

Nornir in Old Norse Mythology

Karen Bek-Pedersen

PhD

The University of Edinburgh

2007



Declaration of Authorship

I hereby certify that I have written this thesis and that the work is entirely my own.
The work presented here has not been submitted for any other degree.

Abstract

The primary object of the thesis is to discuss a particular group of female supernatural beings called 'nornir' and their relationship to the Old Norse concept of fate. Although well-known and often mentioned in scholarship dealing with Old Norse culture, these beings are all too often dealt with in overly superficial ways. The research presented in the thesis seeks to go much deeper in order to properly understand the nature and role of 'nornir' in the Old Norse world view, and the conclusions reached importantly overturn a number of stereotypical conceptions that have long dominated our understanding of 'nornir'. The discussion of these beings fall into four main chapters:

- A discussion of the similarities and differences between 'nornir' and several other kinds of female supernatural beings.
- A discussion of certain symbolic aspects relating the dwelling place of the 'nornir' to their strongly feminine nature.
- A discussion of the well-established image in which fate is represented through different kinds of textile work, and the problems that surround this metaphor in the Old Norse sources.
- A discussion of the Old Norse vocabulary relating to fate and the quasi-legal aspects of the 'nornir'.

The thesis focuses on Old Norse culture and uses predominantly Old Norse source material. Comparative material, especially Celtic, Anglo-Saxon and Classical, is, however, employed when this is thought to be relevant.

For Derek,

Who would probably never have read it,
but who would have been so proud.

**Din sjæl
er
din skæbne.**

Karen Blixen

Contents:

Acknowledgements	1
Abbreviations	2
List of Manuscripts	3
List of Illustrations	5
I. Introduction	6
II. Sources	9
II.1. Edda	10
II.2. Snorra-Edda	12
II.3. Skaldic Poetry	13
II.4. Sagas	15
II.5. Other	17
II.6. Evaluation	18
III. Some Questions of Definition	20
III.1. Nornir, Dísir and Valkyrjur	20
III.1.1. Nornir	22
III.1.1.1. Nornir and Death	23
III.1.1.2. Nornir and Life	29
III.1.2. Dísir	38
III.1.3. Valkyrjur	45
III.2. More Supernatural Women	51
III.2.1. Mothers and Fylgjur	51
III.2.2. Swan Maidens?	53
III.3. Greek Moirai and Roman Parcae	58
III.4. Summary: Borderlines and Grey Areas	63
IV. The Women in the Well	66
IV.1. Urðr, Verðandi, Skuld	66
IV.1.1. The Names	66
IV.1.2. Three Nornir?	75
IV.1.3. Good and Evil Nornir?	79
IV.1.4. 'meyjar margs vitandi'	86
IV.2. Dark and Humid Places	92
IV.2.1. In the Water	92

IV.2.2. Below the Ground	100
IV.3. The Dyngja	108
IV.4. Summary: Fate Comes From the Well	119
V. Fate and Threads	122
V.1. Are the Spinning Nornir Just a Yarn?	122
V.2. Helgakviða Hundingsbana I	124
V.2.1. Threads and Space	131
V.3. Darraðarljóð	134
V.3.1. English and Irish Weaving	141
V.3.2. The Raven Banner	146
V.3.3. 'and ripped it apart'	151
V.4. Weaving Swords and Rolling Heads	152
V.5. Text and Textile	154
V.6. First Merseburg Charm	161
V.7. Katla, Gríma and Guðrún	165
V.8. Gender and Power	169
V.9. Summary: Tangled Threads	172
VI. Fate, Prophecy and Law	175
VI.1. Words for Fate	176
VI.1.1. English Words	176
VI.1.2. Old Norse Words	178
VI.2. Lög and Ørlög	183
VI.2.1. Secular and Religious Law	184
VI.2.2. Law and the Female	188
VI.2.3. Laying Down the Law	189
VI.3. Law-speaking and Málrúnar	192
VI.4. Vqlur and Nornir	195
VI.4.1. The Mysterious Staff-Carriers	196
VI.4.2. Vqlusþá and Urðar orð	199
VI.5. Baldr's Fate	209
VI.6. Summary: A Law of the Spoken Word	211
VII. Conclusions	214
Bibliography	218

Acknowledgements

I owe my gratitude to so many people, many more than I can mention here, for supporting and encouraging me throughout this project.

I am especially grateful to Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson for untiring support as well as valuable comments and suggestions, and I also want in particular to thank my supervisors, John Shaw and Emily Lyle, for their patience, tolerance, encouragement and not least faith in their assumption that I knew what I was doing.

Thanks is also due to Vilborg Daviðsdóttir for dedicated help with translations from Old Norse, to Chris Yocum for assistance with the Latin and Irish material, to Patricia Boulhosa for a thorough commentary and to Jens Peter Schjødt, John Lindow and Jürgen Einhoff for reading through the drafts of the thesis. I am further indebted to Ian MacKenzie for much guidance regarding the illustrations, and to everyone else who has been there for me at Celtic & Scottish Studies in Edinburgh as well as at Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi in Reykjavík.

I am grateful to Stofnun Árna Magnússonar for awarding me two grants that enabled me to spend time in Iceland in connection with my research.

Many thanks to Terry Gunnell without whose support I might never have finished this (and would certainly never have started on this); thanks for the time and inspiration – and for assuring me that ‘the norns have ways of getting at you!’ I would also like to thank Howie Firth and Eldar Heide for sharing many ideas with me, Rósa Þorsteinsdóttir for reminding me that I had enough to do with one PhD, and my dad for still allowing me home at Christmas.

A big ‘Thank you’ to Cuillin for being a friend, to Hamish and Freda for taking me out to play, to Erik and Marieluse for providing a study-proof retreat, and to everyone else who occasionally dragged me away from the books.

Lastly I would like to thank Bel for reading dictionaries with me into the wee, small hours, but mostly simply for being there – you were in my thoughts all the way through this and there you remain.

Abbreviations

AeW – Jan de Vries: *Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*

ATU – H-J Uther: *The Types of International Folktales* (numbers indicate tale-types)

ÁBM – Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon: *Íslensk Orðsifjabók*

C/V – Cleasby and Vigfusson: *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*

CSI – *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders I-V.*

DIL – *Dictionary of the Irish Language*

FSN – *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda I-IV.*

Frtz – Johan Fritzner: *Ordbog over det gamle norske Sprog I-III.*

IeW – Alexander Jóhannesson: *Isländisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*

ÍEO – Arngrímur Sigurðsson: *Íslenzk-Ensk orðabók*

ÍF – *Íslenzk Fornrit 1-35*

ÍS – *Íslendinga sögur 1-12*

KLE – *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda 2-5*

MS/MSS – manuscript/manuscripts

OED – *Oxford English Dictionary*

LP – Finnur Jónsson: *Lexicon Poeticum.*

Skj – Finnur Jónsson: *Den Norsk-Islandske Skjaldedigtning A I+II and B I+II.*

List of manuscripts

AM 45 fol c.1300-1325 / Codex Frisianus

AM 61 fol c.1350-1375

AM 122 a fol c.1350-1370 / Króksfjarðarbók

AM 132 fol c.1330-1370 / Möðruvallabók

AM 162 A δ fol c.1300

AM 162 A θ fol c.1250

AM 242 fol c.1350 / Codex Wormianus

AM 334 fol c.1300 / Staðarhólsbók

AM 285 4° c.1600-1700

AM 291 4° c.1275-1300

AM 448 4° c.1686

AM 468 4° c.1300-1325 / Reykjabók

AM 519 a 4° c.1280

AM 544 4° c.1300-1325 /Hauksbók

AM 556 a 4° c.1475-1500

AM 556 b 4° c.1475-1500

AM 557 4° c.1420-1450

AM 559 4° c.1686

AM 586 4° c.1450-1500

AM 593 a 4° c.1400-1500

AM 748 I 4° c.1300-1325

AM 748 I b 4° c.1300-1325

AM 748 II 4° c.1400

AM 757 a 4° c.1400

AM 166 b 8° c.1600-1700

DG 11 c.1300-1325

Gks 1005 fol c.1387-1395 / Flateyjarbók

Gks 1009 fol c.1275 / Morkinskinna

Gks 2365 4° c.1270 / Konungsbók

Gks 2367 4° c.1300-1350 / Codex Regius

Gks 2845 4° c.1450

Gks 2870 4° c.1300 / Gráskinna

Holm perg 6 fol c.1275

ÍB 226 4° c.1680-1700

Nks 1824 b 4° c.1400-1425

Trajectinus c.1595

Upps UB R 715 c.1650

List of Illustrations

- Fig.1: 'The Three Nornir', painting by J.L. Lund, 1777-1867. Reproduced from *Snorri Sturluson – Edda*. (2003:87).
- Fig.2: 'Nornir', tapestry by William Heinesen and Marianna Matras, 1970. Reproduced from *Snorri Sturluson – Edda*. (2003:81).
- Fig.3: Borgund runic inscription IV. Re-drawn from Olsen (1957:149).
- Fig.4: Schematic representation of a dyngja. Reproduced from Zimmermann (1982:129).
- Fig.5: Sorpe, 12th century Spanish icon of the Annunciation. Kindly provided by Florentina Badalanova-Geller.
- Fig.6: Schematic representation of plying, my drawing.
- Fig.7: Spinning with distaff and spindle. Drawing by Kate Sævvåg, reproduced from Hofseth (1990:103).
- Fig.8: Schematic representation of braiding, my drawing.
- Fig.9: Weaving tablets. Reproduced from Østergård (2004:113).
- Fig.10: Bayeux tapestry. Reproduced from Rud (2000:75).
- Fig.11: The Greenlandic skeið. Re-drawn from Roussel (1941:276; cf. Østergård 2004:57).
- Fig.12: Överhogdal tapestry, weave II. Reproduced from Fitzhugh and Ward (2000:60-61; cf. Horneij 1991:18).
- Fig.13: Oseberg tapestry. Reproduced from Fitzhugh and Ward (2000:80).
- Fig.14: Upper Rhenish Master c.1400, icon of the Annunciation. Kindly provided by Florentina Badalanova-Geller.
- Fig.15: Rila Monastery, 19th century Bulgarian icon of the Annunciation. Kindly provided by Florentina Badalanova-Geller.
- Fig.16: Spinning with distaff and spindle. Re-drawn from Embla Ýr Bárudóttir and Ingólfur Örn Björgvinsson (2004:47).
- Fig.17: Spinning nornir, drawing by Ernst Hansen, 1925. Reproduced from Hansen (1925:65).

I. Introduction

The thesis concerns the *nornir* in Old Norse mythology and its aim is to provide a better understanding of the role played by *nornir* and other beings like them. Although the *nornir* are well known, even to people who have only a superficial knowledge of Old Norse mythology, there is as yet no in-depth discussion of them available amongst the literature dealing with Old Norse beliefs. This thesis is an attempt to redress that situation.

I came upon the topic some five years ago when I was asked to give a talk about fate in Old Norse beliefs. It surprised me to find how little had been said specifically about *nornir* – a few pages here and there, mostly in books of a general nature, and scholars on the whole seemed satisfied to go over the same few features that others had already gone over. This made me wonder whether there would not be more to say about *nornir* if one looked at them in detail. Would there really be nothing but the stereotypical three *nornir* who spin? I decided to find out, and what follows is the result of my research.

Nornir are not prominent figures in Old Norse mythology. Turning up only a handful of times, they remain shadowy background figures and most of their appearances consist of brief references to their secretive dealings behind the backs of human beings. We rarely get clear presentations of what *nornir* really are, but we do see enough of them to understand that they played a role in people's conceptual world at the time. They are there, looming somewhere in the background, intangible and mostly out of focus – intriguingly difficult to grasp hold of. This means that it is also difficult to obtain a clear focus for a full discussion of all references to *nornir*.

By necessity, I discuss a range of other beings and characters who in some way or other overlap with *nornir*, most of which deserve much more attention than I am able to devote to them here. My focus has been on the *nornir*, which means that other beings are discussed predominantly in relation to them rather than in their own right.

From the outset, three specific questions have been fundamental to my research:

- 1) Why is fate so often feminine?
- 2) What is the connection between *nornir* and spinning?
- 3) What do *nornir* actually do?

These questions have provided the framework for the thesis from the beginning but have not been allowed to constrain the research where sources seem to categorise material differently or present material that is of a different nature. I try

to make the discussions clear and systematic but also realise that I am unable to introduce perfect consistency; discussions are guided primarily by topic rather than by a desire to discuss text passages in full before moving on. This approach naturally has disadvantages as well as advantages, but that would be the case with any approach. I have thus largely let my initial questions subdivide the discussions for me; as a result of this, the thesis falls into four main chapters, each dealing with certain aspects of the *nornir*. They are preceded by a discussion of the source material in Chapter II.

Chapter III: 'Some Questions of Definition' discusses *nornir* according to mentions of them in skaldic and heroic poetry, but in particular it concerns similarities and differences between *nornir* and other groups of beings like them, especially *dísir* and *valkyrjur*, along with shorter discussions of *fylgjur* and ancestress figures.

Chapter IV: 'The Women in the Well' concentrates predominantly on the references to *nornir* found in *Völuspá* and *Snorra-Edda* but also once again looks at related supernatural beings. A central theme is the place of origin of the beings involved, and this chapter also suggests a reason why the concept of fate has such a strong tendency to be portrayed in feminine guise.

Chapter V: 'Fate and Threads' explores the well-established image of fate represented through spinning and weaving. It is found that the Norse material itself provides very few examples of supernatural textile workers, and the discussion centres on whether this image was native to Norse tradition and how it relates to *nornir*.

Chapter VI: 'Fate, Prophecy and Law' delves into the relationship between *nornir* and *vǫlur* and also discusses their connections to issues of law and the spoken word. The notion that fate, represented by *nornir*, can be likened to a kind of law is discussed here, as are the etymologies of various words surrounding the concept of fate in Old Norse.

Chapter VII contains the concluding remarks.

As suggested above, the four main chapters of the thesis treat subject areas that intertwine in numerous ways; I have attempted to establish a clear focus for each chapter, yet allowing overlaps where these seemed unavoidable.

Quotations from the *Edda* follow Neckel 1936, and those from *Snorra-Edda* follow Faulkes 1982 and 1998; chapter numbering of *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldskaparmál* follow Faulkes 1982 and 1998 respectively. Where nothing else is stated, translations

are my own. For eddic poems my starting point has always been Carolyne Larrington's translation (1996) but in most cases I have felt the need to make some changes to the passages I quote. For skaldic poetry, *Den Norsk-Islandske Skjaldedigting* and the Skaldic Project home page: <http://skaldic.arts.usyd.edu.au/db.php> have been my starting point, although translations have been checked and amended when this was thought to be necessary. When possible, I quote from editions of texts that contain the relevant poetry.

As English is the primary language of this thesis, all quotations in languages other than English appear also in translation. Old Norse words are used for several concepts and beings as suitable English equivalents are often difficult to come by.

Old Norse distinguishes between q and \emptyset ; modern Icelandic uses \ddot{o} for both.

II. Sources

Dealing with *nornir* means working primarily, although not exclusively, with literary sources. The present topic is the nature of *nornir* within Old Norse¹ mythology and beliefs – that is, the ‘old *nornir*’ – but it is evident that the term ‘*nornir*’ can refer to quite different types of beings depending on the dates and contents of the manuscripts; not all *nornir* are mythological *nornir*. Although it must be granted that it is not the date of the manuscript but the date of its contents that is relevant, there are strong indications, as will become clear below, that generally speaking *nornir* referred to in manuscripts later than c.1400 are of a somewhat different nature from those in earlier manuscripts. These beings undergo some development from their earliest appearances in eddic and skaldic poetry and into later medieval texts.

This means that understanding the nature of the different poems and texts that mention *nornir* is of some importance. Some of these might be as early as 900AD (Dronke 1969:42-45, 214-217; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1962:406) whereas others are close to 1200 (Dronke 1969:111; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1962:528), though none were written down until 1300 or later, leaving some 400 years or more during which people might have changed their ideas many times over about what *nornir* are, what they do and what they represent.

In modern Icelandic, two types of *nornir* can be distinguished from one another in the words *örlaganornir* ‘fate-*nornir*’ and *galdranornir* ‘witch-*nornir*’ or *töfranornir* ‘sorceresses’ (ÍEO:235, 812, 919) and this is a useful distinction roughly corresponding to ‘old *nornir*’ who deal with fate and ‘modern *nornir*’ who are more concerned with witchcraft and magic. It should be made clear that the thesis concerns *örlaganornir*. No doubt interesting insights can be gathered from looking at what the idea of a *norn* developed into but I am more interested in what it developed from. In addition to *nornir*, the word *urðr* will be treated as a central concept due to the close semantic links between *nornir* and *Urðarbrunnr* (see IV.2.1.) and because *urðr* is at times employed directly as a name of one of the *nornir* or as a word almost synonymous with the word *norn* (see III.1.1.2. and IV.1.1.).

This chapter discusses the sources that refer directly to *nornir* and which must therefore be regarded as the main sources, that is, texts that employ the words *norn*

¹ By Old Norse I mean pertaining to the Scandinavian cultural area during the period roughly 800-1200AD. I use the term Scandinavian in a linguistic sense, covering the areas where Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, Icelandic and Faroese are the dominant languages.

and *urðr* or any forms thereof. Relatively few texts contain these words and those of significance to the arguments presented in the thesis have been listed below.

Most of the literature relevant to the present exploration stems from medieval Iceland. The vast majority of references to *nornir* occur in the *Poetic Edda* (referred to here as *Edda*), *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar* (referred to here as *Snorra-Edda*) and skaldic poetry. *Íslendingasögur* (Sagas of Icelanders), *Konungasögur* (Sagas of the Kings) and *fornaldarsögur* (Legendary Sagas) are also relevant but mostly in less direct ways.

II.1. Edda

The *Edda* is an anonymous collection of Old Norse mythological and heroic poetry found in a number of different manuscripts. The earliest preserved manuscript, Gks 2365 4° or *Konungsbók*,² is from c.1270,³ but the *Edda* is also preserved in AM 544 4° or *Hauksbók*⁴ c.1300-1325, and parts of it in the MSS AM 748 I 4° c.1300-1325; AM 242 fol c.1350; Gks 1005 fol or *Flateyjarbók* c.1387-1395 and others.

In editions of the *Edda*, the poems generally follow the order in which they appear in the *Konungsbók* MS⁵ with the mythological ones coming before the heroic ones; additionally, a number of poems considered eddic in nature although not found in *Konungsbók* are often included in modern editions of the *Edda*: *Baldurs draumar* (AM 748 I 4°), *Rígsþula* (AM 242 fol.), *Hyndluljóð* (*Flateyjarbók*), *Grottasöngur* (Gks 2367, 4° c.1300-1350) and sometimes also *Grógaldur* and *Fjölsvinnsmál*. These last two poems (sometimes regarded as one, under the title *Svipdagsmál*) are preserved only in paper manuscripts from the 17th century (Gísli Sigurðsson 1998:419),⁶ and they have been disregarded by many scholars as too late to be considered of value to studies of the *Edda*. However, I have chosen to include *Fjölsvinnsmál* and other late material as a valid sources for the present study, based on the arguments presented by Heide (1997).

The *Edda* is invaluable to our understanding of Old Norse mythology. It contains poems about ancient heroes, the beginning and end of the world, the heathen gods,

² By *Konungsbók* (also known as *Codex Regius*) I mean specifically Gks 2365 4°; other parts of *Codex Regius* will be referred to by their numbers.

³ All MS dates (except for *Konungasögur*) are from *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog* (1989).

⁴ By *Hauksbók* I mean specifically AM 544 4°; other parts of this collection will be referred to by their numbers.

⁵ See *Codex Regius* 1937 for this; the order is different in other MSS.

⁶ See Gísli Sigurðsson 1998:xii for an overview of which eddic poems occur in which MSS.

their adventures and interactions with other kinds of beings; but the number of stories about the gods was never finite and the *Edda* is not a holy book like the *Bible*. In the oral tradition that went before the *Edda*, there would have been variant versions of any one story with each storyteller telling it in their own way to suit each new occasion (Harris 1985:111-116; McKinnell 1994:22-27; Gunnell 1995:182). In this way the stories did not necessarily have one solid form. They received their exact shape only as they were being told and this might have been a slightly different shape every time. Over time, stories are likely to have changed, migrated, been adapted, have taken on board new ideas as well as preserved or dropped old ones and, alongside this, new stories could always be added to the repertoire (McKinnell 1994:20-27). Influences from other places probably came in during all stages of both pre-Christian and Christian beliefs through trade, travelling and general interaction between different areas and cultures. We should not imagine that Old Norse mythology was static; culture is a continuous process rather than a finished product.

