that while both texts undoubtedly build upon traditional material, the term 'saga' in relation to them cannot be used strictly because of the many difficulties attending the adaptation of traditional material, the original form of which is unknown to us, into a learned Latin narrative. Although Dumézil's monograph is dedicated almost completely to the methods of literary adaptation that were supposedly applied by Saxo to his sources, no equally fundamental study has been performed on *\*Siwards saga*. It should be remembered therefore that any notion of the original 'sagas' behind the Latin text stay, so far, as scholarly guesswork and require a correspondingly careful critical approach. The accounts in *Gesta Danorum* and *Vita et Passio Waldevi* do not seem to be interrelated in any other way than that the Odinic hero complex is

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<sup>278</sup> See, for example, Arthur Brodeur's criticism towards the methodology of Cyril Wright who tends to interpret a substantial part of Anglo-Latin legendary narratives as having 'the form of the saga': Arthur G. Brodeur, '*The Cultivation of Saga in Anglo-Saxon England* by C. E. Wright', *The Journal of American Folklore* 54 (1941), 88-90.

apparently present in both of them, and will therefore be considered in two individual sections.

To sum up, this chapter will be dedicated to brief analysis of the two Latin sources where the Odinic hero complex is present, namely Book I of *Gesta Danorum* that contains the story of Hadingus, and a section in *Vita et Passio Waldevi* titled *Gesta Antecessorum Comitum Gualdevi* that deals with Siward digri's youth. Even though this discussion has to stay schematic, it will, on the one hand, throw some new light on the results that have already been achieved, and, on the other hand, will outline the possibilities for further research that would go beyond the scope of saga literature alone.

## 2. HADINGUS AS AN ODINIC HERO

### 2.1. Overview of the Hadingus material

About a half of *Gesta Danorum*'s Book I is constituted by a narrative about the legendary Danish king called Hadingus who rises to power with the help of a one-eyed stranger (in the light of Icelandic sources easily identified as Óðinn) and dies by hanging himself in a supposedly ritual way, which is also commonly understood as an Odinic death.<sup>279</sup> No direct parallels to this story survive, so one has to rely only on Saxo's interpretation of his source or sources.

The Hadingus narrative's Odinic nature has been interpreted, among others, by Georges Dumézil. The scholar understood Hadingus as the god Njǫrðr presented as a human hero, whose is divided between the contrasting worlds of the Vanir and the Æsir. Accordingly, the life of Hadingus is divided into the 'Harthgrepa phase' (named after Hadingus' wet nurse and mistress), connected with sensuality, incest and low magic, and the 'Odinic phase', connected with warlike exploits, high magic and normal marriage.<sup>280</sup> This, according to Dumézil, explains the Odinic encounters that take place in the narrative immediately after Harthgrepa's death. Without aiming to contribute to the discussion of the narrative's mythological background, we will now focus on how exactly these encounters are presented in the text, and evaluate them in the light of the Odinic encounters of the sagas, which have been looked at in chapters

<sup>279</sup> Chadwick, Hector Munro, *The Cult of Othin: An Essay in the Ancient Religion of the North* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1899), 16-20.

<sup>280</sup> Georges Dumézil, *From Myth to Fiction: The saga of Hadingus* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973), 39-76.

2, 3 and 5.

Through the course of Hadingus' career, there are two episodes of the 'encounter with Óðinn' type. In both cases, the stranger is not identified in any way other than 'old man with a single eye' or just an 'old man', who in a saga would be immediately identified as Óðinn through a set of characteristic features (one eye, magical help in battle, appearance during a sea storm and other motifs, which are considered below in more detail). Despite all these Odinic traits of the old man who helps Hadingus, Saxo never indicates directly that this old man is equivalent to the false god and sorcerer Othinus, who in *Gesta Danorum* is a prominent character. It is not even clear whether, according to Saxo's narrative, Hadingus met two different magical helpers or the same old man. Othinus, the old man from the first encounter and the old man from the second encounter could be conceived by Saxo as being three individual characters, or the two old men could be the same person but not Othinus, or, finally, Saxo could be implying that all three are the same person. This entirely depends on whether Saxo and his potential readers could identify motifs like one eye, old age, magical help in war and unreliability as Odinic.

The situation is made even more difficult by the fact that Othinus is introduced immediately after Hadingus' first meeting with the old man, and the story of Hadingus is interrupted by a completely unrelated story from the life of Othinus, which is, in turn, evidently related to the stories of Brisingamen and Mimir's head known from *Snorra Edda*. We will look at the first Odinic encounter and the accompanying digression, then at the second encounter.

## 2.2. The first Odinic encounter of Hadingus

The episode goes as follows. Hadingus is devastated by the loss of his foster-mother and lover, the giantess Harthgrepa, when a certain one-eyed old man 'takes pity' on the hero and sways him towards more warlike activities. The first thing the old man does is to bring Hadingus into friendship with Liserus, a pirate or a Viking, who becomes Hadingus' foster-brother. Hadingus and Liserus then start a war against Lokerus, king of Curland, but are defeated. Then the one-eyed old man appears again, saving Hadingus and taking him to safety on horseback. When they arrive to the old man's house, he heals Hadingus with a potion and utters a poem that, among other

things, contains tactical advice about the forthcoming encounter with Liserus. The old man's 'prophetic advice' suggests that Hadingus should let Lokerus' men capture him, after which he will be condemned to be fed to wild beasts. Hadingus, however, will distract the guards with tales and wait until they fall asleep after feasting, which the old man will secure with his magic. Hadingus will meanwhile break his fetters and escape. Returning after a brief while, he will attack one of the animals and drink its blood. This, says the old man, will make Hadingus unusually strong.

After uttering the poem, the old man again sets Hadingus on his horse and takes him back to where he found him. During the journey, he covers Hadingus with a cloak and prohibits him from looking around, but Hadingus manages to notice to his wonder that they were riding over the sea. A brief mention is made that everything proceeded as the old man had prophesied, and the narrative moves to Hadingus' other exploits.

As can be seen, this episode contains some of the themes that are strongly associated with Óðinn in Icelandic tradition. Thus, the ability to cross open water evokes Óðinn's liminality connected with water borders attested to in *Hárbarðsljóð* and *Völsunga saga* (Edd. I, 389-298 VS 18-19, 23-24). His ability to break chains with spells is mentioned in *Hávamál* (Edd. I, 352).

| <i>Gesta Danorum</i>  | Icelandic sources  |
|---|--|
| The one-eyed old man, evidently disguised Óðinn, assists Hadingus with 'prophetic advice'. This helps Hadingus to win a battle. | <p><i>Völsunga saga</i>:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Óðinn helps Sigurðr to choose a horse;</li> <li>2) Óðinn advises Sigurðr before fight with Fáfnir;</li> <li>3) Óðinn advises Jǫrmunrekkr's warriors to stone Hamðir and Sǫrli.<sup>281</sup></li> </ol> <p><i>Hrólfs saga kraka</i>: Óðinn,</p> |

<sup>281</sup> It has been discussed earlier that the motif of Óðinn's advice is sometimes indistinguishable from the motif of Óðinn's gift, the former probably being a variation of the latter. However, this table provides only the most apparent parallels.

|  |   |
|--|---|
|  | disguised as Hrani, helps Hrólfr to choose a group of twelve before the raid to Uppsala.  |
| Hadingus becomes a sworn brother with Liserus.               | <p><b><i>Hrólfs saga kraka:</i></b> The relationship between Bøðvarr and Hǫtr (Hjálti) is similar to sworn brotherhood and involves many initiatory elements, although no actual sworn brotherhood is mentioned.</p> <p><b><i>Orvar-Odds saga</i> and <i>Heiðreks saga:</i></b> according to both texts, Oddr and Hjálmar are sworn brothers.</p> <p><b><i>Volsunga saga</i></b> operates with a double hero as well, this time the father and son pair (Sigmundr and Sinfjǫtli), the former playing the role of initiator in relation to latter.</p> |
| Hadingus drinks the blood of an animal and becomes stronger. | <p><b><i>Volsunga saga:</i></b> Sigurðr eats Fáfnir's heart and bathes in his blood, which makes him invulnerable.</p> <p><b><i>Hrólfs saga kraka:</i></b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Hǫtr drinks dragon's blood (wolf's blood in <i>Bjárkarímur</i> and <i>Gesta Danorum</i> Book II). This makes him strong enough to fight Bøðvarr as an equal.</li> <li>2) Bøðvarr drinks Elgfróði's blood in order to become stronger.</li> </ol>   |

The table makes it clear that the imagery accompanying the Odinic encounter in

*Gesta Danorum* is quite similar to the imagery in the sagas where the Odinic hero complex is present. Before making any conclusions based on this parallelism, we will consider Hadingus' second Odinic encounter and its points of contact with Icelandic saga literature.

### 2.3. The second Odinic encounter of Hadingus

A while after the previously-considered episode, during a sea voyage to a battle with Biarmians, Hadingus notices an old man on the shore and takes him aboard. It is never mentioned that this is the same person as the one who helped Hadingus against Lokerus. The old man proves a good military advisor and teaches Hadingus a tactic that secures his future victory. This tactic is, minor details aside, the same wedge formation that Othinus (this time under his own name) will teach to Haraldus in Book VII. When the battle starts, the wedge formation works very effectively until the Biarmians turn to magic, conjuring up heavy rain. Then, however, the old man comes up with magic of his own and summons a cloud that stops the hostile storm. The battle is won by Hadingus and the old man departs, but not before he prophesies about Hadingus' future. He foretells that Hadingus will die by his own hand rather than in battle, and advises that he should go in for glorious wars rather than petty ones, and fight in remote lands rather than at the borders of his kingdom. The death prophecy is fulfilled at the end of Book I but the other two pieces of advice, as noted by Paul Herrmann and discussed by Georges Dumézil, hardly make any narrative sense, as Hadingus fights only around Denmark both before and after the advice.<sup>282</sup> This most probably testifies to the fact that much material of the original source has been preserved for the sake of erudition.