The *Edda* presents us with a number of stories that seem to contain narrative motifs and linguistic forms from various periods of time, which means that they are difficult to date precisely. Although language can be dated to certain periods, this tells us little about the age of the contents of a given story and discussions about the age of eddic poems are ongoing. The stories that have been preserved may be but a fraction of what once existed – we will never know how much has been lost.⁷

Eddic references to *nornir* are the following:⁸

Nornir:

Helgakviða Hundingsbana I 2-4 – Nótt varð í bæ, nornir kvómo

Helgakviða Hundingsbana II 26 – þó kveð ek nökkvi nornir valda

Reginismál 2 – aumlig norn skóp oss í árdaga

Fáfnismál 11 – Norna dóm þú munt fyr nesiom hafa

Fáfnismál 12 – hveriar ro þær nornir, er nauðgonglar ro

Fáfnismál 13 – Sundrbornar miðk segi ek at nornir sé

Fáfnismál 44 – fyr skopom norna

Sigrdrífumál 17 – á nornar nagli

Sigurðarkviða in skamma 7 – líótar nornir skópo oss langa þrá

⁷ Further on eddic poetry, see Harris 1983 and 1985; Jónas Kristjánsson 1988; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1962; McKinnell 1994; Fidjestøl 1999; Gunnell 2005; Clunies Ross 2005.

⁸ Numbers following titles of poems indicate which stanza is discussed; following titles of prose texts numbers indicate chapters, page numbers in specific editions follow in brackets.

Guðrúnarkviða II 38 – Svá mik nýliga nornir vekia
Atlakviða 16 – nái nauðfqlva létir nornir gráta
Guðrúnarhvöt 13 – grqm vark nornom
Hamðismál 29 – grey norna
Hamðismál 30 – kveld lifir maðr ekki eptir kvið norna
(All in *Konungsbók*.)

Urðr:

Völuspá 19 – Urðar brunni
Völuspá 20 – Urð héto eina
Hávamál 111 – Urðar brunni at
Sigurðarkviða in skamma 5 – gengo þess á milli grimmar urðir
Guðrúnarkviða II 21 – þat var um aukit urðar magni
Grógaldr 7 – Urðar lokur
Fjolsvinnsmál 47 – Urðar orði
(All, except the last two, are in *Konungsbók*.)

II.2. Snorra-Edda

Snorra-Edda is somewhat different in nature from the *Edda*, although it treats some of the same material. It is ascribed to Snorri Sturluson who supposedly wrote it down around 1220 (Gunnell 2005:83), but the earliest surviving MSS date from the 14th century (Faulkes 1993:601).⁹ *Snorra-Edda* is a sort of handbook of Old Norse poetics that falls into four parts: *Prologue*, *Gylfaginning* ('The Delusion of Gylfi'), which retells a lot of mythological tales, *Skáldskaparmál* ('The Language of Poetry'), which discusses various poetic forms, and *Háttatal* ('List of Verse Forms'), a poem in praise of king Hákon and Skúli hertogi. *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldskaparmál* are particularly relevant here. Three MSS contain the complete *Snorra-Edda*: DG 11 c.1300-1325, Gks 2367 4° c.1300-1350 and AM 242 fol c.1350. It also exists in the later *Codex Trajectinus*, c.1600 though probably copied from an earlier MS (Faulkes 1982:xxix). Three other MSS contain parts of *Snorra-Edda*: AM 748 Ib 4° c.1300-1325, AM 748 II 4° c.1400 and AM 757 a 4° c.1400.¹⁰

⁹ The idea that Snorri was the author, which goes largely unquestioned in scholarship, is based on a comment in DG 11 (Faulkes 1987:vi; Krömmelbein 1992:113); for the purposes of this thesis I will assume that he was indeed the original author.

¹⁰ Generally speaking, modern editors of *Snorra-Edda* silently correct and amend the text from various MSS.

This is a valuable source for Old Norse mythology because Snorri's intention with his book was to preserve knowledge of the old vernacular poetry for young poets (Faulkes 1982:xvii; Krömmelbein 1992:113). In particular, he goes some way to explain several *kenningar* or poetic metaphors by telling the stories behind them (in *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldskaparmál*), and in many cases we would not otherwise have been able to understand what these *kenningar* refer to nor would we have known the stories. *Snorra-Edda* is not, however, an uncomplicated source because, although it preserves much knowledge about heathen matters, it was set down by a Christian over two centuries after Christianity became the state religion of Iceland in 999 or 1000 (Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999:9-10). This means that we are getting an outsider's view – Snorri did not have direct contact, so to speak, with his material as it had been handed down to him through an increasingly thick layer of Christianity. At times, it becomes evident that Snorri is rationalising his material, organising it into systems that fit in with his own way of thinking without necessarily representing any kind of heathen system. This is something to be aware of – that Snorri may have put his material together in a way which is radically different from how it was conceived of two or three centuries before him (Faulkes 1982:xxvii). The sensible approach to *Snorra-Edda* is a critical one.¹¹

Snorri's mentions of *nornir* are these:

Nornir:

Gylfaginning 15 – þær kǫllum vér nornir. Enn eru fleiri nornir

Gylfaginning 15 – góðar nornir ok vel ættaðar skapa góðan aldr

Gylfaginning 36 – norn in yngsta er Skuld heitir

Urðr:

Gylfaginning 15 – brunnr sá er mjök er heilagur er heitir Urðar brunnr

Gylfaginning 16 – þær er byggja við Urðar brunn

Gylfaginning 16 – Fuglar tveir fæðask í Urðar brunni

II.3. Skaldic Poetry

Skaldic poems were composed by poets of the Viking and early medieval period, c.800-1300, of whom we often know both their names and roughly when they lived and died. These differ from eddic poems by being non-anonymous and occasional rather than traditional (Frank 1985:159; cf. Turville-Petre 1976:xvi-xvii). The poems

¹¹ Further on *Snorra-Edda*, see Faulkes (1982, 1987, 1993, 1998); Krömmelbein 1992; Úlfar Bragason 1992; Guðrún Nordal 2001.

that survive were preserved in oral memory, sometimes for centuries, before being committed to writing. Although the tight rules of composition for skaldic poetry, such as alliteration, rhyme and metre serving as an *aide mémoire* (Clunies Ross 2005:13-39; Jónas Kristjánsson 1988:84-88) must have helped to preserve many original features, we should not assume that we have the words exactly as the poet himself composed them (Jónas Kristjánsson 1992:109).

Skaldic poems are found in a variety of manuscripts as they have not been written down purely for their own sake but as parts of longer narratives. In *Skáldskaparmál*, Snorri mentions a number of skaldic verses and stanzas as evidence for the use of certain *kenningar*, but he also quotes some poems of specifically mythological interest in full, or at least extensive, forms. Others are found in manuscripts of *Konungasögur* and *Íslendingasögur* where they are often presented as spoken by the poets themselves in the context where they supposedly composed them.

Two very recognisable features of skaldic poetry are the language of *kenningar* or poetic metaphors and the extensive use of *heiti* or synonyms (Frank 1985:163-172). *Kenningar* can be relatively simple, as in referring to gold as 'Freyia's tears'. For this, we need to know that Freyia was said to weep tears of gold. But they can also be very dense, as in referring to gold as 'Fróði's servants' seed', where we have to know not only who Fróði was (a legendary king said to have lived during a period of great prosperity; *Skáldskaparmál* 43) but also who his servants were (two maidens descended from the *jǫtnar*, the traditional adversaries of the Old Norse gods; these maidens were the only ones that could work Fróði's magical mill) and what their seed was (the gold that the mill would grind out). (Both *kenningar* found in *Skáldskaparmál* 44.) Poets at the time seem to have had a fondness for thinking out complex *kenningar* with which to replace several nouns in the same stanza so that it is not unusual to get a whole string of such pieces of circumlocution, all following each other and all intertwining into one greater meaning. Similarly, the use of *heiti* serves to make the poetry less than easy to grasp, for example in the rather extensive lists of alternative names for Óðinn: Grímr, Gangleri, Bǫlverkr, Saðr, Fiǫlnir and many more (*Gylfaginning* 20; *Grímnismál* 47).

The impression left by such poetry is of a certain register of speech almost akin to a code language where only those who were initiated in the craft could

understand what was being said. We understand many *kenningar* because we know the stories behind them, but many remain unintelligible, too.¹²

Also relevant are the *pulur*. These are essentially metrical lists of names and words that supplement the section on *heiti* at the end of *Skáldskaparmál*, including lists of names and synonyms for man, woman, bird, ship, sword, *jǫtunn* and so on. The term *pulur* (f. pl.) is related to *pulr* (m. sg.), a word used in poetry to denote a wise man or poet (LP:650). The *pulur* preserved in *Snorra-Edda* vary between the different MSS.¹³

Nornir occur in the following pieces of skaldic poetry:

Nornir:

Ynglingatal 24¹⁴ – norna dóms (AM 45 fol c.1300-1325)

Torf-Einarr – rétt skiptu því nornir (AM 45 fol c.1300-1325 and others)

Hallfreðr – fornaldin skǫp norna (*Möðruvallabók* c.1330-1370 and others)

Kveldúlfr – norn erum grimm (AM 162 A ð fol c.1300 and others)

Egill – nesta norn (AM 162 A θ fol c.1250 and others)

Krákumál 24 – fár gengr of skǫp norna (Nks 1824 b 4° c.1400-1425)

Sólarljóð 51 – á norna stóli (AM 166 b 8° c.1600-1700 and others)

Ólafsdrápa Tryggvasonar 18 – skjaldar norn

pulur – Nornir heita þær es nauð skapa (*Skáldskaparmál* 75)

Urðr:

Eilífr – sunnr at Urðar brunni (*Skáldskaparmál* 52)

Kormákr – komsk Urðr ór brunni (*Skáldskaparmál* 49)

II.4. Sagas

Íslendingasögur and sagas in general are a different kind of source altogether. *Nornir* make extremely few appearances in the prose texts of the sagas, as is the case for similar supernatural beings. Nonetheless, the sagas contain much material that is relevant for an understanding of the culture that produced the concept of *nornir* in the first place, and for this reason they are important to the present exploration.

The word 'saga' covers a wide range of narrative styles, from historically realistic descriptions of people in recognisable environments to the more fantastic expeditions

¹² Further on skaldic poetry, see Jónas Kristjánsson 1988; Clunies Ross 1987 and 2005; Guðrún Nordal 2001; Frank 1985; O'Donoghue 2005; Whaley 2005; Turville-Petre 1976.

¹³ Further on *pulur*, see Gurevich 1992; Simek (1993:331-332); Halvorsen 1976.

¹⁴ I follow the stanza numbering from the Skaldic Project homepage.

into mythical lands inhabited by supernatural creatures of various kinds. Of greatest interest for this thesis are *Íslendingasögur*, most of which were written down during the 13th and 14th centuries but which purport to describe the period from the settlement of Iceland until Christianity was accepted there, late 9th century until c.1100 (Vésteinn Ólason 1998:17-37; Jónas Kristjánsson 1988:203-298);¹⁵ and also *fornaldarsögur*, which were generally written down during later centuries, 14th and 15th, but tell legendary stories of great heroes from the ancient past often based on material similar to that of the heroic poems in the *Edda* (Torfi H. Tulinius 2005:449).¹⁶ Whereas the *Íslendingasögur*, with moderate amounts of supernatural elements, give believable accounts of Iceland and its inhabitants during the country's early history as well as accounts of events that take place in mainland Scandinavia¹⁷ and the British Isles, *fornaldarsögur* delve into much more fantastic accounts of superhuman heroes from bygone eras, their journeys into otherworldly places and meetings with trolls, giants, elves and the like. Both types of stories can tell us something about the customs and beliefs of the heathen past of Scandinavia, but it must also be said that information given in *fornaldarsögur* should generally be taken with a pinch of salt somewhat larger than that needed for *Íslendingasögur*. The former are much further removed from their material than are the latter, and so there are many centuries of imagination between what may once have happened to give rise to a story and the form of the extant saga. But neither is there any guarantee that information presented in *Íslendingasögur* can be taken completely at face value just because it asks us to do that.¹⁸

Sturlunga saga is also relevant. It is a compilation of sagas that deal with the events taking place in Iceland during the 12th and 13th centuries, a period of great political upheaval on a national scale that resulted in the loss of Icelandic independence to the Norwegian crown in 1262-64 (Úlfar Bragason 2005).¹⁹

References to *nornir* in sagas are the following:

Nornir:

Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks 19 – illr er dómr norna (Upps UB R 715 c.1650)

¹⁵ Further on *Íslendingasögur*, see Meulengracht Sørensen 1983; Miller 1990; Clover 1985; Gísli Sigurðsson 2002.

¹⁶ Further on *fornaldarsögur*, see Torfi H. Tulinius 2002; Jónas Kristjánsson (1988:341-362).

¹⁷ By Scandinavia I mean Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Iceland and the Faroe Islands and by mainland Scandinavia I mean Denmark, Norway and Sweden.

¹⁸ Whenever possible, *Íslendingasögur* and *Konungasögur* will be quoted from the ÍF series. *Fornaldarsögur* are quoted from FSN unless otherwise stated.

¹⁹ Further on *Sturlunga saga*, see Jónas Kristjánsson (1988:188-202).

Norna-Gests þáttir 11 – in yngsta nornin (Gks 1005 fol c.1387-1395)

(Both are *fornaldarsögur*.)

Urðr:

Eyrbyggja saga 52 – urðarmáni (AM 448 4^o c.1686; copy of the *Vatnshyrna* MS, apparently c.1390-1425, that burnt in 1728)

(One of the *Íslendingasögur*.)

Íslendingasaga 286 [141; 136] – Urðr mun eigi forðask (AM 122 a fol c.1350-1370)

(From *Sturlunga saga*.)

II.5. Other

In addition to the extant Icelandic literature, many other sources relating to the Old Norse conceptual world exist. I will not discuss all of them in detail here as they are not all of equal relevance to a study of *nornir*. Some, however, should be mentioned.

From the Danish area, we have the work of Saxo Grammaticus who was a clerk to archbishop Absalon in the latter part of the 12th century (*Saxo Grammaticus* 1979:4). Saxo was an educated man whom King Valdemar 1st den Store and archbishop Absalon commissioned to write a history of the Danish people. His work is generally known as *Gesta Danorum* ('The Deeds of the Danish People'), although we do not know what he himself called it.²⁰ The first half of Saxo's book is interesting for the legendary history of Scandinavia that it gives; the latter half is a more historically reliable account of the early medieval kings of Denmark covering the period until the reign of Knud 6th Valdemarsen began in 1182.

Saxo's style shows that he was well versed in Roman literature (Petersen and Andersen 1929:75-77). He wrote in Latin, the language of the church, and therefore beings such as *nornir* are referred to under Latin terms; in effect, this means that it is often difficult to know exactly what Saxo is speaking of.²¹

Another interesting historical source is Adam of Bremen's *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen* from c.1074 (*Adam af Bremen* 2000:10), also in Latin. This survives in a number of MSS from c.1200 (*Adam af Bremen* 2000:38-39).

²⁰ The only surviving MS of the complete work is a version printed in Paris in 1512; exactly how much is Saxo's own and how much might be the work of later editors is somewhat uncertain (Boserup 1981:9-11).

²¹ Further on Saxo, see Friis-Jensen (1981, 1987, 2000); Boserup 1980; *Saxo Grammaticus* 1979 and 1980.

In Book Four of his work, Adam describes some heathen rituals supposedly taking place in Uppsala but whether his is a first-hand account is somewhat uncertain. Moreover, as a good Christian church historian, Adam is more keen to make clear how horrible the heathen traditions are than to understand exactly what they consist of.²²

Also of some relevance is the Roman historian and consul Cornelius Tacitus (c.56-117 AD; *Tacitus* 1970:9) who wrote about the Germanic tribes of his time in two of his works: *Germania* (98 AD; *Tacitus* 1970:25) and *Historia* (c.109 AD; *Tacitus* 1997:xl). These survive in MSS from, respectively, the 15th century (*Tacitus* 1970:153) and the 11th century (*Tacitus* 1997:xxxi). Tacitus did not have first-hand knowledge of his material but he probably obtained information from people who had visited the relevant regions or came from them. As with all the sources available to us, Tacitus wrote with a specific purpose in mind and his reasons for writing these accounts rarely coincide with our reasons for reading them.²³

Some runic inscriptions and other archaeological evidence are also interesting to the present research.²⁴

In these sources, only one direct reference to *nornir* is found, none to Urðr:

Nornir:

Borgund runic inscription IV: Bæði gerðu nornir vel ok illa

II.6. Evaluation

Many of our literary sources for Old Norse mythology stem from Iceland, not from mainland Scandinavia, and therefore they might well give us a specifically North Atlantic slant on matters. It would be naïve to think that all ideas that existed in Iceland had exact equivalents across Scandinavia and that Iceland can therefore be taken as a general representative of what was going on in Denmark, Norway and Sweden; we are dealing with a vast geographical region with many different types of landscape, climate, geology and so forth, and also with a chronological period spanning some three centuries or more. Imagining any great degree of uniformity across the board or taking one specific place as a valid representative of what was happening elsewhere or even of the entire region would be a mistake. The Old Norse

²² Further on Adam, see *Adam af Bremens Krønike* (2000:9-41); Hultgård 1997.

²³ Further on Tacitus, see *Tacitus* 1970 and 1997.

²⁴ Further on runes, see Olsen 1957; Page 1987; Mckinnell, Simek and Düwel 2004; Arntz and Zeiss 1939.

belief system should probably be conceived of in the plural, as several systems, all of which were variations on similar themes. This is a point that has been made by several scholars recently (McKinnell 1994; Lindow 1997; DuBois 1999).

Among all the sources mentioned above, there are none that aim specifically at explaining in any neutral ethnographic sense the religious beliefs held by people in Scandinavia during the late Iron Age (c.600-800) into the early Middle Ages (c.1100-1300). We have some accounts that go in this direction,²⁵ but they are all written from the perspective of another culture so that the authors themselves had difficulties understanding what they were writing about. Literature from inside Scandinavia all comes from the Christian period so that we are still not getting an actual insider perspective but a later, tinged recollection of what once was.

In terms of the value of the different sources, when the aim is a deeper and better understanding of *nornir* as these were conceived of in the Viking Age (c.800-1100), I have not found any one consistent method of treatment for all the information. So little is said about *nornir* anywhere that I have decided to take the information from the *Edda* and from the relevant skaldic poems mainly at face value – that is, read the word *nornir* as referring to *nornir* rather than read it as a *heiti* for something else, unless there appears to be good reason for doing so (for example Egill's *lausavísa*; see note 77, and *Ólafsdrápa* 18; see note 51; see also the discussion of *Fáfnismál* 12, III.1.1.2.). Of course, one can doubt everything, and perhaps one should, but I feel that this would probably make for unnecessarily complicated judgements. I am not pretending that what I have to say will be anything like the final conclusions on *nornir*. The intention is to look at the beliefs that lie behind the extant source material in order to bring us closer to an understanding of these figures, and hopefully my findings can serve as a base for future scholars who may be able to take the material further than I have managed to do here.

²⁵ For example Ibn Fadlan's description of a Viking funeral somewhere on the Volga (Foote and Wilson 1980:408-411; Roesdahl 1996:168-169; Ström 1985:209-213; Jesch 1991:119-123).