Once again, Óðinn's abilities attested to in *Ynglinga saga* can be seen, such as prophetic knowledge and power over weather (*Ynglinga* 10). More importantly, the context of the encounter is the same as in *Reginismál* and the corresponding part of *Völsunga saga* modelled on it (VS 28-29).

### 2.4. Blood brotherhood, monster fighting and consumption of

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<sup>282</sup> Georges Dumézil, *From Myth to Fiction: The saga of Hadingus* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973), 16-17.

### blood in the Hadingus sequence and in saga material

In many sources, the rite of sworn brotherhood is closely connected with (usually mutual) consumption of blood, although it is impossible to say whether this is due to the memory of real Iron Age ritual practices or because of the way brotherhood was traditionally represented. In the *fornaldarsaga* material, the theme of consumption of blood has a few other overtones: it tends to be not only connected with the brotherhood theme, but also with the theme of fighting a monster, in which case initiatory implications are evident in the episode. Although the motif of blood-brotherhood and the motif of drinking a monster's blood exist independently, there are two episodes in *Hrólfs saga kraka* and *Bjarkarímur* where they are merged. In the Hadingus sequence, these motifs also appear together, and in order to evaluate this connection in *Gesta Danorum*, we will look first at the two sequences in the saga and the *rímur*, and then draw parallels with *Gesta Danorum* where the presence of the same sequence as in the sagas is, at first, not evident.

The most valuable account, because of its detail, is given in the episode where Bǫðvarr bjarki meets his brother Elgfróði (HSK 60-62, *Bjarkarímur* 132-135). According to both *Hrólfs saga kraka* and *Bjarkarímur*, Elgfróði is Bǫðvarr's actual brother rather than a bloodbrother or a fosterbrother, and the motif of blood in a footstep is explained not by a brotherhood rite, as in *Gesta Danorum*, but rather by a folktale motif of one person knowing the other's destiny. Nevertheless, the episode preceding Bǫðvarr's trip to Hleiðargarðr contains a remarkable initiatory sequence containing the motifs of fighting, monstrosity, blood-drinking and brotherhood. The episode is important enough to quote most of it, which will be followed by a consideration of the key elements that are in the quotation marked bold.

Here Bǫðvarr is looking for Elgfróði, who, meanwhile, is living the life of an outcast and 'kills people for their money'. When he finds Elgfróði's dwelling, he enters it and stays there. When Elgfróði returns, he starts fighting the intruder who, for some reason not explained in the saga, stays hooded and does not reveal his identity to Elgfróði:

**Elgfróði var þess harðari undir höndum, ok eigast þeir við miklar sviptingar,** ok þá ferr ofan hattr Bǫðvars, ok þá kennir Fróði hann ok mælti: 'Velkominn, frændi, ok höfum vit helzt lengi þessar sviptingar haft.'

'Ekki sakar enn til,' segir Bǫðvarr.

Elgfróði mælti: 'Varligar mun þér þó enn, frændi, við mik at eiga, ef vit skulum þat þreyta, ok muntu hér enn aflsmunar kenna, ef vit skulum eigast við ok ekki hlífast við.'

(...)

**Síðan tók Fróði ok stjakaði honum. Þá mælti Fróði: ‘Ekki ertu svá sterkr, frændi, sem þér hæfir.’**

**Fróði nam sér blóð í kálfanum ok bað hann drekka, ok svá gerir Bøðvarr. Þá tók Fróði til hans í annat sinn, ok þá stóð Bøðvarr í sǫmu sporum.**

**‘Helzt ertu nú sterkr, frændi,’ sagði Elgfróði,** ‘ok vænti ek, at þér hafi komit at haldi drukkrinn, ok þú munt verða fyrirmaðr flestra um afl ok hreysti ok um alla harðfengi ok drengskap, ok þess ann ek þér vel.’

Eptir þetta sté Fróði í bergit, er var hjá honum, allt til lagklaufa. Þá mælti Fróði: ‘Til þessa spors mun ek koma hvern dag ok vita, hvat í sporinu er; mold mun verða, ef þú verðr sótt dauðr, vatn, ef þú verðr sjó dauðr, blóð, ef þú verðr vápndauðr, ok mun ek þá hefna þín, því at ek ann þér mest allra minna.’

*(Elgfróði’s grip was much stronger, and they fought with great turmoil, and then Bøðvarr’s hood fell off, and Fróði recognised him and said: ‘Welcome, kinsman, and let us rather not continue this struggle’.*

‘No one is hurt yet’, says Bøðvarr.

[Bøðvarr stays at Elgfróði’s place for a while.]

**Then Fróði came to him and pushed him. Then Fróði said: ‘You are not so strong, kinsman, as it would fit you’.**

**Fróði took blood from his calf and told him to drink [it], and Bøðvarr did so. Then Fróði took on him for the second time but Bøðvarr stayed at the same place.**

**‘Now you are strong enough, kinsman’, said Elgfróði,** ‘And I hope that this drink is useful to you, and you will be the most remarkable of all men in strength and courage, and I gladly give this to you.

After that Fróði stepped on a rock that was nearby, and it went down up to the ankle. Then Fróði said: ‘I will come to this footprint every day and see what is inside. There will be soil if you die from illness, water if you drown, blood if you are killed with weapons, **and I will then avenge you, because I love you most of all**’).

Three important features can be distinguished in this sequence that will be important for further analysis:

1. **The two (blood) brothers in a battle.** Two protagonists fight each other without any, or little, external motivation, apparently to measure which of them is stronger.<sup>283</sup> One of the characters is initially stronger and serves as the initiator (here Elgfróði). The other, who tends to be the protagonist, is initially weaker (here Bøðvarr). In a later episode, present both in *Hrólfs saga* and *Bjarkarímur*, Bøðvarr serves as the initiator and Hǫttr (Hjálti) is the initié. The bond between the two characters is strong and resembles that of blood-brotherhood: note the part where Elgfróði swears to avenge Bøðvarr if something happens to him.
2. **The two stages of the fight.** During the first stage, the initié loses to the initiator (Bøðvarr has difficulties fighting Elgfróði; he is unable to stand when Elgfróði pushes him). During the second stage, which takes place after the

<sup>283</sup> In the quoted episode, the initial fight is partly motivated by the fact that Elgfróði does not recognize Bøðvarr who is hooded, but this explanation is clearly not sufficient because it is clear that Bøðvarr himself wants to fight with Elgfróði and for that reason conceals his identity.

consumption of blood, the initié proves to be as strong as the initiator (Bǫðvarr is able to stand when Elgfróði pushes him for the second time).

3. **Drinking the monster's blood.** The theme of monstrosity is consistently present in the fight sequence, closely connected to the theme of blood drinking. In all the sources, the initié drinks the blood of a monster, usually a wild animal, and becomes stronger. In the quoted episode of *Hrólfs saga kraka* and the corresponding episode in *Bjarkarímur*, this is manifested in Elgfróði's half-human and half-elk nature; Bǫðvarr drinks the blood and becomes stronger. Later in *Hrólfs saga*, Bǫðvarr makes Hjálti drink the dragon's blood (in *Bjarkarímur* this is a she-wolf's blood and in *Gesta Danorum* a bear's blood, as the type of monster fought by Bǫðvarr and Hjálti differs from source to source). Note how the inhuman nature of the strength associated with monstrous blood is consistently stressed in *Bjarkarímur*: first, Bǫðvarr calls Fróði's strength *ógurligr* ('awful', *Bjarkarímur* 134), and when Hjálti drinks the she-wolf's blood he becomes 'sterkr ok ramr sem tröll' ('stark and strong like a troll', *Bjarkarímur* 140).

The same principal features as described in the list above can be found in *Gesta Danorum*:

|                              |  |
|------------------------------|--|
| The two (blood) brothers     | Hadingus and Liserus   |
| The two stages of fight      | The first battle against Lokerus is lost by Hadingus, and the second one, when he follows the old man's advice, is won. It is never explained why the old man does not give his advice before the first attempt, which strengthens the hypothesis that the twofold structure must be borrowed from elsewhere and not invented by Saxo. |
| Drinking the monster's blood | The old man tells Hadingus to drink the blood of a beast, which is going to grant him unusual strength (GD I 110-113).   |

In addition to the fact that Hadingus drinks the blood of a beast, it is mentioned earlier that Hadingus and Liserus mix their blood in a footprint to swear blood-brotherhood:

Siquidem icturi foedus ueteres uestiga sua mutui sanguinis aspersione perfundere consueuerant, amicitiarum pignus alterni cruoris commercio firmaturi.

(GD I 110)

Now our ancestors, when they meant to strike a pact, would sprinkle their combined blood in their footprints and mingle it, so as to strengthen the pledge of their friendship.  
(*The History of the Danes*, 24)

The passage above is reminiscent of the account of *Hrólfs saga* concerning Bǫðvarr and Elgfróði, where the motif of blood in a footprint is also present. Although mixing of blood, especially in the ground, is a commonplace when describing blood-brotherhood, these seem to be the only two sources where the motif of blood in a footprint is mentioned in this context. Unfortunately, it is hard to evaluate the meaning of this connection without looking in more detail at Saxo's background, but this connection nevertheless strengthens the hypothesis that the two texts are somehow connected to each other.

The description of Hadingus drinking the blood of a beast to gain inhuman strength constitute 10 lines in the old man's 18-line stanza:

Inde pedem referens, ubi se mora paruula fundet,  
Uiribus in rabidum totis assurge leonem,  
Qui captivorum iactare cadauera suevit,  
Inque truces armos ualidis conare lacertis  
et cordis fibras ferro rimare patenti.  
Protinus admissa uapidum cape fauce cruorem  
Corporeamque dapem mordacibus attere malis.  
Tunc nova uis membris aderit, tunc robora neruis  
Succedent inopina tuis solidique uigoris  
Congeries penitus neruosos illinet artus.  
(GD I 110-112)

Returning, after a brief while has elapsed,  
you must rise with all your strength against a raging  
beast, which loves to toss its captives' bodies.  
Against its grim fore-quarters test your brawn  
and probe its heart-strings with your naked sword.  
Straightaway bring your throat to its streaming blood  
and devour the feast of its body with ravenous jaws.  
Then new force will enter your frame, an unlooked-for  
vigour will come to your muscles, accumulation  
of solid strength soak deep through every sinew.  
(GD Fisher I, 24-25)

Although the beast itself is introduced as *leon*, the meaning of this word, according to Hilda Ellis Davidson, seems to be general (*The History of the Danes*, II, 31). She also draws parallels to the evidence of hunters drinking the blood of a slain animal, usually a bear, in Finland and Scandinavia. She proposes that in Saxo's source the beast might have been a wolf because of the parallel with *Volsunga saga*, where Sigmundr and his

brothers are captured and devoured by a she-wolf until Sigmundr overcomes her.

The parallel with *Völsunga saga* is tempting to draw, especially considering that both there and in Bjarkarímur the monster is a she-wolf (*ylgr*). That, however, could easily be a coincidence. The parallelism with the two scenes in *Hrólfs saga kraka* including the simultaneous appearance of the motifs is listed in the table above. These seem to have worked as a system in Saxo's source as they do in *Hrólfs saga*. The most important notion for this thesis is that in *Gesta Danorum* the whole episode is dominated by Óðinn's figure, or, to put it more correctly, by an Odinic figure, since the old man is never directly identified as Odinus. This fact contributes to the discussion in chapter 3 of this thesis, where it is argued that *Hrólfs saga kraka* as a whole is driven by the Odinic theme, which starts developing long before *Uppsalaþor*. Concerning Saxo, the conclusions are much more limited, but it seems that a narrative had been used in his work where there was a direct connection between Óðinn, blood-brotherhood and monster-fighting. Since it has been argued in chapters 3 and 4 that the motifs of monster-fighting and *berserkir*-fighting are often substitutable, this also indirectly supports the argumentation in chapter 4.

As has already been mentioned, the 'aged man with only one eye', who supports Hadingus in warfare, is never named directly but is immediately recognizable, as is the case in most saga texts considered earlier. The stranger's Odinic identity is further reinforced by the parallel between the Latin poem, which in *Gesta Danorum* is attributed to the old man, and *Hávamál* 149 and *Ynglinga saga* 7, where Óðinn's ability to break fetters is referred to. It is even possible to assume that Saxo's source followed the same pattern as *Völsunga saga*, where Sigurðr's meeting with 'Fjölfnir' or Óðinn is followed by a stanza uttered by Fjölfnir. Although there is only one stanza in *Völsunga saga*, its direct source, *Reginismál*, provides five more stanzas of gnomic knowledge addressed to Sigurðr, meanwhile the poem in *Gesta Danorum*, on the whole much more obscure, also takes the form of 'prophetic advice' useful for the next battle.

## 2.5. Conclusions on the Hadingus sequence

Although future research on the form and discourse in *Gesta Danorum* could throw more light on Saxo's use of mythological material, the story of Hadingus from Book II, if looked at against the background of saga material, allows us to assert the

following:

1. The complex of motifs traditionally connected with Odinic heroes is present in *Gesta Danorum* in a form notably similar to that in the sagas. This evidence leads us to accept that the Odinic hero complex, typical for the *fornaldarsögur* analysed in chapters 2-5, belongs to a very strong tradition that existed at least at the beginning of the thirteenth century.
2. More specifically, the story of Hadingus demonstrates a close connection between the motifs of encounter with disguised Óðinn, sworn brotherhood and initiatory drinking of animal blood. Although all those three motifs are widely present in heroic narratives and often function on their own, their association with each other in *Gesta Danorum* reinforces the structural integrity of the complex found in *Bǫðvars þáttur* from *Hrólfs saga kraka* and, to a lesser extent, in *Völsunga saga* and in the Sámsey episodes of *Qrvar-Odds saga* and *Heiðreks saga*.

As can be seen, even the first episode in *Gesta Danorum* Book I contains much of the imagery that is usually connected to the Odinic hero complex in the sagas, and the combination of both episodes adds even more to the parallelism. However, the accentuation is quite different in the sagas. For instance, the motif of blood-drinking plays an important role in *Völsunga saga* and in *Hrólfs saga kraka* and is even reduplicated, while in *Gesta Danorum* this motif is only briefly mentioned in the poetic stanza. That leaves room for the assumption that the motif of blood drinking might have been important in Saxo's source, but in the reinterpreted account of *Gesta Danorum* became a rudimental feature. If this assumption is correct, this could mean that the Odinic hero plot existed in the thirteenth century more or less in the same form as in the *fornaldarsögur*. This fact would not be very illuminating of itself because the same complex is present in *Völsunga saga*, which is confidently dated to the late thirteenth century. While *Völsunga saga* was written in Iceland, Saxo's immediate source in this particular case could be either Icelandic or continental, which also makes the situation equivocal and gives no real opportunity to judge if this interconnected group of motifs was an Icelandic or generally Scandinavian

phenomenon.<sup>284</sup> Future research could shed more light on this problem; however, even at this stage the picture is widened by the presence of a similar motif group in a text written in Britain approximately at the same time.

### 3. THE *FORNALDARSAGA* BACKGROUND OF SIWARD OF NORTHUMBRIA

#### 3.1. Overview of the material

*Vita et passio Waldevi comitis* (or simply *Vita Waldevi*) is a hagiographical Latin narrative about Earl Waltheof of Northumbria (1050 — 1076), which is preserved in a mid-thirteenth century manuscript, originally kept in Crowland Abbey. The scholarly consensus is that the texts in the collection must have been created around the last decades of the twelfth century and the early decades of the thirteenth century.<sup>285</sup> The analysis in this chapter is primarily concerned with a short section that is contained in *Vita Waldevi*, titled *Gesta Antecessorum Comitum Gualdevi*. This is the third of a total of eight sections that build up the whole text. As the title suggests, this section deals with the story of Waltheof's ancestors, most prominently with the career of Waltheof's father Siward; it is preceded by summaries of Waltheof's life and martyrdom in prose and verse, and is followed by longer accounts of Waltheof's death, the subsequent deeds of his wife and, finally, an account of the twelve miracles performed by the saint. The structural role of *Gesta Antecessorum* is, as can be seen, very traditional for hagiographical literature — providing the saint with a dignified ancestry. *Gesta Antecessorum* is (unlike the rest of the manuscript) written in one hand, with only minor corrections made by another hand. Both have been dated to the early thirteenth century, most probably before the 1230s.<sup>286</sup> Nearly two centuries after Siward's death in 1055, the narrative is overwhelmed with fantastical elements, and it has often been noted that especially the account of Siward's youthful deeds bear strong resemblance to the Old Norse-Icelandic *foraldarsaga* tradition. Most importantly for this thesis, the motifs of bear parentage and dragonslaying in the Siward narrative work together with a typical Odinic encounter, which, as will be

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<sup>284</sup> Bjarni Guðnason, 'The Icelandic sources of Saxo Grammaticus', *Saxo Grammaticus: A Medieval Author between Norse and Latin Culture* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 1981), 82-84.

<sup>285</sup> Timothy Bolton, 'Was the Family of Earl Siward and Earl Waltheof a Lost Line of the Ancestors of the Danish Royal Family?', *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 51 (2007), 44-46.

<sup>286</sup> Bolton 47.

argued, testifies to deep roots of the Odinic hero complex in the form we know it from *Völsunga saga* and especially *Hrólfs saga kraka*.

The historical Siward digri ('grossus') was a Northumbrian Earl of supposedly Danish or other Scandinavian origin,<sup>287</sup> who ruled from 1041 up to his death in 1055. Along with bits of information that are reliable by the standards of modern historiography, there is a substantial body of pseudo-historical and legendary material connected to this character, which must have circulated in eleventh- to thirteenth-centuries Northumbria and later, finding its way, alongside *Vita Waldevi*, to such texts as Henry of Huntingdon's *Historia Anglorum*. Scholars have frequently drawn parallels between the Siward material, found in different sources, and Old Norse-Icelandic literature, predominantly sagas. The list of motifs that had drawn such discussion is given in the table below.<sup>288</sup>

## **2.6. Scandinavian parallels to legendary material about Siward of Northumbria in sources and in scholarship**

Those of the following episodes that are important for the discussion will be quoted and analysed in more detail in the sections below ('Siward's bear ancestry', 'The Orkney dragon' and 'The Odinic encounter'). The table is provided for the convenience of reference.

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<sup>287</sup> For a review of scholarly discussion about Siward's origin see Timothy Bolton, 'Was the Family of Earl Siward and Earl Waltheof a Lost Line of the Ancestors of the Danish Royal Family?', *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 51 (2007), 42.