III. Some Questions of Definition

Nornir make relatively few appearances in *Edda* and *Snorra-Edda* and even fewer outwith these. Partly because of this, partly because they overlap significantly with certain other kinds of supernatural beings, it makes little sense to look at the *nornir* in isolation and it would therefore be overly confining to focus exclusively on the word '*nornir*'. This state of affairs contributes to the fact that they are often treated as a sub-section of a larger group of beings. Turville-Petre (1964:279-280) hardly mentions them at all but devotes a chapter to the more frequently occurring *dísir*, *fylgjur*, *hamingjur* and *álfar*. Ström (1985:201-202) gives them relatively more attention in a couple of pages, quoting several text passages and giving his thoughts on a number of aspects, though in an earlier work (1954) he deals extensively with *dísir* but with *nornir* in only a short passage, clearly treating them as a sub-category of *dísir*. Also works of a less general nature often opt for brevity; Raudvere (2003:61-69) puts *fylgjur*, *nornir* and *dísir* together under the heading 'agents of fate'. The focus is rarely on the *nornir* as a separate entity,²⁶ they are not often considered to merit much in-depth attention, and this in spite of the fact that they are said to be: *kanske den mest välkända gruppen av kvinnliga gestalter med anknytning till ödet*, 'perhaps the best known group of female beings attached to fate' (Raudvere 2003:62-63). The most sober account of *nornir* hitherto produced is Mundal's short description (1993).

It is not necessarily wrong to consider *nornir* as one division of a larger group of female supernatural beings and there are several reasons why this way of dealing with them is acceptable most of the time: *nornir* are not mentioned very often, there is but little evidence of any formal cult attached to them and, shadowy as they are, it is simply difficult to get a firm hold on any substance which might be lurking behind the term *nornir*. Yet, it may still be possible to reach a deeper understanding of these beings if we treat them in a thorough manner and as our central subject.

III.1. Nornir, Dísir and Valkyrjur

In past scholarship, it has been common to group several classes of female supernatural beings together as though the different terms were all more or less

²⁶ *Dísir* and *valkyrjur* have received relatively more attention as separately conceived groups of beings (Warmind 1997; Ström 1954; Gunnell 2004a; Strömbäck 1949; Damico 1984; Mitchell 2004).

interchangeable and virtually identical.²⁷ For example, Finnur Jónsson, in 1913, refers to *nornir* as *örlagadísir*, ‘fate-*dísir*’ (1913:25-26), a word occurring only in scholarship but one which nevertheless forms a convention that is echoed by Ásgeir Blöndal (1995:1090). Ellis (later Ellis Davidson), in 1943, says about *fylgjur*, *hamingjur*, *dísir*, *nornir* and *valkyrjur* that: “All these terms for supernatural women ... are liable to be freely interchanged” (1943:137). More recently, such generalisations have most often been avoided; for example Dronke, in 1969, talks about *nornir*, mentioning their *valkyrja*-like and their troll-like features (1969:238), the implication being that they bear resemblances to both *valkyrjur* and troll-women whilst remaining distinct from them. The situation leaves us with the difficulty of disentangling these similar yet different terms from one another, but the least we can do is to try to approach the material without being too caught up in our own preconceptions about what we are going to find.

This chapter is intended to discuss some of these various groups of beings and explore their similarities and differences with a view to discovering whether there are any ground rules as to where lines can be drawn between *nornir*, *dísir* and *valkyrjur*, with some attention also given to ancestress figures, *fylgjur* and swan-maidens. It is important to keep in mind that the material is diverse and that meanings of words and concepts may well have varied over time and across space; for example the word *nornir* in some of the oldest skaldic and eddic poems (supposedly from as early as the 10th century) may refer to something very different from *nornir* in medieval *fornaldarsögur* from two, three and even four centuries later (cf. Gunnell 2004a:118-120). In modern Icelandic, *norn* is used to refer to a ‘witch’ or a ‘hag’ (ÍEO:567) and has very little to do with fate. As indicated above, the *nornir* treated here are the *örlaganornir* who concern themselves with fate, not the *galdranornir* who are concerned with witchcraft.²⁸ Similarly, the term *dís* conveys rather positive notions in

²⁷ While I appreciate that *heiti* and the notion of a set of interchangeable words constitute a principle in skaldic poetry, I maintain that, at root, these terms refer to different semantic contents.

²⁸ The thesis will not treat the witch-*nornir* of later periods and continental stories: *Jarlmanns saga ok Hermanns* 21, AM 556 b 4^o c.1475-1500, features *nornir* playing the harp in the company of acrobatic dwarves and other weird and wonderful beings (I am grateful to Jonas Wellendorf, Universitetet i Bergen, for the reference); *Hrólfs saga kraka* 48, AM 285 4^o c.1600-1700, refers to *álfar ok nornir ok annat ótöluligt illþýði*, ‘álfar and *nornir* and countless other malicious beings’; *Barlaams ok Josaphats saga* 136, Holm perg 6 fol c.1275 (translated from the Greek), mentions Þórr’s nine daughters who are *nornir*; and *Buslubæn* 8, from *Bósa saga* 5, AM 586 4^o c.1450-1500, mentions *töfrnornir*, ‘*nornir* skilled in magic’. Such passages remain of some interest, but are taken to be of secondary importance to an understanding of *örlaganornir*.

modern Icelandic (ÍEO:120) but this tells us equally little about what the word meant prior to the adoption of Christianity over a thousand years ago. Once Christianity became dominant, it seems there was relatively little need to distinguish closely between different groups of heathen supernatural beings and so the tendency was for them to be classed together simply as some sort of supernatural women with less attention paid to the terminology used in describing them. So the notion of a set of more or less interchangeable words is by no means new. This complicates our dealings with the source material somewhat because the mere fact that the same word is used in different texts does not guarantee that separate mentions of *nornir* or *dísir* or *valkyrjur* actually refer to the same semantic content, especially not if the texts belong to separate time periods or come from different areas.

The present work, admittedly, does not treat every category of beings that intertwine with *nornir* exhaustively – it is an almost inevitable consequence of the extensive overlapping between such groups and is simply very hard to avoid. Here, as mentioned, the *nornir* form the central focus and, while it is important for the purposes of this thesis also to have an understanding of what is covered by several other terms, particularly *dísir* and *valkyrjur*, I do not pretend to do complete justice to these other beings in what follows.

III.1.1. Nornir

Nornir are a collective group of feminine beings who in some way represent the notion of fate. A few sources appear to present them as creators or personifications of fate (for example Kormákr and *Völuspá*) but there is generally precious little 'person' or 'personality' to be found behind the concept and they most often seem to be completely intangible. Although *nornir* are rather in the mythological background, fate, as they represent it, is apparently the highest power in the universe to which even the Old Norse gods are seemingly subject (Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1997:51; Clunies Ross 1994:246). The following quotations mentioning *nornir* comprise the majority of direct references to these beings in Old Norse literature, that is, occurrences of the word *norn* or *nornir* or any form thereof. I have attempted to organise the cited material in a roughly chronological order, yet without adhering fully to this principle as discussions of specific aspects have at times been given priority over perceived chronology.

III.1.1.1. Nornir and Death

What quickly becomes clear is that references to *nornir* have a tendency to turn up in very strained situations, often carrying connotations of death and suffering. One person deeply regretting the involvement of *nornir* in human affairs is Kveldúlfr, as is shown in a verse (in *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* 24) which he supposedly composed in 880 or 890 (ÍF 2:līi) after his son Þórólfr died:²⁹

Nú frá k norðr í eyju, norn erum grimm, til snimma Þundr kaus þremja skyndi, Þórólfr und lok fóru; létumk þung at þingi Þórs fangvina at ganga, skjótt munat hefnt, þótt hvettimk hugr, malm-Gnáar brugðit. (ÍF 2:60)	I've heard that up north in an island, [the] norn is grim to me, ³⁰ Óðinn ³¹ chose him much too soon Þórólfr has met his end; the heaviness of old age has robbed me of my fighting strength ³² revenge will not come quickly though not for the lack of wanting.
---	---

The verse shows a singular *norn* connected to death in battle³³ and we get a clear impression of the emotional cost involved. Significantly, Kveldúlfr says that the *norn* is 'grim' to him, leaving it unsaid whether the death has positive or negative value for Þórólfr, who died in the battle himself. What is stressed in this verse is the emotional cost on the part of the grieving father who is left behind. Kveldúlfr's verse is a typical example of the situations in which people remind themselves that they are at the mercy of the *nornir*, namely tragic situations.³⁴

Kveldúlfr says '[the] *norn*', but whether he believes there to be only one *norn* or whether he is singling one out from a larger group is uncertain. He then mentions Óðinn as being equally responsible for Þórólfr's death, thus grouping Óðinn and the *norn* together, involved in the same death in similar ways. They are clearly thought

²⁹ AM 162 A ð fol c.1300 and other MSS.

³⁰ The Old Icelandic has neither definite nor indefinite article here, but the English sounds somewhat strange without any article at all.

³¹ *Þundr*, an *Óðinsheiti*, one of many synonyms for Óðinn (*Grímnismál* 54).

³² *Þórs fangvina*, 'Þórr's female fighting friend', a *kennig* for old age (*Gylfaginning* 46; LP:121).

³³ Þórólfr died in a struggle against Haraldr hárfagri (*Egils saga* 22; ÍF 2:53-54).

³⁴ Apart from the heroic reputation a warrior would leave behind and which would spur him on during a battle, some supernatural female beings, for example *valkyrjur*, may be seen as an alluring aspect of death in battle (see III.1.3.); cF. also the good *draumkona* in *Gísla saga* 30 (see III.1.2.). The *norn* mentioned by Kveldúlfr, however, does not come across as particularly desirable, although it must, again, be taken into account that the stanza is spoken by the grieving father, not the warrior himself.

of as closely connected here, perhaps representing a male and a female aspect of or even personification of death, particularly violent death.³⁵

As will become clear, *nornir* rarely appear in person but mostly indirectly. Typically, a person refers to something as being the work of the *nornir*, primarily in the context of death, but we do not actually see them as being present or as carrying out actions in such contexts. The choice of words surrounding *nornir* is often negative, centring on the harshness of life and death. *Fáfnismál* 11 provides an example:

Norna dóm þú munt fyr nesiom hafa ok ósvinnz apa; i vatni þú drukknar, ef í vindi rær: allt er feigs forað.	The judgement of the nornir you will have out at sea the way stupid men die; you will drown in the water if you row in a wind: all is dangerous for one who is fey.
--	--

The threat of *norna dómr*, which appears in fact to be a blind motif, is the threat of death, the final and inevitable decision that the *nornir* make with regard to any human life.³⁶ This sort of reference to *nornir* is typical – brief and threatening.

Hamðismál 30 gives a similar example:

Vel hǫfom vit vegit, stǫndom á val Gotna, ofan, eggmóðom, ³⁷ sem ernir á kvisti! Góðs hǫfom tírar fengit, þott skylim nú eða í gær deyia kveld lifir maðr ekki eptir kvið ³⁸ norna!	We two have fought well, we stand on Goth corpses that are weary of the sword-edge, like eagles on a branch! We have won great renown whether we die now or yesterday ³⁹ no man lives out the evening after the nornir give their verdict.
--	--

There is a strong sense of inevitability here. The phrase *kviðr norna* can only mean death, that final decision of the *nornir*, and both heroes of the poem, Hamðir and Sǫrli, die in the following stanza so that, although they win the fight, their lives are in the hands of the *nornir* with fatal consequences for them. It is noteworthy that the stanza describes a great victory on the part of the two brothers, hinting at the heroic reputation they have gained from this, and the reference to *nornir*, whilst coming across as somewhat doomsday, almost has a feeling of satisfaction over a job well

³⁵ Johansson (2000:52-53) also sees Óðinn and Urðr as parallel figures, though in a different context: as creators of human beings.

³⁶ Kragerud 1981 offers a different interpretation of the *nornir* in *Fáfnismál*.

³⁷ *Eggmóðom* probably means tiredness from loss of blood rather than from fighting.

³⁸ *Kviðr* has two meanings (both masculine): 'stomach' or 'verdict', particularly in court cases (Fritz II:374). The image is of a well-digested decision resulting from some consideration.

³⁹ Gísli Sigurðsson (1998:364) suggests this should perhaps be understood as 'tomorrow' in spite of the use of an expression meaning 'yesterday.'

done. It may even be that Hamðir, who appears to be the one speaking this verse, finds that it is worth paying with his life for this reputation.

The similar phrase *Urðr mun eigi forðask*, 'no one can escape fate', in a verse in *Íslendinga saga* 286 [136; 142],⁴⁰ conveys the feeling of something ominous and unavoidable. The verse, which is obviously spelling death for many men in the coming battle, is spoken by a seemingly supernatural woman and occurs as one of many dream visions prior to the battle of Örlygsstaðr.

The context of war and death is strong in *Hamðismál* of which stanza 29 also mentions *grey norna*, 'dogs of the *nornir*', referring to wolves, and describes how ferocious and uncivilised these '*norn*-dogs' are (Dronke 1969:238). Line one in stanza 29 reads: *Ekki hygg ek okkr vera úlfa dæmi*, 'We are not ones to follow the example of wolves', yielding the impression that as human masters command their dogs, so *nornir* command people as though they were dogs.⁴¹ Sqrli considers the whole affair less than humane in emotional terms and he seems to feel that he is not in charge of his own actions but that he acts like a dog obeying its master; here the masters are the unyielding *nornir* and he objects in vain. *Nornir* are not normally portrayed as giving orders directly to people, but their influence on human life is often described as decision-making or the passing of judgement which may be interpreted as processes similar to giving orders. No other instances link *nornir* to dogs or wolves⁴² but the '*norn*-dogs' rather recall the *Viðris grey*, 'Óðinn-dogs', in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* 13 and they may simply be beasts of the battlefield.

The phrase *kviðr norna* occurs only in *Hamðismál* 30 yet the metaphor comes close to that of a stanza by Torf-Einarr jarl, supposedly c.890, in *Haralds saga ins hárfagra* 30:⁴³

Rekit hefk Rognvalds dauða,
rétt skiptu því nornir,
nú 's folkstuðill fallinn,
at fjórðungi mínum.
Verpið, snarpir sveinar,
því sigri vér røðum,
skatt velk hqnum harðan,
at Háfætu grjóti.⁴⁴

I have avenged Rognvald's death,
the nornir settled it right,
my quarter-part in it;
now the warrior has fallen:
Brave men, throw –
for victory is ours;
it is a hard tax that I take from him,
– stones up around Háfætr.

⁴⁰ *Sturlunga saga I* (1998:410). *Króksfjarðarbók* c.1350-1370.

⁴¹ I am grateful to Vilborg Davíðsdóttir, Háskóli Íslands, for this suggestion.

⁴² Troll-women are often portrayed with close connections to wolves: *Gylfaginning* 49 has Hyrrokin riding a wolf to Baldr's funeral and in *Hyndluljóð* 5 Hyndla rides a wolf, recalling the Hunnstad picture-stone in Skåne (Raudvere 2003:34-35). *Gylfaginning* 12 echoes the same idea. Perhaps we are to understand *norn* in *grey norna* as a *heiti* for a supernatural woman, but whatever we make of these references our knowledge is incomplete.

⁴³ *Codex Frisianus* and others.

The verb in line two, *skipta*, cognate with English 'shift', has several nuances of meaning: 'to change, exchange; to shift, replace' but it can also mean 'to bring to an end' (Frtz III:342-344) or 'to share equally' (LP:507). This last meaning occurs in modern Danish in the legal context of inheritance, namely the noun *et skifte*, 'administration or distribution of a deceased person's estate.' This aspect of the word may be highlighted by the fact that Torf-Einarr refers to his quarter-share in avenging his father, possibly to be equalled by a quarter-share of the inheritance.⁴⁵

In Torf-Einarr's stanza we again see *nornir* bringing death. The attitude in the stanza is uncommon in the sense that the poet appears to have the *nornir* on his side and therefore finds their decision an unequivocally good one; although the stanza is typical by presenting *nornir* in the context of death – Einarr's victory is another man's death – it is untypical in its approach to that fatal judgment of the *nornir*. To agree with the decision of the *nornir* is quite unusual and, although Einarr is obviously the victor, one wonders exactly what he might be saying about himself; clearly, he is not to be taken lightly because where people most often find the decision of the *nornir* hard to accept, he agrees with it.

Some other poems use phrases very similar to Einarr's *rétt skiptu því nornir*, namely *Atlamál* 36, where the last two lines read: *þá hygg ek skop skipto, skildoz vegir þeira*, 'then, I think their fates were settled, when their ways parted', and also lines 1 and 3 of stanza 4 of Ingjaldr Geirmundarson's *Brandsflokkr* in *Þórðar saga kakala* 17:⁴⁶ *Skiptu skop sem optar ... ósvífr fira lífi*, 'Fate, unkind as more often, parted the men from their lives'.⁴⁷ In both cases, the verb *skipta* is employed by the subject *skop*, that is by 'fate' rather than by *nornir*, but the meaning is similar. However, it is possible that Ingjaldr, living in a much later and, not least, Christian period, may be imagining something quite different from the *nornir* when he says *skop*. If Dronke (1969:111) is correct in dating *Atlamál* to the 12th century, perhaps the same could be said for that poem. What happened to the notion of fate as a powerful supernatural force after the coming of Christianity is a separate study altogether; the Anglo-Saxons appear to have successfully christianised some aspects of fate by turning it into 'the will of God'. It seems, however, that Old Norse to a

⁴⁴ The name refers to a man called Hálfðan hálegggr.

⁴⁵ Dronke (1969:215) discusses the parallels between Torf-Einar's stanza and *Hamðismál* 15. The verb *skipta* is also employed in *Hákonarmál* 12 (see below)

⁴⁶ *Króksfjarðarbók* c.1350-1370. Ingjaldr lived in the 13th century.

⁴⁷ *Sturlunga saga* 351 (*Sturlunga saga II* 1988:542).

larger extent established a new vocabulary with Christianity rather than recycle heathen concepts (Green 1998:374-391).

It is noteworthy that of the phrases encountered so far, *nornir skiptu*, *kviðr norna* and *norna dómr*, all carry a legal or quasi-legal gloss. Also belonging to this group is stanza 24 of Þjóðólfr ór Hvini's *Ynglingatal*, apparently from the 9th century, found in *Ynglingasaga* 47:

Ok til þings
þriðja jöfri
Hveðrungs mæR
ór heimi bauð,
þás Halfdan,
sás Holtum bjó,
norna dóms
of notit hafði.
Ok buðlung
á Borrói
sigrhafendr
síðan fölu.
(ÍF 26:79)

And to a meeting⁴⁸
Hveðrungr's girl
called the third king
from the world,
at the time when Halfdanr,
he who lived at Holt,
had embraced
the judgement of the nornir;
and at Borró
the victorious men
later did hide
the king.

The phrase *þás Halfdanr ... norna dóms of notit hafði* seems odd at first because *norna dómr* refers to his death but makes an unusual combination with the verb *njóta* 'to have use for, to benefit from' (Frtz II:827). Exactly how the king 'benefits' from his death is unclear but it is quite possible to understand *Hveðrungs mæR* as an alluring otherworldly woman who is inviting the king to her abode, thus conjuring up a set of positive connotations relating to death in battle. Hveðrungr is mentioned as an *Óðinsheiti* in *Þulur*, making it possible to read *Hveðrungs mæR* as a description of a *valkyrja*; but in *Völuspá* 55, *mogr Hveðrungs* 'Hveðrungr's son' is understood to be a *kenning* for Fenrisúlfr, whose father is Loki, and *Ynglingatal* 24 would then refer to Loki's daughter who is, Hel, the female ruler of the underworld (Simek 1993:166). Either way, she is an otherworldly woman strongly associated with death and the positively loaded description of her seems to draw on the enticing aspects of desirable otherworldly women (Quinn 2006:54-57). Furthermore, *njóta* should probably be understood in a more neutral sense of 'experienced' or 'passed through' rather than with the positive connotations normally conjured up by it.⁴⁹ The best

⁴⁸ *þing* is an 'assembly' or a 'meeting' but can also mean a 'love-relationship' (Frtz III:1020).

⁴⁹ *Njóta* can also mean 'to have sexual relations with a person of the opposite gender' (Frtz II:827). For death as a sexual relationship with a supernatural woman, see Steinsland 1997 (especially 97-123).

translation may be that he 'embraced death', as one might say if death is thought to come at the appropriate time.

Another example of this legal vocabulary comes from the legendary *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* 19:⁵⁰

Bǫlvat er okkr, bróðir,
bani em ek þinn orðinn;
þat mun æ uppi,
illr er dómr norna.
(1924:155)

We two have been cursed, brother,
I have become your slayer,
that will always be so,
evil is the nornir's judgement.