<sup>288</sup> The subsequent literature review looks exclusively at scholarly attention to 'Siwards saga' as a hypothetical literary work. For a review of historical research on the ancestry of Siward and Waltheof, see Bolton 42-43.

| Latin British source | Account of the Siward tradition   | Literary parallels  | Historical context   |
|----------------------|---|---|--|
| <i>Vita Waldevi</i>  | Siward has descended from a polar bear and a noble lady.                          | <p>The Bear's Son folktale type is found in many Indo-European cultures</p> <p>The story of Ulvo's origin in <i>Gesta Danorum</i> Book X</p> <p>Gesta Herewardi</p> <p>Bǫðvarr-bjarka þátrr in <i>Hrólfs saga kraka</i></p> <p>In <i>Bjarkarímur</i>, the bear is specifically a polar bear</p>   | Nothing is known about Siward digri's ancestry, but one of Siward's sons was called Osbeorn ('bear-spirit'), which could be hypothetically connected with the legend or may have inspired it.  |
| <i>Vita Waldevi</i>  | Siward has killed a dragon in Orkney.   | <p>Bear's Son Folktale Type usually includes a fight with a monster.</p> <p>Parallels have been drawn with Sigurðr's dragon fight, especially in the light of the following Odinic encounter, which is also characteristic of Sigurðr's career according to <i>Reginmál</i> and especially <i>Vǫlsunga saga</i>, and to the career of Ragnar loðbrók. At the same time, Eleanor Parker believes that this episode has origins in hagiographical literature.</p> | Close to nothing is known about Siward's career before he became the Earl of Northumbria. <sup>289</sup> It has been suggested that the dragon episode was introduced as a parallel with Sigurðr's killing of Fáfnir, due to the similarity of the names Sigurðr and Siward. |
| <i>Vita Waldevi</i>  | Siward has received advice and gift (a magical raven-banner Ravenlandeye) from an | General relation to the widespread 'Odin's gift' motif has been noted. The  |  |

<sup>289</sup> For Timothy Bolton's theory about Beorn's historical identity, which would connect Siward's dynasty to that of King Swein Estrithsson of Denmark, see Timothy Bolton, 'Was the Family of Earl Siward and Earl Waltheof a Lost Line of the Ancestors of the Danish Royal Family?', *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 51 (2007), 50-71 and Eleanor Parker, 'Siward the Dragon-Slayer: Mythmaking in Anglo-Scandinavian England', *Neophilologus* 98:3 (2013), 482-483.

|  |   |  |   |
|--|---|--|---|
|  | old man with distinctive Odinic traits.   | scene has also been looked at in connection with dragonslaying, which could hint at parallelism with Sigurðr's career.   |   |
| <i>Historia Anglorum</i> ,<br><i>Gesta Waldevi</i> | In <i>Historia Anglorum</i> , Siward stoically reacts to the news of the death of his son [Osbeorn], asking whether Osbeorn had received his mortal wound in the front or the back of his body. Having heard that the wound was in the front, Siward is happy that his son had died a worthy death.<br><br>In <i>Gesta Waldevi</i> and <i>Anglo-Saxon Chronicle</i> , Siward takes vengeance for his son after he hears the news. | <i>Egils saga</i> features a father asking where his son had received his mortal wound, as noted by Christine Rauer. <sup>290</sup><br><br>Axel Olrik compared the <i>Gesta Waldevi</i> variant to an episode in <i>Ragnars saga</i> where the sons of Ragnarr loðbrók hear about his death. | Siward's participation in campaign against the Scottish ruler Mac Bethad mac Findlaích is documented in the <i>Annals of Lindisfarne and Durham</i> and in the <i>Anglo-Saxon Chronicle</i> . The latter also mentions the death of Siward's son Osbeorn. |
| <i>Historia Anglorum</i> ,<br><i>Gesta Waldevi</i> | Being seized by an illness, Siward abhors the idea of dying an unmanly death. He decides to at least put on his armor and arm himself in order to die like a soldier.   | Cyril Wright cites parallels drawn with death of Starkatherus in <i>Gesta Danorum</i> and death of Egill in <i>Hákonar saga góða</i> .   | <i>Vita Ædwardi Regis</i> , <i>Anglo-Saxon Chronicle</i> , <i>Historia Regum</i> and <i>Chronicon ex chronicis</i> agree that Siward died in York, but give no details.   |

The tradition's strong tendency to adorn the life of historical Siward with (mostly legendary) motifs of Scandinavian origin is apparent in this list, but the nature of this tendency is attended by many difficulties. Scholarly suggestions about the form in which the Siward material had circulated in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries have been diverse and often contradictory: most scholars have suggested that there once existed a saga or saga-like narrative about Siward, but have never agreed what surviving material belonged there. Axel Olrik considered the material as 'a Viking saga of the Danes in England' and stressed that it was an important testimonial to the development of saga literature outside the Scandinavian world; at the same time, he

<sup>290</sup> Christine Rauer, *Beowulf and the Dragon: Parallels and Analogues* (Cambridge: D.S.Brewer, 2000), 125.

points to the diversity of the Douai manuscript's material, noting that 'Siward's fictitious youth is like a romantic 'fornaldarsaga', the last part like an historical 'Islandingasaga', with its scenes of fight and revenge'.<sup>291</sup>

The next detailed study of the material behind the \**Siwards saga* was undertaken by Cyril Wright in the framework of his study of saga narratives that may have existed in the Anglo-Saxon world. In the appendix to his monograph, he also published, with translations, fragments of materials he was working with, which were especially important for *Gesta Antecessorum* because of the fact that *Vita et Passio Waldevi comitis* has not been edited since 1854, and has never been translated from Latin.<sup>292</sup> Despite its age, as well as some methodological inconsistencies pointed at by other scholars, Wright's work continues to be an influential and maybe definitive work on the 'Siwards saga'. It is, therefore, important to look in some detail at how it sees this complicated matter.

For Wright, a saga is 'simply the story that has crystallised in the course of its oral transmission (in prose form) through a number of generations, round certain historical events and personages'.<sup>293</sup> This generalisation has more impact on Wright's analysis of the Siward narratives than the rest of material featured in the monograph, because most of the stories related to Siward are obviously related to the actual Old-Norse Icelandic sagas, which, in turn, have much more distinctive genre features than suggested in the definition of saga quoted above.<sup>294</sup> This contradiction is resolved by leaving aside the complexity of the source material and regarding it as an integral body of material. Wright reads his material as '*disjecta membra* of a *Siwards saga* which must have been still current in Northumbria during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries' and consistently maintains that all the sources go back to a single text.<sup>295</sup> For example, the Siward narrative in *Gesta Antecessorum*, which Olrik divided into two parts, Wright finds 'complete in itself', which even strengthens the underlying idea that all the material we have is adaptation and quotation of some uniform text.<sup>296</sup>

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<sup>291</sup> Axel Olrik, 'Siward digri of Northumberland', *Saga-Book* 6 (1908-1909), 218

<sup>292</sup> Cyril Wright, *The Cultivation of saga in Anglo-Saxon England* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1939), 267.

<sup>293</sup> Wright viii.

<sup>294</sup> For a review of scholarly approaches to the problem of nomenclature in saga genres see, e.g., Stephen A. Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas and Ballads* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 9-31.

<sup>295</sup> Wright 129.

<sup>296</sup> Wright 132, 135. Olrik also seems to believe in the existence of a single 'Siwards saga', which he suggests it to be complex in terms of genre – 'half fictitious, half historical' (see Axel Olrik, 'Siward digri of Northumberland', *Saga-Book* 6 (1908-1909), 218).

Although this thesis has no aim to enter discussion on the putative Anglo-Saxon saga, it should be noted for a clearer picture of the material it is dealing with, that there is in fact little evidence of a lost text where all the surviving material on Siward once belonged. The two episodes in Henry of Huntingdon (last in the table), in connection with which the *disjecta membra* phrase was initially used, do not necessarily belong to an integral narrative that does not survive. They could be separate anecdotes that share the concept of honourable death and correspondingly characterise Siward's figure in common perception. These two stories tend to be used as a pair; for example, they appear in Holinshed's *Chronicles*, from which Shakespeare later adapted Siward's character for *Macbeth*, immediately one after the other, without any other substantial information about Siward. Although the evidence of such a late text can hardly throw light on the form in which the Siward material was transmitted in twelfth- to thirteenth-century Northumbria, it shows that no other source had provided Holinshed with more than Henry of Huntingdon had already in the twelfth century – *disjecta membra* of a narrative which may have existed as a unity, or may not.

Although Wright's work has been criticised for its methodological inconsistency, it established a general scholarly understanding of the Siward material, with Wright's arguments often taken for granted in a number of works in neighbouring fields.<sup>297</sup> Further contributions to the discussion, however, have been scarce, with a notable exception in the recent work of Eleanor Parker, who considered the hagiographical nature of the sources as well as their cultural-historical background in Medieval Northumbria and Yorkshire.<sup>298</sup> Her article provides a long-expected elaboration of *Vita Waldevi*'s literary and cultural background, including important points of contact with the tradition connected to Ragnarr lóðbrok and his sons, such as their possession of a raven-banner and, according to a redaction of the *Lund annals*, Ívar Ragnarsson's ability to transform into a polar bear--both motifs present, in some form, in *Gesta Antecessorum*. While Parker's article provides Wright's arguments with dialogue they had needed, both developing some of his points and criticising others, especially on the nature of the oral tradition that preceded *Vita Waldevi* and the time of its transmission.

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<sup>297</sup> Christine Rauer, *Beowulf and the Dragon: Parallels and Analogues* (Cambridge: D.S.Brewer, 2000).

<sup>298</sup> Eleanor Parker, 'Siward the Dragon-Slayer: Mythmaking in Anglo-Scandinavian England', *Neophilologus* 98:3 (2013), 481-493.

Most important for this thesis here is that the life of the Siward legend in Britain is a complicated matter and a subject of an ongoing scholarly debate. For this reason, it seems appropriate for this discussion to stay on relatively firm ground and take into consideration only the *‘fornaldarsaga’* part of *Gesta Antecessorum* as pinpointed by Olrik — starting with the account of Siward’s ancestry and ending with his encounter with the old man. This is a short fragment (about two pages of printed text) that survives in one manuscript, is written by a single hand and seems reasonably uniform in terms of genre, which gives to a non-Anglo-Saxonist the opportunity to throw some light on related Scandinavian material, despite the lack of scholarly consensus around the Siward legend as a whole.

The three episodes that constitute the fragment are the following:

- The legend about Siward’s lineage going up to a noble lady and a polar bear;
- Siward’s fight with a dragon (‘draco’) in Orkney;
- The Odinic old man’s gift and advice to Siward.

These will be looked at in the order in which they appear in the storyline, which also allows to lead the discussion from independent motifs to the broader Odinic theme. It will be argued that Siward’s bear ancestry establishes a *berserkr*/bear connection, which is then supported by the Odinic theme introduced in relation to an initiatory monster-fighting episode, which is followed by the meeting with a gift-bestowing, Odinic, old man. It is well-attested in scholarship that the first two elements of this list, namely the bear ancestry and the monster-fight, constitute the so-called Bear’s Son Tale (*das Märchen von Bärensohn*, as Friedrich Panzer first put it). Widely attested in different cultures, mostly European, this folktale plot features a hero who is born from a bear and a woman and, having grown up, kills a monster, usually with magical or other extraordinary weapon. It has been shown in chapter 3 how in *Hrólfs saga kraka* this folktale merges with the saga’s Odinic theme and the theme of *berserkir*, connecting this mythological imagery with Bear’s Son Tale through the figure of Bǫðvarr Bjarki. As will be subsequently shown, a similar confluence takes place in *Gesta Antecessorum*. The folktale material intertwines with saga imagery, and this phenomenon can shed light on the presence of the Odinic hero plot both on the British Isles and in the Scandinavian world.

## 2.7. Siward's bear ancestry

*Gesta Antecessorum* opens with an account of Earl Waltheof's ancestry, claiming that his family descended from a bear and woman of good birth. The narrative contains many elements that are important for the subsequent discussion, for which reason it will be wholly quoted:

Tradunt relationes antiquorum quod vir quidam nobilis, quem Dominus permisit, contra solitum ordinem humanae proganis, ex quodam albo urso patre, muliere generosa matre, procreati, [Ursus genuit Spratlingum, Spratlingus Ulsium; Ulsius Beorn, cognomento Beresune, hoc est *filius ursi*. Hic Beorn Dacus fuit natione, comes egregious et miles illustris. In signum autem illius diversitatis speciei ex patre generantium, produxerat ei natura paternas auriculas, sive ursi. In aliis autem speciei maternae assimilabatur. Hic [Beorn] autem,] post multas virtutis ac militae experientias, filium genuit fortitudinis et militiae paternae probum imitorem. Nomen autem huic Siwardus; qui, quasi supra se elatus prae gratia probitatis ei innatae, natale solum habuit contempui, patri suo jure hereditario succedere vilipendens, jussitque navem sibi magnam et fortem praeparari et bene muniri in cunctis necessariis, tam in armamentis navis quam in victuabilis et armamentis corpora humano congruentibus.

Ancient traditions tell us that a certain noble man, by the permission of God and contrary to the usual manner of the human race, was begotten of a white bear as his father, a woman of good birth being his mother: [Ursus begat Spratlingus, Spratlingus Ulsius, Ulsius Beorn, surnamed Beresune, which is 'Bear's son'. This Beorn was a Dane by race, a distinguished nobleman and a famous soldier. As a sign, however, of the difference of species on the part of those who were his progenitors, nature gave him his father's ears or those of a bear. In other respects, however, he resembled his mother's race. But he [Beorn]] after many trials of might and military service begat a son of courage and a worthy imitator of his father's prowess. His name was Siward; and he, as if elated above himself because of his inborn valour, held in contempt only his right of birth, thinking it of slight esteem to succeed his father by virtue of heredity, and ordered a large and strong ship to be prepared for him, well-stocked in all necessities both in armaments for the ship and victuals and equipment for the men.<sup>299</sup>

The traditional nature of this narrative is well-attested in scholarship — already in 1882 the Danish historian J.C.H.R. Steenstrup looked at *Gesta Antecessorum*'s parallels in respect to the bear origin myth,<sup>300</sup> and two decades later Axel Olrik provided the text with folktale parallels. Although Friedrich Panzer's fundamental study of the Bear's Son Tale does not feature *Gesta Antecessorum* or other Anglo-Latin sources, it gives a detailed overview of 202 folktale narratives of this type. Panzer's material has been used for analysis. For convenience, the relevant information will be compiled into a table and discussed below.

It should be noted that only saga-influenced Latin texts (*Vita et passio Waldevi*, *Gesta Herwardi* and *Gesta Danorum*) are present in the table alongside

<sup>299</sup> Wright's translation, see Cyril Wright, *The Cultivation of saga in Anglo-Saxon England* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1939), 129-130.

<sup>300</sup> J.C.H.R. Steenstrup, 'Nogle Undersøgelser om Sprakaleggs-Ætten', *Normannerne* (4 vols, Copenhagen, 1876-82), III, 437-440.

*Hrólfs saga kraka* because they belong to the literary-cultural field that is considered in this chapter. *Hrólfs saga kraka* was chosen for comparison for methodological reasons: this text has already been analyzed, the fusion of folktale and mythological imagery in it demonstrated, and, most importantly, this saga shows a very clear example of the Odinic hero complex. Texts that do not meet the research's requirements, either chronologically or because of questionable thematic parallelism, are not looked at here. Most importantly, the long and (to quote Magnús Fjalldal) frustrated scholarly debate on *Beowulf's* relation with the Bear's Son Tale and Scandinavian material (most importantly *Grettis saga*) will not be touched upon.<sup>301</sup> It is sufficient to keep in mind that the Bear's Son Tale is a widespread folktale plot, at least throughout Europe, that is also found in chronologically diverse sources — perhaps as early as in *Beowulf*. This means it could influence thirteenth- to fifteenth-century narratives both in Scandinavia and in the British Isles, either merging with them or co-existing as a parallel.

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<sup>301</sup> Magnús Fjalldal, *The Long Arm of Coincidence: the Frustrated Connection between Beowulf and Grettis saga* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998).

| Motif   | Gesta Antecessorum  | Gesta Danorum Book X   | Gesta Herwardi                                   | Hrólfs saga kraka and Bjarkarímur  | Bear's Son type folktales  |
|---|---|--|--|--|--|
| The hero descends from a bear and a woman   | Siward (in fourth generation)   | Sven Estridsson, Ulvo  | Biern, king of Norway; an unnamed bear monster   | Bǫðvarr bjarki / Bjarki  | The main character   |
| There are names in the lineage with an element meaning 'bear'                           | Beorn ('bear') Beresune ('bear's son'); Siward's historical son, Osbeorn, can be worked into the same paradigm. | Ulvo ('wolf') could be related: compare Ulsius ( <i>recte</i> Úlfr?) in Siward's genealogy. <sup>302</sup> | Biern ('bear')                                   | Bjarki ('bear-cub') is the character's name in <i>Bjarkamál</i> and <i>Bjarkarímur</i> and his cognomen in <i>Hrólfs saga</i> . In <i>Hrólfs saga</i> , his parents are called Björn ('bear') and Bera ('she-bear'). | The main character often has a name of this type (Bjardrengur, Peter Bær, Jean de l'urs, Giovanni dell' Orso)  |
| Characters who descended from the bear have physical animal traits, like a bear's ears. | Yes — bear's ears in Beorn Beresune   | No   | Only feet and head on the bear monster are human | In <i>Hrólfs saga</i> , Bǫðvarr's two brothers have monstrous/animal traits but Bǫðvarr is completely human. In <i>Bjarkarímur</i> , Bjarki has bear's ears.   | 'Half man, half bear' is a common formula to describe the main character, who may have both human and animal physical traits. <sup>303</sup> A number of folktales have the main character with a name meaning 'bear's ears', and/or it is indicated that he has bear's ears due to his origin. <sup>304</sup> |
| Warlike   | Extensively   | No   | The bear   | Bǫðvarr means  | Not known  |

<sup>302</sup> Timothy Bolton, 'Was the Family of Earl Siward and Earl Waltheof a Lost Line of the Ancestors of the Danish Royal Family?', *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 51 (2007), 53.

<sup>303</sup> See Friedrich Panzer, *Studien zur germanischen Sagengeschichte*, 2 vols (München: C.H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1912), I, 17 for a detailed review of this theme in folktale sources.

<sup>304</sup> For Olrik's review of this material against the *Gesta Antecessorum* background see Axel Olrik, 'Siward digri of Northumberland', *Saga-Book* 6 (1908-1909), 219.

|  |   |                            |   |   |  |
|--|---|----------------------------|---|---|--|
| traits of the character who descended from the bear are emphasized .                       | stressed in the quotation above.  |                            | monster is described to be intelligent ‘skilled in fighting’  | ‘warlike’, and this is the character’s main characteristic in the sources.  |  |
| The bear is killed, and the son violently avenges the father.                              | No, but Henry of Huntington depicts Siward’s violent act of vengeance for his son called Osbeorn. | Yes, Sven avenges the bear | Vengeance motif is present only thematically , not in the plot (the king does not allow Hereward to fight the bear) | Yes (Bǫðvarr kills Hvít).   | Sometimes; in other cases, the protagonist kills his father the bear |
| The character descended from the bear is a king or of royal blood.                         | Noble rather than royal – Siward becomes the Earl of Northumbria                                  | Yes (Sven)                 | Yes (Biern, king of Norway)   | Yes, Bǫðvarr’s grandfather is a king. Later Bǫðvarr is granted kingship in another country (motif reduplication typical of <i>Hrólfs saga</i> ) | Sometimes  |
| The main character leaves his homeland looking for fame although he could be a king there. | Yes — as indicated in the quotation   | No                         | No  | Yes, and again the motif is reduplicated  | Not known  |

Two important observations can be made from this table’s content. Firstly, there seems to be a strong connection between the sagas and the saga-influenced Anglo-Latin narratives on a thematic level, which makes these texts stand out against the folktale background. Secondly, there seems to be a specific connection between the accounts of *Gesta Antecessorum* and *Hrólfs saga kraka* since there are specific parallels between these texts that cannot be drawn elsewhere. The thematic connections will now be discussed in more detail below.