The situation here is that the two sons of Heiðrekr have battled against each other and Angantýr has killed Hlǫðr, his brother. Angantýr expresses deep regret for the outcome and he blames the *nornir* for arranging their lives so that they would fight although they were brothers. Underlying their difficulties are issues concerning the right to inherit from their father and when Angantýr refuses to share the inheritance with his brother, Hlǫðr feels this as an attack on his honour and sees armed retaliation as the only solution. The *dómr norna* is again connected to the violent death which has become the inevitable outcome of the brothers' relationship. In our sources, it is common for *nornir* to be blamed when people experience this type of deep crisis brought on by the heavy obligations prescribed by heroic codes of honour.

The 'judgement' or 'legal decision' of the *nornir* appears to be a well-established metaphor for death. One recalls here the legal meaning of a 'sentence' as a punishment imposed by a court, but simultaneously the word has the grammatical meaning of a statement with a subject and a predicate or object. Although these legal references may function primarily as poetic images, it is interesting that even such quasi-legal powers should be put in the hands (or mouths) of feminine figures because women could not sit on a jury or otherwise participate in legal decision-making in ancient Scandinavia. Jesch (1991:190) mentions that: "women took no part in the legal process" and Miller (1990:24) gives a couple of examples: "a chieftaincy [*goðorð*] could pass to a woman via inheritance; she was, however, disabled from discharging its duties. Should a chieftaincy fall to a woman, she was to transfer it to a male who was a member of that local Thing who was then to fulfil the duties associated with the position (*Grágás* Ia 142)" and also that: "The legal affairs of a woman were to be conducted by her *lográðandi*, or legal guardian" (1990:27; cf.

⁵⁰ Upps UB R 715 c.1650. Earlier MSS (AM 544 4^o c.1300-1325; Gks 2845 4^o c.1450) do not contain this stanza, which occurs in chapter 14 of the saga in FSN II:67.

Jochens 1993). The relative powerlessness of human women might, on the other hand, in some way contribute to the ideas of very powerful supernatural women, of whom we encounter so many, which perhaps establishes a perceived balance between this world, dominated by masculine power, and the otherworld, dominated by feminine (cf. Price 2002:390-391).

Of the above-quoted stanzas, both *Hamðismál* 30 and Torf-Einarr mention the *nornir* in the context of weapon fighting⁵¹ while at the same time apparently paraphrasing legal language. The martial aspect combined with the idea of making choices is something they share with *dísir* and *valkyrjur* but the legal vocabulary seems to be much more pronounced for *nornir*.⁵²

The weapon fighting continues in the supposedly 12th century *Krákumál* 24.⁵³

Hjoggum vér með hjǫrvi.
Hitt sýnisk mér raunar,
at forlǫgum fylgjum,
fár gengr of skǫp norna
(1905:156/6)

We cut with swords.
It really seems to me
that we must follow fate
few escape what the nornir shape

The combination *skǫp norna* corresponds closely to *kviðr norna* in *Hamðismál*, both refer to death in battle, but it leaves out the quasi-legal aspect of *nornir*. *Skǫp* (n. pl.) translates as 'fate', that which is 'shaped' or fated for one, and it is cognate with English 'shape' (see also VI.1.2.). The word is a plural form of *skap* which means a 'shape' or 'form' but also has connotations of 'state', 'condition' or 'state of mind' (C/V:537; AeW:483), just as English 'shape' does. *Skǫp* does not in itself appear to have any legal semantic content but can mean a 'curse' or 'fatality' (C/V:537), adding a negative slant. The idea of a shaping power seems to convey that fate, in this word, works with a purpose, organising, shaping and arranging things in some coherent order or following some sort of pattern, although the pattern may not be discernible to human eyes (see also VI.).

III.1.1.2. Nornir and Life

The strongly death-related side of the *nornir* is rather dominant but by no means does it constitute the only significant thing there is to say about them; it is intriguing

⁵¹ Alongside these references should be mentioned *skjaldar norn*, 'norn of the shield', a *kenning* for 'axe' in the apparently 12th century *Ólafs drápa Tryggvasonar* 18 (*Skj.BI*:572-*AI*:576-7); the sense seemingly being that the axe brings 'death' to the shield.

⁵² Though see notes 374 and 380.

⁵³ Nks 1824 b 4^o c.1400-1425; the poem itself has been dated to c.1200 (*Krákumál* 1905:183/33).

that some phrases discussed above can have quite a different semantic content. The phrase *skop norna* turns up also in Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld's *lausavísur* 10, supposedly c.996, from *Hallfreðar saga* 6:⁵⁴

Sás með Sygna ræsi
siðr, at blót eru kviðjuð;
verðum flest at forðask
fornhaldin skop norna;
láta allir ýtar
Óðins blót fyr róða;
verðk ok neyddr frá Njarðar⁵⁵
nidjum Krist at biðja.
(ÍF 8:159)

Such is the custom at the Sygna-
king's, that sacrifice is forbidden;
most of us must avoid
the ancient norn decisions;
all men leave behind
Óðinn's sacrifice;
I, too, will be forced from Njarðr's
kin to worship Christ instead.

It is interesting that Hallfreðr, on deciding – reluctantly, judging by the tone of the verse – to become a Christian, describes his former faith by reference to *nornir* as well as to *æsir* (Óðinn) and *vanir* (Njarðr), because *nornir*, unlike *æsir* and *vanir*, apparently did not constitute a group of deities which people would worship or direct cult activities towards.⁵⁶ Nonetheless, *nornir* must have had a prominent place, certainly in Hallfreðr's consciousness, as he seems by *skop norna* to refer to his pagan faith as such (Whaley 2003:241-242; Lindow 2001:245). The idea recalls Eilífr Guðrúnarson's stanza,⁵⁷ allegedly c.1000, in *Skáldskaparmál* 52. It is about the 'king of Rome', Christ, who sits at Urðarbrunnr, a central place for *nornir* in *Völuspá* and *Snorra-Edda*:

Setbergs kveða sitja
sunnr at Urðar brunni,
svá hefr ramr konungr remðan
Róms banda sik lönðum.
(Faulkes 1998:76)

His seat is said to be
south at Urðr's well,
Rome's strong king has
strengthened his grip on the
lands.⁵⁸

This almost direct parallel between Christ and the *nornir* probably relates to the images of law that surround *nornir* (see IV.2.1. and V.2.).⁵⁹ The parallel finds some explanation in the fact that there seems to have been a particular liking for the

⁵⁴ *Möðruvallabók* c.1330-1370 and other MSS.

⁵⁵ AM 61 fol c.1350-1375, and other MSS of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, has Njarðr; *Möðruvallabók* has Freyr.

⁵⁶ Our knowledge of heathen ritual is incomplete. It is not impossible that some form of worship of *nornir* did take place but the evidence is limited to the *nornagraut* from later traditions, mentioned below.

⁵⁷ I am grateful to Vésteinn Ólason, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, for references to this passage.

⁵⁸ The stanza is difficult to translate; I rely mainly on Faulkes (1987:126) but with some modifications. Further on Eilífr's stanza, see Vésteinn Ólason 2000; Louis-Jensen 2000; von See (1981:394-395); Whaley 2003.

⁵⁹ Vésteinn Ólason (2000:486-487) presents an interesting argument that it might relate to baptism.

image of Christ in judgement on the part of the Christian Church in the early medieval period of Scandinavia. DuBois (1999:61-62) writes: "Christian theology of the period possessed its own particular views of Jesus as well: In prayer, legend, and iconography, the North European in general favored an image of Christ in Judgement, drawing on the imagery of the Gospel of Matthew [25:31-46]."⁶⁰ That this Christian legal notion was the one most often employed by early Christianity in Scandinavia would seem to indicate that it was considered a particularly suitable one, which is hardly a surprise given the Old Norse preoccupation with law.⁶¹ When Christ, by Hallfreðr and Eilífr, is compared by implication to, or even acts as a direct replacement for, the *nornir*, this may point to the strong sense of some quasi-legal aspect of these female supernatural creatures. The heathen beings were replaced by the image of Christ in judgement. Thus, the legal mode of thought was maintained, only in a changed Christianised guise provided by the Gospel itself (see also VI).

One of the most common contexts of *nornir* are situations where people complain about the harsh situations that life presents them with; *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* 5-7 provides an excellent example of this:

Hon sér at lífi
lǫst ne vissi
ok at aldragi
ekki grand,
vamm þat er væri
eða vera hygði
gengo þess á milli
grimmar urðir!

She had not known
any shame in her life
and no harm
that would cause death,
no disgrace that was
nor that she could think of
the terrible fates
intervened in this!

Ein sat hon úti
aptan dags,
nam hon svá bert
um at mælaz:
'Hafa skal ek Sigurð,
eða þó svelti
mög frumungan,
mér á armi!

Outside she sat alone
in the evening
then she began
to speak openly:
'I shall have Sigurðr,
or I shall die,
the young man
in my arms!

Orð mæltak nú –
iðromk eptir þess:

The words I spoke now,
I will regret later

⁶⁰ Green (1998:387) gives a similar example from Old English: "How suitable [*metod*] was for Christian use is clear from its formation from a verb signifying judgment or decree, for this qualified it admirably as an epithet for God as a judge over men, meting out reward and punishment for their deeds."

⁶¹ Miller (1990:221), as an example of this preoccupation, states that: "Law played a role in more than the definition and processing of disputes. ... Norms of good kinship provided the basis for imposing legal obligation, which in turn buttressed the norms and so on in continual feedback of mutual influence."

kván er hans Guðrún,
en ek Gunnars –
liótar nornir
skópo oss langa þrá!

Guðrún is his wife,
and I am Gunnarr's,
the loathsome nornir
gave us much yearning!

The stanzas describe Brynhildr's reaction following the deception of herself and Sigurðr, also portrayed in *Völsungasaga* 30-32, where the promises they have given one another are broken through the treacherous actions of the Gjúkungar.⁶² In the above-quoted stanzas, Brynhildr blames the *nornir* for the negative turn of events, calling them *liótar nornir*, 'loathsome *nornir*'; she does not at all blame human actions for what has happened to her, almost as though the people involved could not have acted otherwise or had no control over their own actions.⁶³ She herself now embarks on a horrific revenge expedition, spreading death all around her and in a sense perhaps emulating the *liótar nornir* or even fulfilling their work, feeling that she herself does not have a choice of action either. In some way, this goes well with Hallfreðr's conception of *nornir* as central to the heathen way of life; he equates them with heathen faith as such and Brynhildr apparently holds them responsible for the heroic code of honour that forces her to act the way she does. It was Christianity that brought about the changes to the Old Norse conception of what was morally correct behaviour.

The first line of stanza 6: *Ein sat hon úti* mirrors exactly the first line in *Völuspá* 28 where the *völva* appears to be in the middle of a prophesying ritual and begins to speak in line four of the stanza, as does Brynhildr.⁶⁴ Furthermore, the first two lines of stanza 7: *Orð mæltak nú – iðromk eptir þess*, 'the words I spoke now – I will regret later', add to the feeling that Brynhildr is in fact conducting a ritual prophecy, albeit one that is painful to herself as she notes already now that she will regret it later on. Caught in a situation from which there is no pleasant way out, she feels forced to do terrible things and she blames the *nornir* for it.

Another interesting word here is *urðir* in stanza 5, which is quite unusual, seemingly a plural of *urðr* 'fate'. The word rarely occurs in the nominative form: *urðr* (this happens mainly when it is used as the proper name of one of the *nornir*: *Urðr*), but mostly in the genitive form: *urðar*, attaching itself to something which is a source

⁶² All references to *Völsungasaga* are to Grimstad 2000, from Nks 1824 b 4° c.1400-1425.

⁶³ In *Völsungasaga* 21-22 (Grimstad 2000:146-155) Brynhildr plays the role attributed to Sigrdrífa in *Sigrdrífumál*. She also has a past as a *valkyrja*.

⁶⁴ *Útiseta* is the practice of sitting outside in the night in order to conduct magic; *Norges Gamle Love* I:19, II:497; Finnur Jónsson 1892; Ström (1985:227); de Vries (1956:328-330); Price (2002:168-169).

or form of fate (*Urðarbrunnr*, 'well of fate' – *Völuspá* 19; *urðar megin*, 'power or force of fate' – *Guðrúnarkviða II* 21; *urðar orð*, 'words of fate' – *Fjölsvinnsmál* 47; *urðar lokur*, 'fate's or woman's calling song'⁶⁵ – *Grogaldr* 7; *urðar máni*, 'fateful moon' – *Eyrbyggja saga* 52). The above quoted stanza probably provides the only example of the plural form *urðir* and it seems to be synonymous with *nornir*. There is no doubt about how Brynhildr feels here either, calling them *grimmur urðir*, much as she refers to *liótar nornir* a little later. The situation is not an untypical one for *nornir* to appear in – when life takes a harsh turn they are there to be blamed for it, but what is also clear here is that one cannot argue or negotiate with them. The decision of the *nornir* operates in ways akin to laws of nature; they are unbendable.

A similar situation of emotions running high draws on the same image, namely in *Guðrúnarhvöt* 13:

Gekk ek til strandar,
grōm vark nornom,
vilda ek hrinda
stríð grið þeira –
hófo mik, né drekþo,
hávar báror:
því ek land um sték,
at lifa skyldak.

I went to the shore,
I was furious at the nornir,
I would not accept
their harsh truce offering.
The great waves lifted me,
did not drown me:
so that I came to land,
I was supposed to live.

This poem opens with Guðrún urging her sons to avenge the death of their sister but after she has successfully seen them off she breaks into a long list of woes, recounting all her past sorrows. The situation recalls that of Brynhildr in that Guðrún feels both forced into horrible acts of revenge and feels tremendous grief even as she does it, caught in a tragic combination of necessity and inhumanity. She clearly feels the *nornir* have given her too many negative experiences and decides to end her own life, only to realize that the *nornir* have more in store for her, and her suicide attempt is unsuccessful. In this case, it seems that the hard decision of the *nornir* consists of not taking away life but, indeed, keeping Guðrún alive, as she appears to be of the opinion that this will simply prolong her suffering. The *nornir's* decision here maintains a negative colouring.

A somewhat enigmatic reference to *nornir* occurs in *Guðrúnarkviða II* 38:

Svá mik nýliga
nornir vekia,
vílsinnis spá

So recently the nornir
have awakened me,
he wanted me to interpret

⁶⁵ Finnur Jónsson suggests 'unyielding decisions of fate' for *urðar lokur* (LP:427); I lean more towards 'woman's calling song', suggested by Mitchell (2004:69-70), but see also Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 2001.

vildi at ek réða:
 hugða ek þik, Guðrún,
 Giúka dóttir,
 læblöndnom hiq
 leggja mik í gognum.

prophecies of harm:
 "I thought that you, Guðrún,
 daughter of Giúki,
 ran me through
 with a treacherous sword."

The context is one of impending death. Atli asks Guðrún to interpret his dreams and she deliberately misinterprets them so that he thinks they are not so bad after all. To find *nornir* involved in the scene is not surprising, though the meaning of the phrase that they 'have awakened' Guðrún is unclear. Perhaps it is a way of describing her extreme state of mind, thinking of nothing other than how she can avenge Sigurðr and how little she cares for Atli. At any rate, to be awakened by *nornir* is not something that seems to produce gentle thoughts, quite the contrary if we are to judge by Guðrún's reaction to Atli's dreams.

Until now, *nornir* have been discussed almost exclusively in terms of their negative aspects but, although it may be lopsided, the image of *nornir* is not one-dimensional (see also IV.).

These feminine beings are attached not only to death but also to birth so that they really encompass transition as such: both the beginning and the end. *Fáfnismál* 12 mentions *nornir* apparently in connection with birth:⁶⁶

Segðu mér, Fáfñir,
 allz þik fróðan kveða
 ok vel mart vita:
 hveriar ro þær nornir,⁶⁷
 er nauðgönglar ro
 ok kíosa mæðr frá mögom?⁶⁸

Tell me, Fáfñir,
 as men say that you are wise
 and know a great deal:
 who are those nornir
 who go to those in need
 and separate mothers from sons?

On the one hand, the phrasing in line 4 'who are those *nornir*' combined with the fact that very similar lines occur elsewhere (see note 67), referring to *meiyar*, 'maidens', makes it possible that the word '*nornir*' is being used as a *heiti* here. It is quite possible to read the line as: 'who are those supernatural women', asking more generally. The reply in stanza 13 (see IV.1.2.) emphasises that there are different

⁶⁶ That *Fáfnismál* 12 does actually refer to birth is not incontestable but hinges on our understanding of the word *nauðgönglar*. It could probably also mean separation at death; I am grateful to John Lindow, University of California, Berkeley, for this observation. This stanza is the only old evidence for *nornir* as potential helpers at birth. In *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* (and the late *Norna-Gests þátr*) they are present to determine the child's fate, not to assist during the birth (KLE 5:431).

⁶⁷ Very similar lines occur in *Baldrs draumar* 12 and *Vafþrúðnismál* 48.

⁶⁸ *Völsungasaga* 18 has: *hveriar erv þær nornir er kíosa maug(u) fra meðrum* (Grimstad 2000:140). Both phrases strongly recall *Sigrdrífumál* 9: *leysa kind frá konom*, where separation also seems to be the issue (see III.1.2). The phrases are probably formulaic.

kinds of *nornir*, which may also simply be taken to mean that there are differences between separate categories of supernatural women. However, the information given in *Fáfnismál* 13 is not easily matched with information supplied by other sources. On the other hand, the consistent use of the word '*norn*' in stanzas 11, 12 and 13 of *Fáfnismál* does make it plausible that it does actually refer to *nornir*.

The role attributed to *nornir* in *Fáfnismál* 12 is somewhat ambiguous and sums up their double-sided nature rather well: they bring life but they also take it away. The combination *kiósa frá* is unusual and it is not entirely clear what the *nornir* do in this stanza, making translation of it difficult, but two options look possible: either it simply means that at birth *nornir* separate the child from its mother, making them into two individual beings (KLE 5:431-432), or it means that *nornir* determine whether the mother or the child will live (Gísli Sigurðsson 1998:233), leaving the option of translation as either 'choose' or 'separate'.⁶⁹ *Kiósa*, 'to choose' indicates the familiar role of *nornir* as decision makers (see also IV.1.3.) and here they are perhaps choosing between the lives of two individuals, not unlike the type of choices apparently made by *valkyrjur* on the battlefield. Whatever the case, the *nornir* with their powers to determine matters concerning life and death are involved in the crucial moments of transition from one state to another.⁷⁰

As noted above, the literature shows little evidence of worship or any sort of cult attached to them but, in spite of their stern qualities, it is hard to imagine that people did not at least attempt to influence decisions made by *nornir*. A few references from later traditions speak of a special food, *nornagraut*, '*norn*-porridge', which had its place in relation to childbirth. Apparently, a custom involving this food existed in folk tradition until fairly recent times in certain areas of Scandinavia: Setesdal in Norway (Skar 1909:120; Reichborn-Kjennerud 1933:63; 76) and the Faroe Islands (Olsen 1957:156; Lid 1946:18; de Vries 1956:272). Ström says about *nornagraut*: *Den tillreddes vid ett barns födelse och har ansetts vara ett ursprungligt offer till nornorna*, 'It was prepared when a child was born and has been considered to have originally been a sacrifice to the *nornir*' (Ström 1985:202). Noteworthy here is that Bäckman (1984:31-32) mentions what may be the very same tradition

⁶⁹ This strongly recalls the name of the Saami birth-goddess Sarakka, supposedly deriving from a verb *saret*, 'to cleave', who is said to separate the child from its mother at birth (Ränk 1955:21-22).

⁷⁰ In *Oddrúnagrátr* 9 Frigg and Freyia are called upon to help at birth (see IV.2.1. on Frigg), in *Sigrdrífumál* 9 *dísir*. On Frigg and Freyia, see Ingunn Ásdísardóttir 2007; Grundy 1996.

amongst the Saami, involving a group of female supernatural beings known as the *akkas*.⁷¹

Furthermore it is said that when the woman's time has come *Madder-Akka* and her daughter *Sarakka* will stay at the woman's side and aid her. For this assistance they get offerings from the mother in the form of animal sacrifices. Immediately after the birth a meal will be prepared, called *Sarakka-porridge* which the mother will eat together with her married female friends. Three pegs are put into the porridge, one white, the other black, and the third with three rings carved on it. After the porridge is eaten the pegs are placed under the threshold for three nights and if the black one disappears the mother or her child will die soon, but if the white one is gone the mother knows that both of them will stay alive.⁷²

Ränk adds the following:

In this porridge three wooden matches were stuck, one of them with a cloven end, which evidently had some meaning connected with the health of the mother and child.
(Ränk 1955:24)

Troels Lund, speaking of 16th century Denmark, also knows the custom:

Hos mange gammeldags var der anbragt tre Pinde i den [Barsel-Grøden], der maaske oprindeligt havde haft Hentydning til de tre Norner, Skæbnens Gudinder; Barnets Lykke antoges i hvert fald at staa i et vist Forhold til disse Pinde.
(Lund 1908:53)

'In many old-fashioned homes there were three sticks placed in it [the childbirth-porridge], which may originally have alluded to the three *nornir*, goddesses of fate; at any rate, the child's fortune was placed in a certain relationship to these sticks.'
(My translation)

The descriptions given by Bäckman and Lund are interesting as it seems that *Fáfnismál* 12 gains some further explanation from the Saami tradition.