**Imagery of kingship and power.** Both the three saga-influenced Latin narratives and the account of Bǫðvarr’s career in *Hrólfs saga* revolve around the idea

of political power — to the extent in which a conventional *fornaldarsaga* narrative can explore this theme. As it can be seen from the table, all of the protagonists descended from royalty and/or become important chieftains. Moreover, the theme of kingship is further stressed in the cases when the character leaves his inherited throne for a heroic future (*Gesta Antecessorum*, *Hrólfs saga kraka* and, arguably, *Beowulf*). The folktales, by contrast, seldom feature characters with royal connections, and do not stress the theme of kingship even when the Bear's Son is related to nobility. This distinction can be naturally explained by genre difference between sagas and saga-like narratives similar to *Gesta Antecessorum*, which tend to build upon the imagery of power, and folktales, which often feature characters of humble origin. In sagas and saga-like narratives, the themes of kingship and power tend to revolve around the theme of martial prowess, which is a defining characteristic of a saga character inspired by Scandinavian war elites.

**Martial prowess and *berserkr* connotations in the protagonist.** First of all, it has to be noted that the Bear's Son Tale is, at the core, a monster-fighting tale that culminates in the protagonist's victory over a supernatural enemy. This suggests on itself that the character is physically strong and capable of fighting. It is evident, however, that the three Latin narratives as well as *Hrólfs saga kraka* take the theme of military skills and warlike characteristics much further than that, with the Latin narrative rhetorically stressing these qualities and *Hrólfs saga* giving the name Þǫðvarr ('warlike') to a character elsewhere known as Bjarki or Biarco. Þǫðvarr's ability to become a giant bear on the battlefield suggests that the concept of *berserkr* was easily read into bear ancestry stories at least in a saga context. The connection between the themes of bear origin and *berserkr* can be supported by the fact that, in relation to characters with bear ancestry, there is a tendency to use names related to wolves (Ulsius, Ulvo) alongside the more expected bear-names like Beorn, Biern, Bjarki etc. This may reflect the bear and wolf connections of *berserkir* and *úlfhéðnar* who are mentioned alongside each other in *Ynglinga saga*.

It can be seen that the parallels between *Gesta Antecessorum* and *Hrólfs saga kraka* are striking, especially for two texts created in such different cultural contexts, and surviving in manuscripts divided by almost five centuries. In fact, every detail from the list is shared by the two texts except for the vengeance story (which, in Siward's case, could be present in Henry of Huntington's account of Osbeorn's death scene, although this idea cannot not grounded well enough to become more than a

hypothesis). Most notably, in *Gesta Antecessorum* and *Hrólfs saga kraka* the bear origin narrative plays the same structural role — that of a starting point in a hero's journey, for the sake of which he abandons the kingship he had inherited, and by the end of which journey he finds himself at a king's court. Looking ahead, it is worth noticing that an initiatory monster-fight and an Odinic encounter are the main events of both heroes' career.

The possible connections of characters characterised as Odinic heroes with *berserkir* and *úlfhéðnar*, especially in the context of shapeshifting into bears and wolves, has been already observed in the analyses of *Hrólfs saga kraka* and *Völsunga saga* respectively. In the capacity of a yet unproved theory it may be noted that, considering the plots' obvious parallelism, the adjacency of bear names and wolf names fits into the *berserkir/úlfhéðnar* framework. At the same time, kingship and war are quite naturally two themes closely associated with Odinic heroes, who basically tend, with Óðinn's aid, to rise to kingship through war. Although saga literature tends to be concerned with power in general, the distinction is plausible. The Bear's Son folktale type is Indo-European and therefore universal, while the Odinic hero plot is, naturally, specifically Scandinavian; when the two themes interweave, the flexible folktale material acquires new ideological meaning. This hypothesis about the nature of Siward's youth narrative in *Gesta Antecessorum* derives quite naturally from the conclusions of chapters 2-5; this is, however, but a hypothesis until it is supported by the evidence of the further two episodes.

However, before these two episodes are considered, it has to be noted retrospectively that the bear-*berserkr* connection has for a long time been taken for granted in relation to literary material that involves bear-fighting or bear parentage. Due to *Gesta Antecessorum*'s apparent Scandinavian parallels, this attitude applied to the Siward's youth narrative as well, with an author of popular Yorkshire history suggesting already in 1865 that

[Siward's] grandfather was a Berserkir, i.e. one who fights in a Bear's skin, which originated the tale that he was himself descended from a bear; an imputation to which his pointed ears lent some apparent probability.<sup>305</sup>

From today's scholarly point of view, this notion, although an acceptable generalization in a popular work, is technically ungrounded. Firstly, the bear-*berserkr*

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<sup>305</sup> J.G. Miall, *Yorkshire Illustrations of British History* (London: Hall, Smart & Allen, Paternoster row, 1865), 103.

connection is still sometimes regarded as questionable itself; secondly and even more importantly, the mere fact of reference to bears in the plot, even in text evidently inspired by Scandinavian literature, would not necessarily mean that the concept of *berserkr* is implied there in any way, even less that a historical *berserkr* could ‘originate the tale’ of bear ancestry. Most likely, both Book X of *Gesta Danorum* and *Gesta Herwardi* testify to the fact that the bear ancestry plot must have been in wide circulation at least in Denmark. It is understandable, therefore, that the possible *berserkr* implications in the Siward story have not received much elaboration in scholarship, and Siward’s bear origin has been conceived up to today to vaguely ‘have some basis in pre-Christian Germanic origin myths in general’.<sup>306</sup> However, the Icelandic tradition of Odinic hero narratives, as shown in this thesis, shows too many points of contact with *Gesta Antecessorum* to be explained by accidental combination of similar motifs.

It has been mentioned that the structure of the Bear’s Son Tale suggests a monster-fight. In *Hrólfs saga kraka*, after leaving his kingdom in search of greater deeds, Þoðvarr defeats a dragon in Hleiðargarðr. It may be a coincidence or a matter of the audiences’ taste that Siward’s monster was also a dragon, which has also drawn associations with Sigurðr, Ragnarr and Beowulf’s dragons. The next section aims to put the short account of Siward’s fight with the dragon in Orkney into the same context as the ancestry story, and discusses this episode’s significance for the whole narrative.

### 3.1. The Orkney dragon

*Gesta Antecessorum*’s account of Siward’s fight with the dragon is very brief, yet it has, understandably, featured prominently in scholarly discussion. The narrative relates:

In insula autem illa habitabat draco quidam, qui erat non solum in bestiis, verum et in populo, strages maxima. Cujus fama ad aures Siwardi rerum gesta deferente, cum eo pugnam inire satagebat; non operas locans arenariorum more, sed robur corporis et animi virtutem in hoc declarans, eum devicit et ab insula effugavit.

In that island [Orkney], however, there was living a dragon, who was the cause of very great destruction not only among beasts but also among people. When the report of its doings

<sup>306</sup> Timothy Bolton, ‘Was the Family of Earl Siward and Earl Waltheof a Lost Line of the Ancestors of the Danish Royal Family?’, *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 51 (2007), 65.

reached the ears of Siward he was eager to engage it in combat; not hiring out his services in the manner of the combatant in the arena but in this demonstrating the strength of body as well as power of mind he overcame it and drove it in flight from the island.<sup>307</sup>

Wright considers a dragon-story to be ‘property of no country in particular’ and pays little attention to this episode,<sup>308</sup> expectably, numerous parallels have been drawn to this brief episode of some fifty words. The figures most commonly invoked are the famous dragonslayers of Old Icelandic tradition, Sigurðr Fáfnisbani and Ragnarr loðbrók. Both parallels can be, and have been, backed up by the accompanying material. In Sigurðr’s case, scholars have noted the cognation of the names Siward and Sigurðr. They suggested that the Orkney dragon parallels Fáfnir and the encounter with the Odinic old man parallels Sigurðr’s meetings with Óðinn (one attested in *Reginismál* and three in *Völsunga saga*). The Ragnarr loðbrók parallel was developed by Eleanor Parker’s insight into the parallels of the Siward legend with British material connected to the sons of Ragnarr; the most important of these are the presence of the raven-banner motif in both narratives, and Ívarr’s transformation into a bear (*Lund Annals*) that could, according to Timothy Bolton, be related to the bear origin myth. Together with the dragonfighting episode, this group of parallels could theoretically establish the two traditions as at least remote analogues. Finally, Bǫðvarr Bjarki’s dragon fight in Hleiðargarðr (*Hrólfs saga kraka*) has been mentioned as a possible analogue.

*Bǫðvars þáttr* shares with *Gesta Antecessorum* a number of important elements, such as the protagonist’s bear parentage and the nature of the defeated monster, which is, like Siward’s dragon, uncharacteristically land-attacking rather than treasure-keeping (more on that below). The most evident problem with the *Hrólfs saga kraka* episode is whether it can be identified as a dragon-fight at all: many scholars have argued that the dragon in *Bǫðvars þáttr* might be a late innovation, inspired by chivalric narratives with its fashion for winged monsters. According to this interpretation, the dragon in *Hrólfs saga kraka* took the place of a more traditional bestial monster killed by Bjarki in related narratives, namely a giant bear (*Gesta Danorum*) or a she-wolf (*Bjarkarímur*). In the same wave, Ludwig Olson has argued that Bǫðvarr’s dragon fight is modelled on the folkloric Yule troll fight, and the change of an actual troll for a winged ‘troll-dragon’ complies with the taste of

<sup>307</sup> Wright’s translation, see Cyril Wright, *The Cultivation of saga in Anglo-Saxon England* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1939), 130.