Jacobsen and Matras' Faroese-Danish dictionary (1961:299) lists both *nornagreytur*, 'norn-porridge': *det første Maaltid, som en Kvinde nyder efter en*

⁷¹ I am grateful to Tom DuBois, University of Wisconsin, Madison, for this reference.

⁷² Nothing is said about what happens if the third peg is gone. It is interesting to note that one peg is black, one is white whilst the third one is different (see also III.1.2. and III.2.2.). Saxo uses a similar idea in the story of Ericus and Rollerus, *Gesta Danorum* Book 5 (2,6-2,7), where Craca prepares a meal for her son Rollerus and stepson Ericus. Rollerus (though logically it should be Ericus) happens to see her: "Surveying the interior, he spied his mother stirring an ugly-looking cauldron of stew. He looked up and saw also hanging aloft from a thin rope three snakes, from whose jaws putrid saliva dripped steadily to provide liquid for the recipe. Two of them were pitch black, the third had whitish scales and was suspended a little higher than the others" (*Saxo Grammaticus* 1979:124). As a result, one half of the food is black, the other white; the dark food contains special powers and Craca intended it for Rollerus, but Ericus eats it and thereby gains knowledge, eloquence, magical protection in combat as well as the ability to understand animal languages.

Barnefødsel, 'the first meal taken by a woman after giving birth' and *nornaspor*, 'norn-print': *hvid Plet på Negl (siges at forkynde et Menneskes Skæbne)*, 'white spot on a nail (is said to prophesy the fate of a person).' Olsen comments on this: *Disse ord synes henholdsvis å sikte til offer som tilkom nornene, og til den hjelpende nornehånd ved forløsning*, 'These words appear to indicate, respectively, a sacrifice to the *nornir* and the helping *norn's* hand at birth' (Olsen 1957:156). This seems oddly parallel to the cutting of runes on the *norn's* nail in *Sigrdrífumál* 17: *á norðar nagli*.⁷³ In the light of how *nornir* are described in the poetry, one might wonder whether their hand is indeed a helping one, but at the same time we must keep in mind that births merit a lot less attention in the sources than do deaths. Somehow, birth seems to fall under a heading of everyday activities whereas death is something to talk about, especially, of course, heroic or violent death. This might partly explain why we hear so much more about *nornir* in the context of deaths: only few births are described.⁷⁴

The one image that keeps reoccurring with *nornir* is that of making choices, making decisions or passing judgement, always in transitional situations: birth, death, battle – typically situations where people feel that matters are not in their own hands. Whether there is such a thing as a choice which is not in one way or another intermediate seems doubtful; is that not the nature of a choice – that it represents some sort of threshold? At such crucial times, people appear particularly prone to feel the influence of *nornir* on their lives.

The picture seems somewhat lop-sided: *nornir* are in charge of both birth and death but the tendency is to remember them primarily when lives are ending rather than beginning. It further seems that they are there to be blamed when events take rough turns (*Guðrúnarhvöt* 13, *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* 5-7, *Kveldúlfr*).⁷⁵ In terms of human emotion, this is not an uncommon type of reaction, for example lots of people will admit that they pray only when they are in trouble and that as long as things are going well they do not think much about praying. What it means in Old

⁷³ *Sigrdrífumál* 15-17 lists many strange things to cut runes on, including Sleipnir's teeth, wolf's claw, owl's beak. The purpose of the runes is not stated but they would seem to be cut for protection.

⁷⁴ However, we must keep in mind that, of the older sources, only *Fáfnismál* connects *nornir* directly with birth, if that reading is even correct, though see also III.2.1.

⁷⁵ *Nornir* appear to be beyond physical presence or actions; their decisions, judgements, words are manifested in human actions whilst they themselves remain intangible. So it is also with spoken words, they do not have a physical form, they only exist at the moment of speaking but their effects will continue to be felt long after, especially if they are malicious words.

Norse literature is that the *nornir* have a tendency to appear almost as a metaphor for emotionally taxing events and circumstances that are often tragic from the point of view of those involved: "The natural inclination to look for reasons when things go wrong burdened the norns especially with the responsibility for cruel fate" (Mundal 1993:626). This is certainly true, it is rare to hear someone say that the *nornir* were good to him or her because the portrayal of them often is so sinister. Still, we should be careful about jumping to easy conclusions; there are many more things to say about *nornir*.

Also interesting to note is that, like *dísir* and *valkyrjur*, they hardly ever turn up in mythological poems. Outwith *Völuspá* (which probably describes them, but does not use the word '*nornir*'), they are mentioned almost only in heroic and skaldic poetry.

III.1.2. Dísir

Dísir, like *nornir*, are a collective group of female beings connected to issues of birth and death but also to fecundity. The situation surrounding them is somewhat different because there are so many more references to them; the word *dísir* turns up in the literature, both prose and poetry, far more frequently than does the word *nornir*. This means that it is not possible in this thesis to give a complete overview of these beings; the scope has to be limited to pointing towards differences and similarities between *dísir* and *nornir* as well as attempting to give a description of the general nature of *dísir*.⁷⁶ The texts quoted in this chapter have been selected with the aim of achieving a basic understanding of the nature of *dísir* and the semantic content of the word.

It can be difficult to gauge which text passages concern actual *dísir* and which use the term as a *kenning* because *kenningar* based on the word *dís* are so much more frequent than ones based on the word *norn*.⁷⁷ Therefore, *dís* may refer simply to a woman or a female character of some kind but it can also refer to this special group of supernatural women; these supernatural ones are regarded here as the 'proper' *dísir*, the ones to whom the semantic content of the word originally refers.

⁷⁶ Gunnell 2004a, Ström 1954 and Strömbäck 1949 focus more specifically on *dísir*. See also Turville-Petre (1964:221-227), Raudvere (2003:68-69) and Simek (1993:60-62).

⁷⁷ The word *norn* occurs as a *kenning* for woman: *nesta norn*, '*norn* of the brooch' in one of Egill Skallagrímsson's *lausavísur* (*Egils saga* 56; ÍF 2:156), as does possibly the name *Urðr: urðar lokur*, 'woman's calling song' or perhaps 'magical incantation' in *Grógaldr* 7 (Mitchell 2004:69-70). In *Skáldskaparmál* 31 Snorri says: *Kona er ok kend við allar Ásynjur eða nornir eða dísir*, 'Kennings for woman can be any of the *ásynjur* or *nornir* or *dísir*' (Faulkes 1998:40).

The attempt to avoid quoting texts which use the word merely as a *kenning* is deliberate.

The etymology offered by de Vries (AeW:77) suggests that the word simply refers to a 'goddess, feminine divine being', *weibliche götterwesen*, a very general definition, but mentions that it might be related to Old Indic *dhiṣanyant-* 'attentive, devout'. Pokorny (1959:955) does not mention Old Norse *dís* but derives *dhiṣanyant-* from an s-form of *dh̥s-* 'to see' from which derive also words for wisdom, thought, and insight, which could be relevant to our understanding of *dísir*. Gunnell (2004a:130), on mentioning *fylgjur*, says:

Dísir, on the other hand, seem to have been more powerful. Like the *valkyrjur*, these were female spirits with male characteristics (they ride horses, and ... "hunt" down victims). ... Unlike the other two types of beings [*fylgjur* and *valkyrjur*], however, the *dísir* sometimes receive sacrifices, have place names dedicated to them, and appear to protect not only individuals but also families and even nations.

Raudvere (2003:68) holds a similar opinion:

Disernas funktion verkar närmast ha varit att värna äring och produktion på en viss plats. De är mer förbundna till landskapet och har en mer utpräglat beskyddande roll än de mer abstrakta fylgjorna. De senare är relaterade till en individ eller familj, medan diserna verkar vara primärt kopplade till en bestämd plats.

'The function of the *dísir* seems to have been the protection of the crops and production in a certain place. They are more closely related to the landscape and have a more markedly protective role than the more abstract *fylgjur*. The latter are connected to an individual or family, while the *dísir* seem primarily connected to a certain place.'

(My translation)

Dísir appear to have been a kind of protective spirits, possibly female ancestor spirits, and in the times of Old Norse beliefs they were surrounded by a cult. People would sacrifice to them at the *dísablót* (it may be telling that we never hear of any *nornablót*), which were festivals held at certain seasons, namely at the beginning of winter and seemingly also in spring (Gunnell 2004a:131-134). Such festivals are mentioned in several sources⁷⁸ but people would apparently also call on the assistance of *dísir* in certain other less predictable situations, including childbirth, as in *Sigrdrífumál* 9:

Biargrúnar skaltu nema
ef þú biarga vilt

Helping-runes you must know
if you want to help

⁷⁸ *Egils saga* 44 and *Víga-Glums saga* 6 mention *dísir* in connection with the Winter Nights celebration; *Ynglinga saga* 29 seemingly in connection with spring.

ok leysa kind frá konom;⁷⁹
á lófa þær skal rísta⁸⁰
ok of liðo spennu
ok biðia þá dísir duga.

and release children from women;
they should be cut on the palm
and put around the joints
and then ask the dísir to help.

In this stanza, they, like *nornir*, act as givers and takers of life and in this particular instance they appear to provide protection at the beginning of a new life. They also seem rather practically minded, able to step into the middle of the situation in order to lend their assistance. That one should ask for the help of the *dísir* reveals that they were, in fact, considered willing to help, and this might give them a more positive image than that of the *nornir*, whose involvement people would rather prefer to avoid and never seem to ask for. Having said this, the "association with impending death seems to be a common place of the usage of the term 'dísir' in eddic poetry" (Lindow 2001:95) and, like *nornir*, they are rarely mentioned in the mythological poems.

Atlamál 28 speaks of *dísir* in connection with 'dead women' who came at night and wanted to 'choose' Gunnar:

Konor hugðak dauðar
koma í nótt hingat,
værit vart búnar,
vildi þik kíosa,
byði þér brálliga
til bekkia sinna:
ek kveð aflima
orðnar þér dísir!

I thought that dead women
came here in the night
they were scantily clad
wanted to choose you,
invite you very soon
to their benches:
I say that useless
the dísir have become for you!

In this particular instance, certain aspects common to *dísir*, *nornir* and *valkyrjur* seem to merge into one: 'dead women', those supernatural women who choose the time of death for people. Certainly, the mood in this stanza is ominous; yet, we may also detect a kind of opposition between the 'dead women' – whoever may hide behind the label – and the *dísir* who are unable to help Gunnar against the 'dead women'. The impression is that *dísir* are protective spirits of some sort, perhaps even guardians of life in opposition to the figures that represent death here. However, it is also possible that the 'dead women' are themselves *dísir* so that the stanza may hint at some sort of opposition between one group of *dísir* and another or between conflicting aspects of what the *dísir* stand for (cf. *Þiðrandi þátrr ok Þórhalls*

⁷⁹ This line strongly recalls *Fáfnismál* 12: *kíosa mæðr frá mögom* (see III.1.1.).

⁸⁰ Cutting runes on the palm of the hand at birth is also referred to in *Sigrdrífumál* 16: *á lausnar lófa*, 'on hands that deliver.'

discussed below). *Konor dauðar* is not a common term; taken literally, it might refer to ancestress figures but also recalls the *draumkonor* of *Gísla saga Súrssonar*⁸¹ (see below). Clearly, their purpose here is to signal Gunnar's impending death and bring him to the realm of the dead, and the idea of a choice is again emphasised as is otherworldly female power.

A somewhat similar reference to *dísir* crops up in *Hamðismál* 28:

<p>Af væri nú haufuð, ef Erpr lifði, bróðir okkarr inn þóðfrækni, er vit á braut vógom verr inn vígfrækni - hvöttomk at dísir -, gumi inn gunnhelgi - gørðomz at vígi.</p>	<p>Off his head would now be if Erpr were alive, our brother the battle-bold one whom we killed on the way the man courageous in battle - dísir encouraged me - the man untouchable in battle - we prepared to kill him.</p>
---	---

We encounter here that very sinister aspect of *dísir* in which they seem to overlap quite significantly with the dark sides of *nornir*. Hamðir says that the *dísir* urged him to kill his brother Erpr and now he regrets it because it means that Erpr cannot help him and Sqrli in their fight against Iqrmunrekkr. This would seem an entirely fitting context for *nornir* to appear in but for the fact that, apparently, *nornir* simply decide, they do not urge people to carry out certain actions.⁸² Still, *dísir* embody the duality more clearly than *nornir* do because *dísir* often appear in clearly benign roles as well as clearly sinister ones; the portrayal of *nornir* is less balanced, weighted more towards the negative end.

The term *spádís* is at times used in *fornaldarsögur*, for example *Völsungasaga* 11, where it is said of Sigmundur: *Enn sva hlífðv honum hans spaðísir at hann varð ecki sár. ok engi kunni taul hversv margr maðr fell fyrir honum* (Grimstad 2000:116), 'But his *spádísir* shielded him so that he was not wounded, and no one could count how many men fell at his hand' (my translation). Raudvere (2003:68) suggests that the term refers to a *völva* but that seems unlikely in this case where they act more like protectresses than seeresses. Byock (1990:53) translates the word as 'spawomen' and notes: "*Spádísir* is often used in a generalised or metaphorical sense to refer to valkyries, Norns, or goddesses. Here it would seem to be Norns, deciding men's fate" (Byock 1990:116). Also Grimstad translates as 'norns' (2000:117). I agree that the term is vague but I disagree with the translation 'norns'. These *spádísir*, protecting

⁸¹ All references to *Gísla saga* are to the shorter of the two versions; AM 556 a 4° c.1475-1500.

⁸² Unless this is how we are meant to understand the verb *vekia* in *Guðrúnarkviða II* 38 (see III.1.1.2.).

their chosen hero, act more like *fylgjur*, *valkyrjur* or *galdranornir*, but not like *örlaganornir*.⁸³

This extended use of the term makes it doubly difficult to discover the exact nature of these beings because the word *dísir* itself is no guarantee that the talk is actually of *dísir* at all. The word can be employed simply in the meaning 'woman', particularly in *kenningar*, but some instances look as if they indicate more than just femininity. The epithets *Vanadís* for Freyia (*Gylfaginning* 34) and *Qndurdís* for Skaði (*Háleygjatal* 4, allegedly c.985; *Gylfaginning* 23) are interesting because both of these are highly independent and highly honoured goddesses. Freyia 'chooses half the slain' (*Grímnismál* 14), thus seeming to appear as a female counterpart of Ódinn (perhaps recalling the *norn* in Kveldúlfur's verse?; cf. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 2006), and *Vanadís* could be a name drawing on the connection between fecundity and death twice over – through *vanir* and through *dísir*. Similarly, *Qndurdís*, 'Skiing-*aís*' may show Skaði as a female counterpart of Ullr (Simek 1993:286-287), god of archery and skiing (*Gylfaginning* 31), her connection to *dísir* provided by her fiercely independent and masculine behaviour when she turns up among the gods, weapons and all, seeking revenge for her father (*Skáldskaparmál* G56). This blend of independent femininity and clearly masculine elements is mirrored in the female *dísir* who ride horses and carry swords.

The cult of the *dísir*, mentioned above, appears to have been a fertility cult, portraying two sides of these supernatural women, one of which is a life-enhancing and life-giving side while the complementary other side relates to death and the taking of life. This double nature is clearly pictured in the story of *Þiðrandi þáttur ok Þórhalls*.⁸⁴ In this tale, Þiðrandi, against the advice of his father, answers a knock on the door during the Winter Nights. The text continues:

Hann tók sverð í hönd sér ok gekk út. Hann sá engan mann. Kom honum þá þat í hug, at nökkurir boðsmenn mundu hafa riðit fyrir heim til bæjarins ok riðit síðan aftr í móti þeim, er seinna riðu. Hann gekk þá undir viðarköstinn ok heyrði at riðit var norðan á völlinn. Hann sá, at þat váru konur níu ok váru allar í svörtum klæðum ok höfðu brugðin sverð í höndum. Hann heyrði ok at riðit var sunnan á völlinn. Þar váru ok níu konur, allar í ljósum klæðum ok á hvítum hestum. Þá vildi Þiðrandi snúa inn aftr ok segja mönnum sýnina. Þá bar þar at fyrr konurnar, þær inar svartklæddu, ok sóttu at honum, en hann varðist vel ok drengilega.
(ÍS 10:376)

⁸³ Sigmundur, incidentally, is killed at the intervention of Ódinn in the next sentence.

⁸⁴ From *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar hin mesta* in *Flateyjarbók* c.1387-1395.

'He took a sword in his hand, and went out. He could see no one. It struck him that some guests might have ridden ahead to the farm, and then ridden back to those who were riding more slowly. He then went under the wood pile, and heard the sound of riding coming into the field from the north. He saw that there were nine women, all of them in black clothes and with drawn swords in their hands. He also heard the sound of riding into the field from the south. There were another nine women, all of them in light clothes, and on white horses. Then Thidrandi wanted to go back in and tell people about the sight, but the women, those dressed in black, got to him first and they attacked him. He defended himself bravely.'

(CSI II:460-461)

In spite of his defence, Þiðrandi is killed by the mysterious women.⁸⁵

The incident is interpreted in the text itself as an approaching change of religion where the black riders symbolise the old faith and the white ones represent the new faith, Christianity, which is not yet strong enough to save the life of Þiðrandi, lending the story a very strong Christian flavour.⁸⁶ While this could be a later, rationalising interpretation of the *dísir*, who are also referred to as *fylgjur* in the text (ÍS 10:377), dividing them into two groups of which one is dark and evil whilst the other is bright and benign, it still conveys their double-sided nature: *dísir* have the potential of being both, just as *nornir* have.

In *Þiðrandi þáttr* the *dísir* come riding, indicating their connection to horses and possibly portraying the horse in a role of mediator between the living and the dead.⁸⁷ In *Gísli saga* 30, while Gísli has his nightly visitations from a good and an evil dream-woman, the good dream-woman appears to him one night, riding a grey horse and showing him the otherworld:

⁸⁵ A remarkably similar incident occurs in *Laxdæla saga* 37 (ÍF 5:105-106) where Kotkell and Gríma carry out a *seiðr* ritual in order to harm and insult Hrútr. Hrútr tells everyone on his farm that they must stay indoors during the night when the ritual is performed, but his favourite son Kári goes outside and walks towards the *seiðr* which kills him. The text says that Kotkell and his family sing beautifully; it also says that they come from the Hebrides (*Laxdæla* 35) and so they are possibly Christians. Their unfamiliar Christian singing might be interpreted as malicious magic by their heathen neighbours who are clearly at odds with them (Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 2001:104-105). Whatever the case, the ritual involves human beings (of both genders) and there are no supernatural women involved. For a discussion of the Kotkell episodes, see Sayers (1992b:133-140); Raudvere (2003:147-152).

⁸⁶ The Scottish legend of Michael Scot contains a detail extraordinarily similar to Þiðrandi's death. About Michael Scot it is said that: "On his death-bed he told his friends to place his body on a hillock. Three ravens and three doves would be seen flying towards it; if the ravens were first the body was to be burned, but if the doves were first it was to receive Christian burial. The ravens were foremost, but in their hurry flew beyond their mark" (Campbell 1900:288). The black and white birds are interesting insofar as ravens in Old Norse tradition are associated with Óðinn, battlefields and corpses. The doves are a Christian symbol, but they are significant as white birds in opposition to, yet somehow equal to, the ravens (see III.2.2.).

⁸⁷ Loumand 2005 discusses the horse in this role.

Einhverja nótt er þat enn, at Gísla dreymir, at konan sú in betri kom at honum. Hon sýndisk honum ríða grám hesti ok býðr honum með sér at fara til síns innis, ok þat þekkisk hann. Þau koma nú at húsi einu, því er nær var sem holl væri, ok leiðir hon hann inn í húsit ok þóttu honum þar vera hægendi í pöllum ok vel um búit. Hon bað þau þar vera ok una sér vel, - "ok skaltu hingat fara, þá er þú andask," sagði hon, "ok njóta hér fjár ok farsælu."

(ÍF 6:94)

'One night, Gisli dreamt again that the good dream-woman came to him. She was riding a grey horse, and she invited him to come home with her, to which he agreed. They arrived at a house, which was more like a great hall, and she led him inside. He saw cushions on the raised benches and the whole place was beautifully decorated. She told him they would stay here and take their pleasure – "and this is where you will come when you die," she said, "and enjoy wealth and great happiness.'

(CSI II:38)

The evil dream-woman has quite different ideas in mind in chapter 33:

"Þat dreymði mik enn," sagði Gísli, "at sjá kona kom til mín ok batt á hofuð mér dreyra húfu ok þó áðr hofuð mitt í blóði ok jós á mik allan, svá at ek varð alblóðugr."

(ÍF 6:103)

'Then in a second dream,' he said, 'this woman came to me and tied a blood-stained cap on my head, and before that she bathed my head in blood and poured it all over me, covering me in gore.'

(CSI II:42)

These *draumkonur* are clearly otherworldly messengers and the appearances of a good and an evil dream-woman bear some resemblance to the black and white *dísir* in *Þiðrandi þáttr* as well as to the double-sided nature of many kinds of supernatural women. The grey colour of the horse recalls Sleipnir, the eight-legged horse that can cross the borders to the otherworld, and the *dísir* on their horses seem to belong to this in-between area, the borders of this world and the next, supernatural women in control of human life and death who mediate between the known and the unknown worlds.

Dísir appear to have been some kind of protective spirits and, like *nornir*, the tendency is for them to appear and act as a collective whole rather than as individually named beings and, like *valkyrjur*, they seem at times attached particularly to one specific person. The fact that there was a cult of them gives the *dísir* at least a sheen of being approachable – if people sacrifice to them then this must be because they hope somehow to influence them. *Dísir* are seemingly relatively easier to reach and to enter into some sort of dialogue with than are

nornir, and it is possible that the extensive use of the word *dís* is indicative of a type of being with whom people felt more comfortable, who were somehow present in everyday life and who therefore seemed much more familiar than the unapproachable *nornir* whom, as has been indicated, one could hardly hope to influence anyway.

III.1.3. Valkyrjur

Valkyrjur are a third group of related but nevertheless separate beings. The word *valkyrja* is generally taken to have quite a specific meaning, namely: 'chooser of the slain' (from *valr* [m] 'men slain in battle', and *kiósa* 'to choose'). This interpretation goes a long way in explaining how they are most commonly understood: they are female supernatural battle spirits deciding who will be slain in battle (Simek 1993:349; Lindow 2001:95; Stefánsson 2005:252; Price 2002:331; Damico 1984:44). They are mentioned in heroic and skaldic poetry and also *fornaldarsögur* but not in *Íslendingasögur*, like *nornir*, they apparently belong in some mythical realm. As will be seen, however, a curious aspect of this explanation is that choosing the slain rarely seems to be what they actually do.⁸⁸

Like *dísir*, *valkyrjur* are mentioned more frequently in the sources than are *nornir*, which means that a small selection of references to them will have to suffice here.

Three skaldic poems clearly mention *valkyrjur* and as these are probably our earliest references to this type of being they are particularly relevant to an attempt at understanding what they really are. Þorbjörn hornklofi's *Haraldskvæði* (*Hrafnsmál*) 1-3, supposedly c.900, in *Noregs konungatal 2*, is in all likelihood the oldest:

Hlýði hringberendr,
meðan ek frá Haraldi segi
odda íþróttir
enum afar-auðga;
fra mólum munk segja,
þeim es ek mey heyrða,
hvíta haddbjarta
es við hrafn dæmði.

Listen, ring-carriers,
while of Haraldr
I will tell his many deeds,
the very wealthy one;
I will tell of the words
which I heard from a maiden,
white, with very fair hair,
who was talking to a raven.

Vitr þóttisk valkyrja,
verar né óru þekkir
svá enni frátleitu,
es foglsrødd kunni;
kvaddi en glæhvarma

The valkyrja seemed wise,
men were not dear to,
the keen-eyed one,
who understood bird speech;
she of the fair eye lashes

⁸⁸ Further on *valkyrjur*, see Warmind (1997:86-110); Simek (1993:349-350); Price (2002:331-346).

ok en kverkhvíta
Hymis hausrofa,⁸⁹
es sat á horni vinbjarga.

Hvat es yðr hrafnar?
Hvaðan eruð ér komnir
með dreygu nefi
at degi ǫndverðum?
Hold loðir yðr í klóum,
hræs þefr gengr ór munni,
nær hykk í nótt bjöggguð
þvíss vissuð náí liggja.
(ÍF 29:59-60)

and the white neck
greeted the raven
that sat on the back of the grassy
hill.

What is with you ravens?
Whence have you come
with bloody beak
so early in the day?
Flesh hangs from your claws,
corpse smell from your mouth,
you seem this night to have been
where you knew corpses lay.

The poem gives an interesting portrayal of a *valkyrja*: she is a fair maiden who talks to a raven about a recent battle.⁹⁰ She asks the raven why it has blood on its beak, flesh in its claws and a stench of death about it; the bird then begins to describe the events leading up to the battle. She herself is not involved in the fighting at all, neither is she present on the battlefield and she only speaks to the raven afterwards. In fact, she appears to be a literary construct or an otherworldly mediator: Þorbjörn displaces the perspective to her, who understands the language of birds, and she in turn displaces it to the raven. It is an elaborate introduction, taking up three stanzas before the action begins, and this strange woman figures only as a linguistic interpreter between Þorbjörn and a talking raven, she apparently has no direct connection to the fighting.⁹¹

The next reference is in *Eiríksmál* 1, supposedly c.950 (*Skj* BI:164), in *Noregs konungatal* 8 and *Skáldskaparmál* 2, where *valkyrjur* appear as bar-maids in Valhöll, bringing wine to the warriors there:

Hvat er þat drauma
Ek hugðumk fyr dag rísa
Valhöll at ryðja
fyrir vegnu folki,
vekða ek einherja,
bæða ek upp rísa
bekki at stráa,
bjórker leyðra,

What dreams are these,
I thought I got up before day
to clear up Valhöll
for slain warriors,
that I woke the Einherjar,
asked them to get up
to strew the benches
and fill the beer casks,

⁸⁹ *Hymis hausrofa*, 'skull-opener / skull-pecker of Hymir', *kenning* for a raven (LP:232).

⁹⁰ That she understands bird speech reveals her otherworldliness. In *Fáfnismál* 32-38, knowledge otherwise hidden is revealed to Sigurðr through bird speech.

⁹¹ The continuous emphasis on her fairness brings out a clear contrast between her white colour and the black raven with blood on its claws and beak. The colour scheme of black, white and red recalls the Irish story of Deirdre (ÓhÓgáin 1990:155; MacCana 1996:94-97; MacKillop 2004:132-134) but is also common in folktales such as Snow-White (ATU 709). The black and white contrast occurs also with the *dísir* in *Þiðrandi þáttr*, the birds in the Michael Scot legend and the pegs in the Sarakka-porridge (see III.1.1.2.).

valkyrjur vín bera
sem vísi komi.
(ÍF 29:77-78)

asked the valkyrjur to carry wine
as if a prince were coming.

Here, the *valkyrjur* are clearly placed in the otherworld, in Valhøll where they serve beer for the *einherjar*, the fallen warriors. Where the *valkyrja* in *Haraldskvæði* is described in terms of her fair looks, ability to communicate with birds and wisdom, the ones in *Eiríksmál* are described in terms of their social function: they are serving-maidens.⁹² In both instances, the word *valkyrja* is used but in neither poem do these beings 'choose the slain', which gives the impression that the term is either applied broadly or that its semantic content is more extensive than what can etymologically be understood from it.

In Eyvindr skáldaspillir's *Hákonarmál*, supposedly c.960 (ÍF 26:xcii), however, the situation is different, firstly because these *valkyrjur* have names: Gøndul and Skøgul,⁹³ secondly because the description of them is quite different from those quoted above. The poem occurs in *Hákonar saga góða* 32; stanza 1, also in *Skáldskaparmál* 2, reads as follows:

Gøndul ok Skøgul
sendi Gautatýr⁹⁴
at kíosa of konunga,
hverr Yngva ættar
skyldi með Óðni fara
ok í Valhøllu vera.
(ÍF 26:193; Faulkes 1998:8)

Gøndul and Skøgul
did Óðinn send
to choose from the kings
who of Yngvi's descendants
should go with Óðinn
and stay in Valhøll.

Furthermore, stanzas 10-13 read as follows:

Gøndul þat mælti,
studdisk geirskapti:
Vex nú gengi goða,
es Hákonni hafa
með her mikinn
heim bōnd of boðit.

Gøndul spoke,
leaning on the spearshaft:
'now increases the gods' side,
since the gods have
invited Hákon
with a great army.'

⁹² This also means that they are under male control, as are *valkyrjur* who act at the orders of Óðinn. The *valkyrja* in *Haraldskvæði* appears different in this respect (unless we are to understand her as acting at the instigation of the male poet).

⁹³ Gøndul looks like a female version of Gøndlir, an *Óðinsheiti* (*Grímnismál* 49); both relate to *gøndull* (m), 'magic wand; male organ' (AeW:199) and to *gandr* (m), 'stick, staff; magic; wolf' (AeW:155; LP:170). McKinnell (2005:151) says that: "*Gandr* has traditionally been translated 'magic staff', but probably means 'magic spirit' and/or 'wolf' ... *gandr* is a *heiti* for 'wolf', perhaps because wolves were regarded as the embodiment of spirits." For a thorough discussion of *gandr*, see Heide 2006; cf. note 387. Skøgul translates as 'battle' (AeW:511; LP:517) and relates to the verb *skaga*, 'to jut out, project from the surroundings' (Frtz III:274; AeW:480).

⁹⁴ An *Óðinsheiti*.

Vísi þat heyrði,
hvat valkyrjur mæltu
mærar af mars baki.
Hyggiliga létu
ok hjalmaðar sötu
ok hofðusk hlífar fyrir.

The prince heard that,
what the valkyrjur said,
maidens on horsebacks,
they acted wisely
and sat wearing helmets
and held shields before them.

Hví þú svá gunni
skiptir, Geir-Skǫgul?
Vórum þó verðir gagns frá goðum.
Vér því völdum,
es þú velli helt,
en þínir fiandr flugu.

'Why do you decide the battle
in this way, Spear-Skǫgul?
We were worthy of victory from
the gods.' 'We made it so
that you held the battlefield
and your enemies fled.'

Ríða vit skulum,
kvað en ríkja Skǫgul,
græna heima goða
Óðni at segja,
at nú mun allvaldr koma
á hann sjalfan at séa.
(ÍF 26:195)

'We shall ride,'
said the powerful Skǫgul,
'to the green home of the gods,
to tell Óðinn
that the king will now come
himself to see him.'

The poem talks specifically about these two *valkyrjur* and portrays them in a much more active way than do the previous two poems – they are present during the battle, sent by Óðinn to choose between the two warring kings which of them will go to Valhǫll. They carry weapons and ride horses (stanza 11) and their connections to dead warriors, to Óðinn and to Valhǫll are clear – thus, they act much like the 'classic' image of *valkyrjur*, those fierce female supernatural battle spirits who possess power over the life and death of warriors and who actively exercise those powers on the field of battle, choosing from among the living who will die (Warmind 1997:91; Price 2002:331).

In these three descriptions, the *valkyrjur* share certain otherworldly qualities and a clear connection to warfare and the dead, but it is also clear that we need to go beyond the etymology in order to gain a fuller understanding of them. *Valkyrjur* often appear in groups but many of them have names, even if this in most cases lends them only a token individuality. Generally, their names seem to be little more than poetic words for battle, indicating strength, force, weaponry or noise: Hlǫkk ('Ringing', 'Battle'), Gǫll ('Noise'), Þrúðr ('Force'), Hildir ('Battle'), Hjálmpriðul ('Causer of Helmet-noise'), Gunnr ('Battle') and more. In skaldic poetry, such names often seem to occur as mere stock phrases with absolutely no hint of personality hiding behind them and it may be that they were employed simply as a literary device on the same level as battle-*kenningar* involving ravens and wolves.

In heroic poetry, *valkyrjur* are typically daughters of kings who, for reasons mostly unknown, are leading a warrior-type of life.⁹⁵ At times they travel through the air, at times on horseback, indicating again a connection between supernatural women and horses (see III.1.2.). *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* shows a *valkyrja* apparently travelling through the air in the prose passage between stanzas 9 and 10:

Eylimi hét konungur. Dóttir hans var Sváva. Hún var valkyrja og reið loft og lög.

'There was a king called Eylimi. His daughter was Sváva. She was a *valkyrja* and rode the air and the sea.'

The same is said of Sigrún in the prose between *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* 4 and 5 and rather recalls a description of the special horse Hófvarpnir in *Gylfaginning* 35 where it is said of the goddess Gná:

Hon á þann hest er rennr lopt ok lög, er heitir Hófvarfnir.
(Faulkes 1982:30)

'She has that horse, which runs in the air and across the sea, and which is called Hófvarpnir.'⁹⁶
(Faulkes 1987:30)

In *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* 17 we encounter Sigrún again, this time on horseback: *En af hesti Høgna dóttir ... ræsi sagði*, 'From horseback Høgni's daughter ... said to the prince', and it is tempting to make the assumption that 'riding the air' actually means 'riding a horse through the air' but this is not necessarily what we are meant to think. There could be other valid explanations.⁹⁷

These *valkyrjur* of apparently human origin also have clear personalities, Sigrdrífa and Brynhildr (who seem to be the same character, cf. *Sigrdrífumál* and *Völsungasaga* 21-22) being the most prominent examples. They are young, unmarried women who, for some reason, have become warriors and taken on an entirely masculine role and who then undergo dramatic changes back into a feminine role when they encounter love (or at least encounter the hero who loves them) and

⁹⁵ Saxo says that some women themselves have chosen this way of life, although their reasons for doing so are rarely clear, for example Lathgertha in *Gesta Danorum* Book 9 (4,2). Aluilda in Book 7 (6,3) became a warrior through the malicious influence of her mother who disliked her suitor.

⁹⁶ Cf. the description of Gerðr in *Skírnismál* 6 and the mention of a horse that carries a person *um myrkvan*, 'through the dark' in *Skírnismál* 8-9.

⁹⁷ In later folk tradition, beings such as witches may ride just about any object through the air. A horse is not a requirement for doing so (Price 2002:119-122).

become married or betrothed to him.⁹⁸ Rather than choosing the slain, they appear as protectresses of their chosen heroes (Quinn 2006). Whether these human *valkyrjur* have their origins in social reality is questionable. Although *Íslendingasögur* provide some evidence for the acceptance and even approval of women occasionally stepping into the masculine realm of behaviour,⁹⁹ there are clear indications that they can go too far in this; we have but little historical evidence for women actually fighting as warriors.¹⁰⁰ What is presently significant about such women is that supernatural powers to grant or destroy life is conceived of in the female form of *valkyrjur* whose war-like and unruly nature lends them a type of double identity: they are feminine in gender but masculine in behaviour.¹⁰¹ It is not the intention here to discuss the cultural politics potentially involved in such portrayals of women¹⁰² but rather the double-sided nature of powerful supernatural or mythical women.

It is not so widely applied as *dís* but the term *valkyrja* is used in such different contexts that it is difficult to grasp what the exact semantic content of the word actually is. Warmind says that: "The word valkyrie seems also to be useable about any magical, active female" (1997:196) and distinguishes between several kinds of *valkyrjur*, primarily those who carry *valkyrja*-type names that typically denote battle in some way or other, and those that are 'romantic' or 'heroic' *valkyrjur* carrying names of a more ordinary type (Sigrún, Kára, Sváva, Brynhildr) which he also describes as shield-maidens. This distinction between ethereal, supernatural *valkyrjur* and more human shield-maidens makes sense. Warmind further says: "I would argue that shield-maidens and valkyries have been thoroughly confused in the Fornaldarsögur – or rather that the distinction was not meaningful to the authors" (1997:196), which appears a valid judgement also for Saxo's descriptions of similar characters.¹⁰³

⁹⁸ Holmqvist-Larsen 1983 provides an enlightening discussion of shield-maidens, and the role of women in general, in *Gesta Danorum* Book 7.

⁹⁹ *Fóstbræðra saga* 1 introduces Þorbjörg digra, who governs the district while her husband is away; she rides to the *þing* and saves a man from hanging; *Laxdæla saga* 1-7 tells the story of Unnr (elsewhere Auðr), who acts as the head of her family and travels to Iceland where she claims land and settles.

¹⁰⁰ Tacitus (*Germania* 7-8, 1970:107-8) mentions that women (and children) would accompany men to the battlefield and encourage them from the sideline but without partaking in the fighting.

¹⁰¹ Ney 2004 provides a discussion of women, mythical and historical, who cross the gender barrier in such ways.

¹⁰² Jochens 1996 and Helga Kress 1993 and 2002 discuss such issues.

¹⁰³ Similar difficulties of interpretation surround the Old English *wælcyrrie*, etymologically identical to Old Norse *valkyrja*, which is said to gloss a Fury, a Gorgon, the Roman goddess of war Bellona, or may be used generally about a witch or sorceress (Bosworth 1898:1153). On

If 'choosing the slain' is what we should expect of them, then there are several *valkyrjur* who act in an 'unauthorised' manner, serving beer or talking to ravens instead; the explanation 'chooser of the slain' is only a partial description of the semantic content of the term *valkyrja*, which complicates our attempts to detect sensible distinctions between them and other classes of beings.

III.2. More Supernatural Women

A few more kinds of female supernatural beings are also of relevance to the present exploration of the *nornir*. The next two sections discuss some groups of beings whereas a number of other individual figures will be discussed in chapter IV.

III.2.1. Mothers and Fylgjur

One such group seems to lurk behind the references to a mother-cult in the area now known as Germany. Roman-inspired votive stones and altars, originating between the 1st and 5th centuries AD and found in the areas then occupied by the Romans, speak of such cults, but they seem to represent cults of native ancestress figures, not Roman ones. The iconography shows almost exclusively groups of three female figures variously dressed as married women (wearing headdresses) and unmarried women (with loosened hair), carrying attributes relating to fertility, childbirth and occasionally warfare. There are more than 500 votive stones with well over 100 different Germanic names or epithets, some of which relate to specific Germanic tribes, while others refer to them as 'helpers in need' (recalling the *naudgonglar* in *Fáfnismál* 12) and a few as warrior goddesses (Simek 1993:204-208). The blending together of birth and warfare is significant: "The idea behind this association lies in the old belief that the mother or deity that brings one to life is also responsible for all good or evil that the individual experiences in his life" (Giannakis 1998:25). Apart from the votive stones, most of which are found on the Lower Rhine, Bede, in *De Temporum Ratione* 15, c.725, makes a reference to an Anglo-Saxon heathen festival called *modranect*, 'night of the mothers', which was a midwinter celebration (1999:53).

the latter usage, however, Mitchell (2004:70) objects: "this gloss on late Anglo-Saxon uses is debatable, as there is no information other than the association with witch (i.e. the collocation itself) to imply that the word means 'sorceress' or anything like it", and goes on to discuss whether the concurrence of *wælcyrrie* with 'witch' is due to a fondness for alliterative pairs in Old English text sources rather than to shared semantic content.



These pieces of cult evidence are often seen as related to the cult of the *dísir* (Simek 1993; McKinnell 2005), and the *matronae* or mothers share concerns for fertility, childbirth and war with *dísir* as well as with *nornir*. Although the evidence spreads out over large geographical areas and spans a period of about a millennium, it seems plausible that we see in these mother-figures some degree of continuity from much earlier periods into the Old Norse sources relating to the *nornir*. They fit into the present discussion even if it is difficult to describe the relationship between *dísir*, mothers and *nornir* from the evidence we have. The idea of a triad, each 'mother' apparently with her own area of concern, strongly recalls the idea of three individually named *nornir* (see IV).