<sup>308</sup> Wright 134.

the time when the known form of *Hrólfs saga kraka* was written (3.2). The status of *Bǫðvars þáttr* in relation to *Gesta Antecessorum* has not been established consensually: most scholars briefly mention it, sometimes with reservations, without going into much detail and therefore suggesting that the parallels are determined by the presence of the same extremely widespread theme (dragon-fight or monster-fight). It does not help the discussion that, although a wide range of datings has been suggested for *Hrólfs saga kraka* (3.2), the earliest surviving manuscript is four centuries younger than the Douai manuscript containing *Vita Waldevi*.

Similar reservations can be made about the two other saga parallels, those with the two dragonslayings of the *Vǫlsung* legend. It has already been mentioned that both Fáfnir and Ragnar's dragon are passive, hoard-guarding monsters who are approached by the active heroes who aim to get the treasure. Although it is noted in *Ragnars saga* that the dragon has to be fed, which is a concern for jarl Herruðr, it does not actively attack land and people as happens in *Gesta Antecessorum*.

New light was thrown on the nature of this controversial episode of *Gesta Antecessorum* with Christine Rauer's *Beowulf and the Dragon*, where a chapter is devoted almost exclusively to Siward's dragon fight with some parallels from other post-Conquest English narratives.<sup>309</sup> Rauer demonstrates convincingly, on both thematic and phraseological levels, that the account of Siward's dragon-fight is in fact very similar to the hagiographical tradition of dragon-fighting. The following features are characteristic of this tradition. Firstly, as the formula suggests, the monster is usually a serpentine, winged, fire- or venom-breathing dragon, which is aggressive towards the population of a land and towards cattle. This is clearly the case with Siward but can be contrasted with Sigurðr Fafnísbani and Ragnar loðbrók, who fought passive, hoard-guarding monsters. For convenience, these two types of dragon-fighting will be further labelled *saint's life type* and *heroic type*, although Rauer does not call them that. Secondly, as Rauer notes, it is often the case in hagiographical narratives that a saint drives the dragon away from the land rather than kills it; this is also the case in *Gesta Antecessorum*, but quite uncharacteristic for a saga narrative. Rauer concludes that *Gesta Antecessorum* is 'a rare variant which combines the paradigm of The Bear's Son with a dragon-fight' that is, arguably, 'modelled partly

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<sup>309</sup> Christine Rauer, *Beowulf and the Dragon: Parallels and Analogues* (Cambridge: D.S.Brewer, 2000), 125-133.

on a hagiographical tradition, partly on Germanic legend'.<sup>310</sup> It seems safe to assume that the monster-fight has become a dragon-fight under the influence of a hagiographical tradition, which provided the story with material, but the structure has been defined by the Bear's Son Tale type.

Looking back at the bear origin story, one can see Siward's dragon-fight as a contamination of three large literary themes: the Bear's Son paradigm, which provides the story with the basic plot structure of bear origin and monster-fighting; the hagiographical dragonslaying tradition, which makes the monster a land-attacking dragon; and, finally and most importantly for this thesis, the Odinic hero complex characteristic of the Old Norse-Icelandic sagas. The Odinic hero complex links the bear origin story with *berserkr* and the concept of great martial ability, gives initiatory overtones to the monster-fight (which can be, or not be, a dragon-fight), and introduces an Óðinn-encounter into the story. The relation between these three large thematic trends is shown in the figure below.

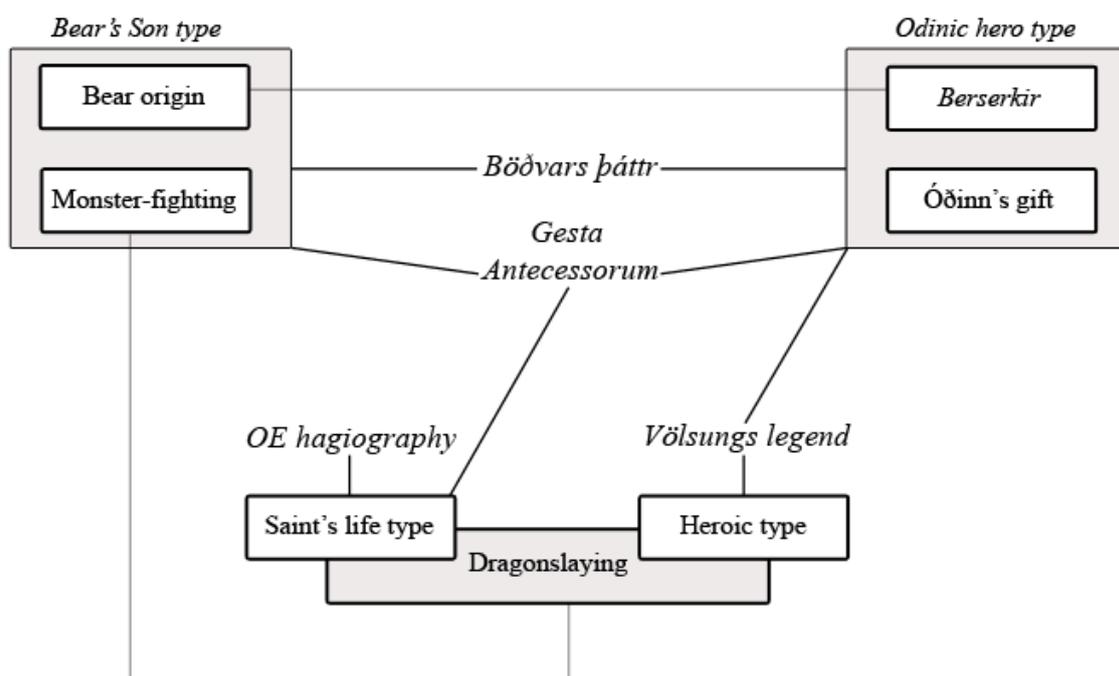


Figure 5. The parallels to *Gesta Antecessorum*

In this figure, grey lines show connections between themes and motifs that in general exist independently, but sometimes tend to merge in collective imagination. For

<sup>310</sup> Christine Rauer, *Beowulf and the Dragon: Parallels and Analogues* (Cambridge: D.S.Brewer, 2000), 131

example, the Bear's Son folktale type is found around the world without any connection to Óðinn, but in Scandinavian context it is easily worked into the Odinic hero narrative through correlation of the bear origin motif with a *berserkr's* bear nature, and the monster-fight, characteristic of this folktale type, with an initiatory fight that establishes the Odinic hero in his role. As shown in the figure, the image of Þoðvarr bjarki in *Hrólfs saga kraka* is the result of exactly this contamination. A similar merging appears in a paradigm that requires any monster-fight, and eventually this place is taken by a dragonslaying episode, even if the material is not initially associated with a dragon figure. The reasons for this interfusion may vary; in *Gesta Antecessorum* the dragon was most likely introduced, as shown by Christine Rauer, under the influence of hagiographical literature.

### 3.2. Conclusion on *Vita et passio Waldevi*

It is clear from Figure 5 that the nature of the monster defeated by the protagonist is not relevant to the study, and may be determined by many factors like the influence of hagiographical narratives. In the light of the many apparent similarities between *Gesta antecessorum* and *Hrólfs saga kraka*, it would be tempting to suggest that the dragon in *Þoðvars þáttr* is a close parallel to Siward's dragon, but there is too little material to back this hypothesis, and only a detailed further study of this particular case could support this argument or prove it wrong. Neither *Bjarkarímur* nor *Gesta Danorum* support the relation hypothesis as they mention a bear or a wolf as Bjarki's monsters. However, regardless of the possible parallelism between the Orkney and Hleiðargarðr dragons, important conclusions can be made confidently:

- The merging of the Bear's Son paradigm with the Odinic hero complex, found in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, is also attested in *Vita et passio Waldevi*, a thirteenth-century Anglo-Latin narrative influenced by a Scandinavian tradition.
- It is quite possible, in the light of the parallelism between sources, that *Vita Waldevi* and *Þoðvars þáttr* have a common origin that has been connected both to the Bear's Son Tale type and to some form of the Odinic hero complex.

There are reasons to assume, therefore, that the Odinic hero complex, more or less as it is present in *Völsunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka*, is at least older than the

thirteenth century. This is important because *Hrólfs saga kraka*'s dating is problematic (3.2), and further investigations could shed more light on it.

#### 4. GENERAL CONCLUSION ON THE LATIN SOURCES

The analysis of the two Latin sources that demonstrate the Odinic hero complex, namely the Hadingus sequence in *Gesta Danorum* and the account of Siward's early years in *Vita et Passio Waldevi*, has yielded two important parallels with saga literature that makes use of this complex. Firstly, the motif of initiatory blood-drinking, which is present in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, also attaches itself to Hadingus in *Gesta Danorum*, and it does so in a clearly Odinic context. The presence of the initiatory blood-drinking motif both in *Gesta Danorum* and in *Hrólfs saga* continues the long line of initiatory episodes connected to the Odinic hero complex. At the same time, the motif of blood-brotherhood in the Hadingus narrative evokes double protagonists in other considered narratives: Þóðvarr and Hjalti in *Hrólfs saga kraka* and Hjálmar and Oddr in the Sámsey complex. The connection between the Odinic old man and the blood-brotherhood of Hadingus and Liserus supports the hypothesis that both in *Hrólfs saga* and in the battle of Sámsey episode we are dealing with a distant reflection of an Odinic *Männerbund*. In a similar vein, the account of Siward digri's bear ancestry shows that *Vita et Passio Waldevi*'s source showed a close connection between *berserkir* and bestiality on the one hand, and the motif of Odinic hero plot on the other.