Also *fylgjur*, another type of female supernatural being, share certain traits with *valkyrjur* and *dísir*. The word *fylgja* is etymologically comprehensible. Raudvere says about them:

Benämningen kommer från verbet *fylgja*, att följa och är också besläktat med ordet för efterbörd, *fulga*; alltså något som kommer med livet själv och vidhäftar individen. Dessa varelser uppträder som tydligt synliga i djur- eller kvinnogestalt, och deras uppenbarelsform har ofta en metaforisk innebörd då de kan agera som ett slags dubbelgångare.
(Raudvere 2003:61)

'The designation stems from the verb *fylgja*, 'to follow' and is also related to the word for afterbirth, *fulga*, that is, something which comes with life itself and is attached to the individual. These beings occur as clearly visible in animal or female human form, and their appearance often has a metaphorical meaning as they can act as a sort of *doppelgänger*.'
(My translation)

It is the female human, rather than the animal, version which is of interest in the present context.¹⁰⁴ Like *dísir*, they act as guardian spirits but, whereas *dísir* were the object of a cult, there is no evidence of such in connection with *fylgjur* (Turville-Petre 1964:227-228; Ström 1985:195-196). They occur sometimes as single beings, sometimes in groups, and they seem to be closely connected to the individual, embodying that person's luck or destiny, but can also be attached to a family. Often they are spoken of, even seen, shortly before someone's death as in *Hallfreðar saga* 11 where Hallfreðr falls ill on the way to Iceland:

Þá sá þeir konu ganga eptir skipinu; hon var mikil ok í brynju; hon gekk á bylgjum sem á landi. Hallfreðr leit til ok sá, at þar var fylgjukona hans.

¹⁰⁴ Animal *fylgjur* are mentioned in *Njáls saga* 23 where Gunnar's *fylgja* is a bear, and in *Vatnsdæla saga* 42 where Þorkell silfri's *fylgja* is a red horse signalling his impending death; both are seen in dreams. Mundal 1974 shows that whereas animal *fylgjur* embody the qualities of the person to whom they are attached, the women *fylgjur* act as protectresses.

Hallfreðr mælti: "Í sundr segi ek þillu við þik." Hon mælti: "Villtu, Þorvaldr, taka við mér?" Hann kvazk eigi vilja. Þá mælti Hallfreðr ungi: "Ek vil taka við þér." Síðan hvarf hon.
(ÍF 8:198)

Then they saw a woman following the ship. She was tall and dressed in a mail-coat. She walked on the waves as if on land. Hallfred looked and saw that it was his *fetch*.
Hallfred said, "I declare myself finally parted from you."
She said, "Will you take me on, Thorvald?"
He said he would not.
Then the boy Hallfred said, "I'll take you on," at which she disappeared.
(CSI I:252)

The element of transition is clear in this passage, both Hallfreðr's transition from the living to the dead and the transition of the *fylgja* from one person to another, which, however, is not imposed on the person by the *fylgja* but by his own choice. This could be an indication that she personifies a person's luck or fate and we see that, whereas Þorvaldr will have nothing to do with her, the young Hallfreðr accepts her as his own, as though she belongs with him as some inevitable consequence of being named after the older Hallfreðr.

The term can be used in more extensive senses (as in *Þiðrandi þáttr* where the words *dísir* and *fylgjur* are both used to describe the same group of supernatural women) but, unlike *dísir*, *valkyrjur* and also *nornir*, *fylgjur* as such do not appear to make decisions or choices and they may simply be embodiments of conceptual features (especially good luck or strength) of the person to whom they are attached.¹⁰⁵ It may be coincidental that all the *fylgjur* we hear about are attached to men, not to women.

III.2.2. Swan-Maidens?

Having attempted to draw some lines between *nornir*, *dísir*, *valkyrjur*, *matronae* and *fylgjur*, one last group of female supernatural beings merit some attention. These are the three women in *Völundarkviða* 1:

¹⁰⁵ For a fuller discussion of *fylgjur* see Mundal 1974.

Meyjar flugo sunnan
 myrkvið í gøgnom,
 alvitr ungar,
 ørlög drýgia.
 Þær á sævar strönd
 settoz at hvílaz,
 drósir suðrænar,
 dýrt lín spunno.

Maidens flew from the south
 across Myrkviðr,¹⁰⁶
 the strange young creature,
 to fulfill fate.
 They sat on the lake shore
 to rest,
 southern ladies,
 spun precious linen.

Significantly, it is only the prose introduction, not the verse, which labels the women *valkyrjur* and the term 'swan-maidens' occurs only in scholarship, not in the eddic text.¹⁰⁷ The poem simply calls them *meyjar*, 'maidens',¹⁰⁸ revealing nothing more than their gender. The women also have names and lineages; the prose says:

Þar voro tvær dætr Hlōðvés konungs, Hlaðguðr svanhvít ok Hervqr alvitr; in þriðia var Qlrún, Kiárs dóttir af Vallandi.

'Two of them were daughters of King Hlōðvér, Hlaðguðr swanwhite and Hervqr all-knowing [or 'strange creature']; the third one was Qlrún, Kiár's daughter from Valland.'¹⁰⁹

Should they really be *valkyrjur*, they certainly belong with the more human kind rather than the purely metaphorical, war-related ones (see III.1.3.).

The poem applies two sets of names to the women: Hervqr, Hlaðguðr and Qlrún on the one side with Alvitr and Svanhvít on the other.¹¹⁰ Hervqr and Hlaðguðr appear to belong to the battle-related names of *valkyrjur*. The name Hervqr,¹¹¹ from the noun *herr*, 'army' and *Vqr*, listed as a goddess in *þulur* (Faulkes 1998:114),¹¹² probably means something like 'goddess of the army.'

For the name Hlaðguðr, several interpretations are possible. *Guðr* means 'battle' and *hlað* could be a feminine version of the masculine noun *hlōðr*, 'slayer or killer' (LP:268), meaning something like 'killing battle-goddess', not an unlikely name for a

¹⁰⁶ 'Mirkwood' or 'dark wood', apparently a legendary forest in heroic poetry; *Lokasenna* 42 connects it to Ragnarøk.

¹⁰⁷ The swan in the swan-maiden story is unlikely to be native to the Scandinavian area (Hatto 1961:349), though the story pattern is well known, cf. mare-stories (Tang Kristensen 1928:154-158) and selkie-stories (Jón Árnason 1954:629-630 [632-3]; Simpson 1972:100-102).

¹⁰⁸ This also goes for the *nornir* in *Völuspá* 20 (see IV.1.4.).

¹⁰⁹ This information is repeated in stanza 15.

¹¹⁰ Dronke (1997:290-292) discusses the names as two sets, arguing that the *valkyrja* names are a later interpolation that belong neither to the swan-maiden motif nor to the story of *Völundr*.

¹¹¹ Hervqr is the name of the main character in the legendary *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs*, but she appears to be unrelated to the eddic Hervqr.

¹¹² It is an element in many compound names: Glaumvqr, Grjótvqr, Leirvqr, Oddvqr (LP:629).

valkyrja. As a verb, *hlaða* can mean to make a pile, or to kill, to bring down a person (LP:260).¹¹³ But it could also be the noun *hlað*, an embroidered band or ribbon for tying round one's head or onto items of clothing. Simek (1993:151) interprets *hlaða* as 'to weave', reading the name as 'weaver of battles' which he then relates to *Darraðarljóð*. This interpretation is perhaps not impossible but it hardly seems an obvious one; in the combination *hlaða spjöldum*, *hlaða* refers to what is probably tablet weaving: 'putting tablets of wood next to one another' (LP:260),¹¹⁴ as is referred to in *Guðrúnarkviða II* 26: *Húnscar meylar, þær er hlaða spjöldom*, 'Hunnish maidens, who do tabletweaving' (it occurs in the context of the precious and costly contents of a house and is unlikely to refer to anything supernatural). If she is a *valkyrja*, Hlaðguðr's name seems more likely to refer to killing; that it should relate to weaving is a stretch of the imagination for which there is not much support.

The name *Qlrún* looks different from the previous two in that it does not conjure up the same kind of war-related images. That it should consist of the nouns *ql*, 'ale' and *rún*, 'rune, secret wisdom', giving 'ale-rune', is a somewhat doubtful interpretation but could relate in some way to the *qlrúnar* in *Sigrdrífumál* 7 and 19: runes carved onto a drinking horn in order to protect against deceit from another man's wife.¹¹⁵ This idea would combine well with the information given in stanza 15: that she is skilled in magic, and it could refer to certain protective aspects. It is more likely, however, that the root etymology of the name refers to good luck. "*Qlrún* is Egill's swan-maiden wife in *Vqlundarkviða*, and *qlrúnar* must originally have been connected with Primitive Old Norse *alu* 'good luck'" (McKinnell 2005:212).

The other names, *Alvitr* and *Svanhvít*, seem to be of quite a different kind. There are two possible readings of *alvitr*; it can mean 'fully wise', 'all-knowing' (this meaning occurs in *Háttatal* 99) or it can mean 'strange creature', favoured by Dronke

¹¹³ The name is strikingly similar to that of Lathgertha, first wife of Ragnarr Loðbrók (whom Saxo calls Regnerus) in *Gesta Danorum* Book 9 (4,2). Lathgertha, whose name would be Hlaðgerðr in Old Norse, acts like a *valkyrja* or shield-maiden. The name might relate to the place name Hlaðir in Norway or to the Frankish female name Leutgarde, attested in 942 (*Saxo Grammaticus* 1980:151).

¹¹⁴ Tablet weaving (or card weaving) is done with very thin, often square, tablets of wood or some other durable material with little holes in them (typically one hole in each corner). The warp is threaded through these holes, and the shed is created between the threads in the upper holes and those in the lower holes; the weft is carried across between the upper and lower warp threads, and the shed is changed by turning the cards, so that other threads are brought to the top and to the bottom. Only quite narrow things can be woven in this way (straps, belts etc.); they can, however, be very long (Collingwood 1996).

¹¹⁵ In *Egils saga* 44 (ÍF 2:109) Egill carves runes onto a horn containing a poisonous drink; then he cuts his hand and when he grips the horn with his bloody hand, the horn breaks asunder.

(1997:255) and taken by Finnur Jónsson to refer particularly to swan-maidens (LP:11). In *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* 26, Helgi addresses his *valkyrja*-lover Sigrún as *alvitr* but whether he means to call her 'very wise one' or 'strange being' ('strange' perhaps in the sense of supernatural) is not clear; she could well be both.



Figure 1. Many artistic interpretations of *nornir* represent a mixture of Old Norse and Classical tradition, as appears to be the case here, where Verðandi is holding a set of scales. The scales never figure in Old Norse tradition. Regarding her swan wings, the artist may have had *Völundarkviða* in mind.

Svanhvít means 'swan-white', 'white as a swan' and is remarkably easy to interpret compared to the other names; so much so that one is tempted to think it must have a deeper meaning as well. In stanza 2 she is said to 'wear swan feathers', which has given rise to the widespread practice of referring to all three women as swan-maidens (cf. Larrington 1992:145-146), but the poem actually speaks of only one of them in this way.

'Swan-maidens' are not otherwise known as a separate category of beings in Old Norse mythology.¹¹⁶ This does not in itself mean that they were not known but it makes it difficult to say much about them. *Brymskviða* mentions Freyja's magical feather cloak, *fiðrhamr*, and *Skáldskaparmál* 19 states that Frigg was able to assume the shape of a falcon (*drottning valshams*, 'queen of the falcon skin'¹¹⁷ is a *kenning* for her), so the 'wearing of swan feathers' is not as such unique, it is just a

¹¹⁶ They recall the white dove-maidens of *Friedrich von Schwaben*, a Middle High German epic that shows remarkable parallels and contrasts to *Völundarkviða* (Bonsack 1983; Dronke 1997:286; Nedoma 2000).

¹¹⁷ *Valshamr* means 'falcon skin' (Frtz III:847), but the noun *valr* (m) has three meanings: 1) falcon, 2) name for a horse and 3) those who have fallen in battle (LP:590-1).

different species of bird. That exactly this species of bird is employed may, however, not be entirely arbitrary because *Guðrúnarkviða II* 14 mentions *svani danska*, 'Danish swans' as part of the picture which Guðrún is embroidering – a picture also depicting *sali suðræna*, 'southern halls' and *skatar léko*, 'men's (who) played (at war)'. In *Völundarkviða*, the women arrive from the south, as migrating swans do, and *valkyrjur* are associated with 'men's war-play'. Furthermore, swans occur in a number of battle-related *kenningar* in skaldic poetry, seemingly as doubles for ravens and eagles, birds often associated with war,¹¹⁸ and there is some evidence that black ravens as well as white swans are connected to *valkyrjur*. The swans are somehow equivalent to as well as opposites to ravens, a kind of 'white ravens'.¹¹⁹

Gylfaginning 16 connects swans to Urðarbrunnr:

Fuglar tveir fæðask í Urðar brunni. Þeir heita svanir, ok af þeim fuglum hefr komit þat fugla kyn er svá heitir.
(Faulkes 1982:19)

'Two birds feed in Urðarbrunnr. They are called swans, and from these birds has come that species of bird that has that name'.
(Faulkes 1987:19)

The association between swans and Urðarbrunnr might simply be due to the whiteness of either but it does tenuously link the birds to ideas about fate.¹²⁰

Taking all of these factors into account, what can we make of the women in *Völundarkviða*? That they are supernatural beings is beyond doubt, their borderline nature reveals this: they span the human and animal worlds, they are found on the shore of a lake¹²¹ early in the morning. We encounter them just at the time when

¹¹⁸ Eyvindr skáldaspillir's *Háleygjatal* 11: *svanir Farmatýs*, 'Óðinn's swans' and Einar Skúlason's *Øxarflokkur* 5: *Gautreks svana*, 'Óðinn's swans', which are ravens; Gopþormr sindri's *Hákonardrápa* 1: *Jalfaðs svangæðir*, 'Óðinn's swan-feeder', a warrior (who feeds the ravens, 'Óðinn's swans', by killing men).

¹¹⁹ The complex etymology of 'black' (OE *blæc*) is interesting: "In OE. found also (as metres show) with long vowel *blāce*, *blācan*, and thus confused with *blāc* shining, white ... as is shown by the fact that the latter also occurs with short vowel, *blāc*, *blācum*; in ME. the two words are often distinguishable only by the context, and sometimes not by that" (OED I:889). This is reflected in the two meanings of 'bleach'; a derivative of 'black' but also having the meaning 'pale, shining' (OED I:910), which recalls Danish *bleg* 'pale' and *blæk* 'ink'. These words stem from the Indo-European root **bhleg-* 'burning', and it seems the meaning depends on whether one focuses on the bright flames or on the scorched ashes resulting from the burning flames.

¹²⁰ Why Snorri connects swans to the well in the first place is unclear.

¹²¹ The lakeshore goes well not only with aquatic birds but also with the idea of spinning linen; linen consists of very long fibres with no elasticity so that keeping the fibres moist helps the process along. One would have a cup of water to dip the fingers in to keep the fibres damp whilst spinning them. (Personal communication from Freda Bayne, Holmwood Textiles, Orkney.) Cf. note 244.

everything about their situation is in an in-between state; they are between water and land, between night and day, between human and animal. Of the beings discussed above, they seem to fit most easily with the shield-maidens, having names and lineages whilst being very tangible beings, but at the same time there is remarkably little 'shield' about them – they show no attachment to warfare, they carry no weapons, they ride no horses, in short they are neither shield-maidens nor *valkyrjur* (and *Völundr* is not a warrior). They seem simply to occupy that grey area where *fylgjur* and *valkyrjur* overlap with one another, as the poem itself seems to span the mythological and legendary heroic worlds.¹²²

It is noteworthy that the one instance in Old Norse literature where the words 'spinning' and 'fate' occur together in the same text passage does not concern *nornir*, those looming manufacturers of fate, but innocent-looking swan-maidens instead.¹²³ Fate in the poem is not something imposed on the men by the strange women, it rather seems to be a fate to which the women themselves are subject, namely that they must act like swans and return to whence they came after a certain period. There is little indication that they are in charge of fate, their fulfilment of fate apparently consists of being what they are, namely of a different nature from their husbands. The prose may refer to them as *valkyrjur* but, unlike *valkyrjur*, they leave their husbands and, although swans might have links to *valkyrjur* and perhaps *nornir*, the women themselves are neither *valkyrjur* nor *nornir*.

III.3. Greek Moirai and Roman Parcae

Before moving on to further discussions of the Norse material, it is worthwhile taking a look at comparable material from Classical tradition. *Nornir*, where conceived of as spinners, are often compared to the Greek *moirai* and Roman *parcae* (Simek 1993:237; Bæksted 1965:181); while such comparisons are in many ways justified it should not be overlooked that the *moirai* are by no means the only Classical women involved with fate. Greek mythology presents a bewildering array of female supernatural beings, all of whom in some way or other concern themselves with issues of fate, and systematising the relationship between these into a logically

¹²² Their brief role as visiting otherworldly women recalls the folktales about selkies found in Scotland, Norway and Iceland or the tragic nightmare-women of Danish folk tradition (Tang Kristensen 1928:154-158), yet there is no indication that the men steal their garments or in other ways force them to stay, as is common in the folktales.

¹²³ Dronke (1997:255, 305) suggests that their spinning constitutes a reference to their marriages to the three brothers.

coherent description is likely to result in unhelpful generalisations. For the purposes of this thesis, the most prominent Classical beings will be discussed briefly but no attempt will be made to describe them fully, only to establish relatively concise outlines of the *keres* (κηρες), *erinyes* (ερινυες), *moirai* (μοίραι) and Nemesis (Νέμεσις) as comparable figures. Neither is it the intention to draw actual parallels but, in anticipation of the discussions of fate and textiles in chapter V, it would seem necessary to devote a certain amount of attention to the Classical tradition. I have concentrated firstly on the idea of fate and spinning/weaving, secondly on Homeric literature; that is, some of the earliest Classical literary sources dating from the 8th century BC. While it is relevant to concentrate on the early evidence, as is also the approach adopted for the Norse material, it is also convenient to limit the scope to specific sources as this is not intended to be an exhaustive study of the development of Classical figures relating to fate.

The *keres* (Κηρες) seem to be imagined as evil, bloodthirsty female spirits with sharp claws and teeth who bring all sorts of bad things to people – old age, ravaging disease and violent death. They are often described with the adjectives 'black' and 'dark' or they haunt the battlefields in gruesome forms like some kind of vultures. A passage from the *Illiad* 18:535 describes them thus:

Then they formed for battle and fought it out by the banks of the river, casting at each other with their bronze-tipped spears. And Strife [Eris] and Confusion [Kydoimos] were in their company, and cruel Death [Ker] – she gripped one man alive with a fresh wound on him, and another one unwounded, and was dragging a dead man by the feet through the shambles: the cloak on her shoulders was deep red with men's blood. The figures closed and fought like living men, and dragged away from each other the bodies of those who were killed.
(1987:308)

The word *ker* (κηρ; plural *keres*) occurs frequently in Homer, mainly with reference to an ominous manifestation of death rather than as a reference to fate as such; in other literature, *keres* may refer to all kinds of harm that man may encounter. The word is often translated into English somewhat simplistically as 'fate', though it never portrays a good fate, the simplicity probably arising from the difficulties of distinguishing between different chthonic beings in translation but perhaps also because *keres* and *moirai* overlap and both are strongly associated with death (Dietrich 1965:243). *Keres* seem at times to have been conceived of as the souls of dead people but then always with the added implication of being harmful (Hjortsø 1984:93; Dietrich 1965:242).