These two Latin sources drastically deepen the chronological perspective of this discussion. It is not mere speculation at this point that the Odinic/*berserkir* theme in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, technically a seventeenth-century text, may be very old: *Gesta Danorum* and *Vita et Passio Waldevi* prove that it is at least older than these two texts.

## GENERAL CONCLUSION

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In order to shed some light on what Stephen Mitchell calls ‘the relationship between the literary uses of Óðinn and the facts concerning the actual religious practices of pagan Scandinavia’, this dissertation considered the literary form of the *fornaldarsögur* that centre around heroic figures depicted as Óðinn’s protégés.<sup>311</sup> To formalise the discussion as well as the choice of material, the concept of the Odinic hero complex was introduced, which encompasses narrative structures, imagery and other material associated in the sagas with a protagonist helped and betrayed by Óðinn. This Odinic hero narrative has been looked at on the example of three *fornaldarsögur*, *Völsunga saga*, *Hrólfs saga kraka* and *Gautreks saga*, as well as learned Latin texts connected to saga literature. The analysis also relied on the evidence of saga narratives that do not explicitly demonstrate the complete Odinic hero complex as it is described in chapter 1, but contains significant thematic parallelism to the main sources; these secondary sources included *Hálfs saga ok hálfrekka*, *Qrvar-Odds saga* and *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*. The evidence shows that the plot about a hero who receives Óðinn’s help and gifts, performs great deeds thanks to this help, but then is betrayed by Óðinn and perishes, has been a staple of saga literature throughout centuries: it is attested to as early as in around 1400 in *Völsunga saga*, and is still popular throughout the seventeenth century where the earliest manuscripts of *Hrólfs saga kraka* belong. This timespan is significantly widened if the now lost early narratives, which influenced *Gesta Danorum* and *Vita et Passio Waldevi*, are also labelled as ‘sagas’. On the surface, this consistency seems to support the hypothesis that there is a more or less direct connection between the material contained in the ‘mythical-heroic sagas’ and their pre-Christian roots.

However, a comparative analysis of the sources that make use of the Odinic hero paradigm demonstrates that there is a substantial diversity between them on ideological and structural levels. Manuscript traditions behind the sagas and their relationships with sources and parallels contrast with each other as well. Curiously, the most crucial distinction can be drawn between *Völsunga saga* and the rest of the material. The most important points of contrast are given below.

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<sup>311</sup> Stephen A. Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas and Ballads* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 61.

Firstly and most importantly, the overwhelming majority of the texts that employ the Odinic hero complex revolve around the idea that the protagonist's relation to Óðinn is conflicted, dangerous and, in the end, fatal. The conflict with Óðinn tends to be the driving force of a narrative where Óðinn is physically present and plots against the hero, as it happens in *Hrólfs saga kraka* and in *Vikars þáttur* in *Gautreks saga*. The theme of resentment against Óðinn may be present on the thematic level in narratives where Óðinn does not participate in the action himself, but metonymically embodies death and defeat. This is the case in *Hálfs saga ok hálfrekka* and the Sámsey sequence found in *Qrvar-Odds saga* and *Hervarar saga*. The analysis of these three latter texts in chapters 4 and 5 demonstrated that both *Hálfs saga ok hálfrekka* and the battle of Sámsey complex are structurally and thematically related to *Hrólfs saga kraka*, and the concept of the band of *berserkir*, which either includes the protagonists or is opposed to them, is connected to the image of the malevolent Óðinn in all of these texts. It is shown in chapter 6 how the younger *Gautreks saga* works the themes of a warband of twelve and Óðinn as an enemy into the *Starkaðr* material, which clearly presents Óðinn as deceptive and evil. When set against this quite homogenous background, *Völsunga saga* stands out as very neutral in its attitude to Óðinn both from the author-compiler's point of view and in the characters' direct speech. As opposed to the dying Sigmundur's calm acceptance of the fact that Óðinn 'does not want [him] to wield his sword anymore', in similar situations we see Bǫðvarr's intention to crush Óðinn 'as a detestable little mouse', Innstein's wish to 'do Óðinn harm', and Qrvar-Oddr's detest of Valhǫll that is reinforced by his identity of a noble heathen and subsequently a Christian who is hostile to paganism in general and to Óðinn specifically. Except for *Völsunga saga* and the Latin non-saga sources, Óðinn is always represented as the Odinic hero's greatest enemy.

Scholars have described the pronouncedly negative attitude to Óðinn in *Hrólfs saga kraka* as Christian in its nature. Indeed, *Hrólfs saga kraka* demonstrates a very clear opposition between the diabolic pagan world and the idealised protagonists who, tragically, 'have no knowledge of [their] Creator'. It has been shown in chapter 3 how the last chapters of *Hrólfs saga kraka* gradually introduce the Christian theme into the narrative, first by playing with the connotations of the word *ferligr* and then making the definitive statement quoted above. However, this Christian theme is not explicit in the parallels to *Hrólfs saga kraka*, which also present Óðinn in a very negative way

and, more importantly, all contain the theme of a hero's enmity towards Óðinn. It is clear that *Hálfs saga ok hálfsrekka*, *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* and *Qrvar-Odds saga* are nevertheless products of Christian consciousness, and it must inevitably affect the way they represent Óðinn. *Völsunga saga*, however, was also been written between three and four centuries after the Conversion, and its analysis — both performed in chapter 2 of this dissertation and by much earlier scholars like Per Wieselgren — shows that it is a very untypical text, which is basically a rewriting of a manuscript similar to the *Codex Regius*, but with the Odinic theme heavily reinforced. To sum up, the theme of the Odinic hero's hostility towards Óðinn is a dominant one in the sagas that feature the Odinic hero at all. The odd example of *Völsunga saga* can be explained by the fact that its author-compiler was clearly trying to keep the narrative as close as possible to a collection of Eddic poems, and therefore could not bring into the saga new narrative paradigms that typically accompanied the Odinic theme.

Although the analysed sources are diverse ideologically, i.e. in how negatively they represent Óðinn-worship, there is a surprising homogeneity in terms of common motifs and imagery. Consistent with Jens Peter Schjødt's view of the Odinic hero, there is an initiatory pretext to virtually all analysed narratives except for the rather fragmentary *Sámsey* sequence. The initiatory theme tends to be very pronounced and clear. So, in *Hrólfs saga kraka* it is reduplicated for every champion (*Svipdagr*, *Bǫðvarr*, *Hjalti*) and then, via an Odinic encounter, for the whole warband and *Hrólfr kraki*. In *Völsunga saga*, initiation structures are repeated for *Sigmundur*, *Sinfjötli* and *Sigurðr*. Both in *Hrólfs saga kraka* and *Völsunga saga*, the themes of shapeshifting and blood-drinking are worked into the structures, and the evidence of *Hálfs saga ok hálfsrekka*, the *Sámsey* complex and *Gautreks saga* seems to prove Schjødt's hypothesis of a close connection between *berserkir*, *berserkir*-slaying, shapeshifting and slaying a monster as variants of an initiatory rite connected to Óðinn. The learned Latin material contains elements from the same semantic field. In the Hadingus narrative, *Gesta Danorum* presents the motif 'drinking the blood of a monster gives strength' through an Odinic old man's direct speech, evoking *Bǫðvarr* drinking *Elg-Fróði's* blood, *Hjalti* drinking the flying monster's blood and *Sigurðr* eating *Fáfnir's* heart. *Siward digri*, according to *Vita et Passio Waldevi*, shares the bear origin story with *Bǫðvarr*, which could suggest an association with *berserkir*. The analysis of other narratives where the bear origin story is used, supports this hypothesis.

Once again, however, the evidence of *Völsunga saga* is fundamentally

different from the other examples. Although it contains all of the elements of the complex, they are scattered around the narrative rather than represent a logical unity similar to the last two *þættir* of *Hrólfs saga kraka*, and, one could argue, often look as if they are worked into the narrative by the author-compiler rather than like a natural part of the tradition. Sigmundr and Sinfjötli's transformation into wolves is a clear example of such irregularity. Although this shapeshifting episode is routinely interpreted as a reference to *úlfhéðnar* and therefore a remnant of a very old initiation structure, the analysis shows that, most likely, it has been invented when the saga was being composed and written down. Furthermore, it has been shown in chapters 3 and 7 how the blood-drinking motif in the Odinic context tends to be associated with the theme of blood-brotherhood. The *Sámsey* sequence and *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana* support this tendency by presenting two closely connected protagonists as *berserkir*-slayers. However, the Sigurðr narrative lacks any connection to this group of motifs associated with the *Männerbund*, and it is most likely that the motif of eating Fáfnir's heart has always existed independently.

So, considering the findings of chapter 2 against the evidence received from the rest of the material, one will inevitably notice how *Völsunga saga*'s representation of Óðinn stands out. Surviving in but one copy, and strictly following a manuscript of the *Poetic Edda*, which was a close parallel to the *Codex Regius*, *Völsunga saga* is clearly a product of an antiquarian imagination that consciously constructs an image of heroic past determined by Óðinn's will. In this respect, *Völsunga saga* is a valuable document that demonstrates thirteenth-century attitudes to the earlier poetic tradition. This leads us to an important conclusion: the association between Óðinn, *berserkir*, shapeshifting and initiation structures is a concept not unconsciously transmitted since pre-Christian times, but understood and used by thirteenth-century authors.

An important layer of evidence, which has been only touched upon in this discussion, is the figure of Othinus in Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*. The scope of the dissertation allows for the comparative analysis of a part of the material that reflects the Odinic hero complex, but there are still many unanswered questions connected to Saxo's treatment of mythological and heroic material. A comparative study of the *fornaldarsaga* Óðinn and Saxo's Othinus, focused on Saxo's literary form and his use of rhetorical devices, would undoubtedly support some of this dissertation's findings and challenge others, as well as provide the scholarly discussion with a better understanding of Óðinn's image in Christian Scandinavia. That is, however, a

perspective for further work.

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