The *erinyes* (Ἐρινυες; Latin 'Furies') are another group of female supernatural beings associated with the *moirai*. The etymology of the word *erinyes* (singular *erinyis* [ἐρινυς], plural *erinyes*) is uncertain and its original meaning seems to have been lost already to the scholars of antiquity, a fact perhaps revealing that they are very ancient figures; the word probably alludes to chthonic and angry beings "capable of penalizing the transgressions of men and gods" (Dietrich 1965:98). Often, they are said to bring madness or overwhelming feelings of guilt to murderers, especially for the crimes of matricide or patricide; in Homer they are sometimes synonymous with or personified forms of curses spoken by people (Dietrich 1965:234). They look horrifying, their hair and bodies intertwined with snakes and they often wear black robes. They never let go of their prey but are, on the other hand, not interested in catching it either, as their primary function is to follow criminals continuously wherever they go. In this respect, they are related to Nemesis who is not only strongly chthonic but also has a highly moral function (Dietrich 1965:167-168). As with the *keres*, the number of *erinyes* tends to be unspecified, although the latter are at times regarded as a triad and in later periods names were attached to them: Alekto (Ἀληκτώ) 'Untiring One', Megaira (Μέγαιρα) 'Envious One' and Tisifone (Τισίφουνη) 'Avenger'.¹²⁴ The *erinyes* were, interestingly, called upon when taking an oath (Hjortsø 1984:93-94; Dietrich 1965:232), as in the *Iliad* 19:257: "Let my witness now be Zeus first of all, highest and greatest of gods, and Earth and Sun and the Erinyes who punish men below the earth, when any has falsely sworn" (1987:317). This aspect would appear to relate closely to their chthonic identity and otherworldly powers.

Moirai (Μοῖραι) are the female supernatural beings most often mentioned when the talk is of fate in ancient Greek mythology but they clearly overlap and intertwine with both *keres* and *erinyes*. Like these, they are imagined as gloomy figures bringing death. "This in all likelihood was the early 'lot' they gave to man, while their functions at births and marriages and their presence throughout life might well have been later additions" (Dietrich 1965:64). In many later sources they are said to spin, occasionally to weave or bind, or reference is made simply to their threads; however, in Homer we hear of this only once, namely in the *Iliad* 24:209 where Hekabe says about Hektor: "So strong Fate must have spun for him with her thread as he was

¹²⁴ Damico (1984:44) notes that: "Latin equivalents for the term *wælcyrge* (...) found in Anglo-Saxon glosses and vocabularies of the eighth through the eleventh century refer to the *Erinyes* (...) *Allecto*, *Tisiphone*, *Parcae*, and the Roman goddess of war, *Bellona*."

born, at the moment I gave birth to him, that he should be food for the quick-running dogs" (1987:393). The word used in the Greek here is *moira*. When we hear of spinning in the *Iliad* 20:127-128: "he will suffer what Fate spun for him with her thread as he was born" (1987:325), Homer uses the word *aisa* (αἴσα) rather than *moira*, and in the *Odyssey* 7:195, where Alcinous says of Odysseus: "[He] must suffer whatever Destiny and the relentless Fate spun for him with the first thread of life when he came from his mother's womb" (1991:100), the word used is *klothes* (κλωθές) 'spinners'. Exactly how the terms *aisa* and *klothes* relate to *moirai* is difficult to gauge. *Klothes* could refer to the *moirai* or the gods alike as both are said elsewhere to spin fate; *aisa* means 'fate'¹²⁵ and seems at times to be synonymous with *Alekto*. It cannot be said with certainty that these words refer to the *moirai* but neither is it certain that they do not. Other instances of spinning occur in Homer, though always attributed to the gods: *Iliad* 24:525: "This is the fate the gods have spun for poor mortal men" (1987:401) and *Odyssey* 11:139: "the threads of destiny which the gods themselves have spun" (1991:163). Thus, the image of spinning is common when describing births whilst descriptions of death may refer to the cutting, crumbling or tightening of threads (see note 266); but the action is not attributed exclusively to *moirai*.

Otherwise, *moirai* are found as agents of verbs, such as 'to give', 'to prophesy' and 'to decree'. They appear in both the singular, one *moira*, and in the plural, several *moirai*, and, while they are often un-named and un-numbered, when a number is given it is always three. Hesiod, in *Theogony*, says (217-219) that Nyx, Night, gave birth to the *moirai* without specifying anything, but later (904-906) states that the *moirai* are the offspring of Zeus and Themis, that their names are Klotho (Κλωθώ) 'Spinner', Lakhesis (Λάχεσις) 'Apportioner of Lots'¹²⁶ and Atropos (Ἄτροπος) 'Unchangeable One' (Lampe 1961:261, 759, 794), and that they give mortal men both good and ill in life. Thus, *moirai* are associated with positive as well as with negative things.

The term *moira* contains several nuances of meaning ranging from 'share' or 'portion' in quite a spatial, physical sense (in Modern Greek it can refer to latitude

¹²⁵ αἴσα supposedly derives from ἴσος (Dietrich 1965:11), meaning 'equal, equality, balanced' (Lampe 1961:677).

¹²⁶ Interestingly, λάχνος refers to a fleece of unspun wool (*Odyssey* 9:445), and Onians (1951:416-419) suggests that the three names refer to different stages of the weaving process: Lachesis for the wool itself, Klotho the spinning process and Atropos the actual weaving.

and longitude; Stavropoulos 1988:558)¹²⁷ to 'lot' or 'share of good and bad' in a more metaphysical sense relating to fate. It seems to correspond in both of these meanings to English 'lot' and Old Norse *hlutr* which also have concrete as well as more metaphorical meanings. *Hlutr* (m) describes the individual lot used for lot-casting (Frz II:17) but also a kind of amulet or oracle as well as a share or part of a whole (Frz II:18).

As is evident, *keres*, *erínyes*, *moirai* and Nemesis share many features, especially their association with death, and drawing dividing lines between them is about as easy as it is to distinguish clearly between their Norse counterparts. At the risk of over-simplifying we might say that, in Homer's portrayal, *moirai* represent the inevitability of death, *keres* its horrying aspect, whilst *erínyes* and Nemesis incorporate certain notions of otherworldly judgement.¹²⁸

With respect to the Roman *parcae*, these appear to be the exact same figures as the Greek *moirai*, though referred to under a Latin name in Latin sources. Parca is explained as: "A Roman goddess of birth, identified (app. by false etymology) with the Greek Moirai and then pluralized to correspond with them" (*Oxford Latin Dictionary*:1294). The false etymology would seem to be *pars*, 'share, part' for Parca, associated with *moira*, 'share, lot.' Her name originally came from the verb *parere*, 'to give birth to; to create.'

That *nornir* and *moirai* have a lot in common cannot be doubted but we see now that the situation is not uncomplicated: *moirai* are not the only Greek figures to share features with *nornir*, nor are the *nornir* the only Norse figures to share features with the *moirai*. We cannot simply transfer Greek ideas about fate and *moirai* onto *nornir* or the Old Norse situation in general but through comparisons we gain a broader perspective onto the topic. The fact that *moirai* spin does not in itself mean that *nornir* do the same; it may, however, serve as our starting point for an exploration of the idea.

¹²⁷ Lewis (1999:298) describes an intriguing parallel from Chinese tradition: "This use of *jing* to indicate dividing lines that establish order or create structure is closely related to its sense as the warp of a fabric. Consequently, when indicating spatial demarcation it is sometimes paired with the character *wei* 'weft' ... These characters would ultimately be used to translate the terms 'longitude' and 'latitude'." I am grateful to Emily Lyle, University of Edinburgh, for this reference.

¹²⁸ Homer seems to operate with several concepts of fate side by side and also uses individual words, such as *moira*, in more than one sense (Dietrich 1965:230, 327-337).

III.4. Summary: Border Lines and Grey Areas

It can be difficult to tell these different kinds of beings apart as they do tend to merge more or less into each other, yet without ever becoming entirely synonymous with one another. Simultaneously, confusion about which is what appears to have arisen at an early stage so that little guarantee is provided by the use of specific words – for example the words *dís* and *valkyrja* do not in themselves ensure that the women described as such should be grouped with these types of creatures. Disentangling such groups of beings from one another by means of logic would not only be impossible but probably outright wrong. In all likelihood, people at the time did draw some lines but not everyone everywhere drew the same lines at all times; this would make it doubly artificial to try to do this now. There may well have been significant differences in the semantic content attached to certain terms in different geographical areas as well as during different periods of time. Frustrating as this is, it is a situation which we can only accept.

Ström says about *dísir*:

Det ligger i sakens natur, att väsen som råder över så oberäkneliga, skickelsedigra och livsavgörande skeenden som äring och missväxt, livsfruktens liv och död, seger och nederlag i strid måste erhålla drag av ödesmakter, av makter som håller människans hela livsöde i sina händer. Om valkyrjorna kan säges representera den heroiskt-mytiska aspekten hos *dísirna*, representerar *nornorna* lika säkert deras ödesaspekt. (Ström 1954:85-86)

'It is obvious that beings who control such unpredictable, fateful and life-deciding events as growth and failure of crops, the life and death of all living things, victory and defeat in battle must take on the character of powers of fate, of powers which hold the whole of human life in its hands. If the *valkyrjur* can be said to represent the heroic-mythical aspect of the *dísir*, the *nornir* represent their fatal aspect.'
(My translation)

In scholarship, *dísir* has sometimes been regarded as an umbrella term for female supernatural beings as such so that *nornir* and *valkyrjur* have been seen to form sub-groups of *dísir*, as is the impression given by Ström. I agree to a certain extent, but many things speak against using any of the terms discussed here as an overarching description for all kinds of supernatural women and doing so quickly becomes an artificial approach to the study of supernatural women in Old Norse tradition. I do not think it advisable to say that *valkyrjur* are a type of *dísir* any more than I agree with using the invented term *örlagadísir* to describe *nornir*, the differences are too great – even if the dividing lines must remain fuzzy. At best we can hope that our

endeavours will result in a little less confusion, but we must keep in mind that logically applicable rules are unlikely ever to have existed, especially considering that we are talking about a very large geographical area: the whole of Scandinavia, as well as an extensive period of time: the Viking Age into the early Middle Ages, with many texts stemming from even later periods.

Of *nornir*, *valkyrjur* and *dísir*, the last-mentioned constitute the only group to which a cult was demonstrably attached. They might have been considered some sort of anonymous ancestress figures, although there is no direct evidence for this; their cult had to do with fertility and death and it contained certain legal aspects as is evident from the institution of the *dísaping* (see notes 374 and 380).

Valkyrjur have a special connection to warfare and to the realm of the dead but have little to do with childbirth and fertility. Nothing speaks of a cult of *valkyrjur*. They turn up as individuals as well as groups, often have names and are at times attached to individual warriors. Although the term *valkyrja* would seem to indicate an act of choosing, this is not a consistent feature of these beings and the term appears to be used in rather a broad sense.

Fylgjur are essentially linked to birth situations and to ideas about protection but as embodiments of a person's characteristics or good luck rather than as helping or choosing figures; they are the only ones who tend to appear only as singular figures.

Nornir appear to represent notions of inevitability in a broad and unapproachable sense; they are strongly linked to death and to ideas concerning judgement but also to birth. The relative absence of *nornir*, even when this word is used, may be one of their most recognisable features: they rarely appear in person but are referred to as beings that are out there somewhere, generally as a collective whole of unnamed figures but sometimes also as individuals. Their less than physical presence may also contribute to the fact that they are not really described as being particularly alluring or enticing the way that *dísir* and *valkyrjur* at times are. *Nornir* often seem to disappear into conceptual background spheres.

Thus, *nornir* and *dísir* would seem to come quite close to each other as collective groups attached to birth and death and with certain legal notions surrounding them, yet *dísir* appear the more tangible of the two groups and are actually present in human life, while *nornir* are more abstract figures looming in the darker, often transitional, moments of life. Such dividing lines are valid even if they remain unclear; there are many overlaps and confusion easily arises in the grey areas in between. What unites them is the fact that *nornir*, *dísir*, *valkyrjur* and *fylgjur* all

represent – in some way or other – an otherworldly power which both gives and takes life and which is conceptualised in female form.

IV. The Women in the Well

The sections in the following chapter explore especially the references to *nornir* found in *Völuspá* and *Snorra-Edda* which, in certain ways, differ from those discussed above. This is evident firstly because these two sources attach names to them or at least to some of them; secondly because they describe the work of *nornir* in remarkably positive or at least neutral ways; and thirdly because they pay particular attention to the well as a place of origin for *nornir*. These are the three main topics discussed below. *Nornir* are popularly conceived of as a group of three but, although there is some evidence for there being three of them, most sources do not specify their exact number but simply refer to *nornir* in the plural. This does not in itself mean that one can argue against the idea that there are three *nornir*, but the importance of actually reading what the sources tell us must be stressed and the lack of consistency regarding this point is noteworthy.

A major issue also raised here is the question of why fate is portrayed as being so decidedly and consistently female, either taking the form of female figures or being associated with feminine types of work.

IV.1. Urðr, Verðandi, Skuld

Much of what is said about *nornir* in scholarship focuses on *Völuspá* 19-20, *Gylfaginning* 15-16 and the names given in these two passages. For reasons that will become clear, it is obvious that both passages are important to our understanding of *nornir* but that they also raise several questions.

IV.1.1. The Names

In most instances, *nornir* are referred to simply as *nornir* – there are 29 direct mentions of the word in all of the source material – a collective group of beings who, like *dísir*, are not called goddesses as such and do not seem to have individual personalities.

Völuspá 19-20 bring us face to face with three enigmatic female characters:

Ask veit ek standa,
heitir Yggdrasill,
hár þaðmr, ausinn
hvíta auri;
þaðan koma döggar

I know an ash that stands
called Yggdrasill,
a tall tree, watered
with white silt;
from there come the dews

þærs í dala falla;¹²⁹
stendr æ yfir, grænn
Urðar brunni.

which fall in the valleys;
it stands eternally, green
over the well¹³¹ of Urðr.

Þaðan koma meylar,
margs vitandi,
þriár, ór þeim sæ
er und þolli stendr;
Urð héto eina,
aðra Verðandi,
-skáro á skíði-¹³⁰
Skuld ina þriðio.
Þær lög lögðo,
þær líf kuro
alda börnum,
ørlög seggia.

From there come maidens,
Knowledgeable of many things,
three, from that lake
which stands under the tree;
one they called Urðr,
another Verðandi,
-they carved on slips of wood-
Skuld the third one.
They laid down laws,
they chose life
for the children of men,
the fate of men.

This is the *Konungsbók* rendition of the poem, c.1270, and the version from *Hauksbók*, c.1300-1325, has slight variations. In *Hauksbók*, the third line of stanza 20 reads: *þriár ór þeim sal*, 'three from that hall' instead of *þriár ór þeim sæ*, 'three from that lake'. *Hauksbók* thus gives a hall as the place that the *nornir* come from, whereas *Konungsbók* gives a lake; both are situated below the tree. Further, *Hauksbók* renders the last line as: *ørlög at seggia* where *Konungsbók* has: *ørlög seggia*. This discrepancy will be discussed below (see IV.1.4.).

From the passage in *Völuspá*, we learn that these *meylar* are very knowledgeable, lay down laws, that they choose life for the children of men and choose men's fate and that they are involved with some kind of carving on wood. These three women are most often taken to be *nornir* but the use of the unspecific noun *meylar* leaves at least the option that they might be a different type of beings. The description given in *Völuspá* 19-20 could, arguably, fit most of the female figures connected to watery places and fate that are discussed below (see IV.2.1. and IV.2.2.). The idea that they are *nornir* is, however, clearly the explanation given by Snorri in *Gylfaginning* 15:

¹²⁹ This recalls *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* 28 where sweat from the manes of *valkyrjur*'s horses falls as dew in valleys and as hail in forests on higher ground. The name Yggdrasil also seems to indicate a horse (Stefánsson 2005:270; Simek 1993:375); *drasil* being a poetic word for 'horse' (Frtz I:261; LP:84).

¹³⁰ The phrase is understood by some as dative singular (Holtmark 1951:82), by others as accusative plural (Larrington 1996:6; Hermann Pálsson 1996:71). I follow the latter convention and, as an accusative, *skíði* may be either singular or plural. I am grateful to Sverrir Tómasson, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, for this information. (See IV.1.4.)

¹³¹ The term *brunnr* translates as a source of water, spring or well (Frtz I:200; LP:67); a sharp distinction between these meanings is not important to the argument presented here.

Þar stendr salr einn fagr undir askinum við brunninn, ok ór þeim sal koma þrjár meyjar þær er svá heita: Urðr, Verðandi, Skuld. Þessar meyjar skapa mönnum aldr. Þær kollum vér nornir. Enn eru fleiri nornir, þær er koma til hvers manns er borinn er at skapa aldr ... Góðar nornir ok vel ættaðar skapa góðan aldr. En þeir menn er fyrir ósköpum verða, þa valda því illar nornir.

(Faulkes 1982:18)

'There stands there one beautiful hall under the ash by the well, and out of this hall come three maidens whose names are Weird, Verdandi, Skuld. These maidens shape men's lives. We call them norns. There are also other norns who visit everyone when they are born to shape their lives ... Good norns, ones of noble parentage, shape good lives, but as for those people that become the victims of misfortune, it is evil norns that are responsible.'

(Faulkes 1987:18)

Snorri's description falls in two parts, almost as if he is referring to two separate classes of *nornir*: first those who have names, then those who have parentage and are either good or evil. The impression is almost of a hierarchy with three 'chief *nornir*' at the top and further down 'lesser *nornir*' who do the footwork of visiting newborn children. Whatever intention lies behind such a division is hard to understand but Snorri may have rationalised the concept of *nornir* into subdivisions; the idea of *nornir* having parentage of some sort is supported by *Fáfnismál* 13, and that of good and bad ones is reminiscent of the black and white *dísir* in *Þiðrandi þátr* (see III.1.1.2.). Yet, this division is not evident in references to *nornir* beyond *Snorra-Edda* and *Fáfnismál*.¹³²

The names attached to the *nornir* on these two occasions form the present focus of interest: Urðr, Verðandi and Skuld – in that order. The three names occur together only in these two texts, which means that it is not that common a constellation, although the names Urðr and Skuld occur independently in a few other places. Urðr, or forms thereof (genitive *urðar*, plural *urðir*), appears in 11 instances, either as a name for one *norn* or in compounds where it has the meaning of 'fate' or 'fateful' (see III.1.1.2.); Skuld in 4, as a *norn* in *Grógaldr* 4, a *valkyrja* in *Þulur* (Faulkes 1998:115), a *kenning* for a woman in a *lausavísa* by Egill Skallagrímsson¹³³ and an evil half-sister of Hrólfr in *Hrólfs saga kraka*.¹³⁴

In English editions of the *Edda*, the names are often translated. Larrington (1996:6) calls them Fate, Becoming and Must-be, whereas McKinnell (1994:117), more convincingly, gives Fate, Existence and Debt. Faulkes (1987:18), with minimal

¹³² Kragerud 1981, however, bases his understanding of *nornir* almost entirely on *Fáfnismál*.

¹³³ In *Egils saga* 56 (ÍF 2:149).

¹³⁴ FSN I:1-105.

translation, calls them Weird, Verdandi and Skuld, and Byock (2005:26) gives both the 'original' forms Urd, Verdandi and Skuld alongside translations: Fate, Becoming and Obligation. All of these are valid attempts at translating the names whilst also nearing some sort of explanation of the nature of the beings behind them, though one must keep in mind that translation always involves some degree of interpretation. The semantic content of a word is translatable but it is rarely possible to convey the same set of associations as those conjured up by the word in its original language. This means that difficult choices often have to be made in the process of translation, not least because the semantic content of a word may undergo significant changes over time so that it may in fact be quite far removed from the etymological root meaning of the word:

Die Etymologie ist ein fragwürdiges Mittel zur Erschließung einer konkreten religiösen oder weltbildhaften Vorstellung; sie kann stets nur Stütze, nie aber Rückgrat der semantischen Interpretation sein.
(Weber 1969:11)

'Etymology is a questionable means of accessing a concrete idea relating to religion or world-view; it can only remain a supporting tool, never the backbone of a semantic interpretation.'¹³⁵

It is not uncommon to read the three names as conveying a representation of past, present and future, respectively,¹³⁶ and a closer look at two Old Norse verbs reveals how such interpretations are reached.¹³⁷

The noun *urðr* translates as 'fate' (f.) but can also mean 'death' (m.); it is etymologically cognate with Old English *wyrd* (see VI.1.) and is probably connected to the verb *verða*, 'to happen, come to pass, take place' (Iew:145). The past plural form of *verða* is *urðu*, describing those things which 'came about' or 'did happen',

¹³⁵ Translation kindly provided by Jürgen Einhoff.

¹³⁶ Simek (1993:342 and 357), Lindow (2001:245), Larrington (1992:155), Stefánsson (2005:169), Steinsland (2005:249-250).

¹³⁷ Winterbourne gives an in-depth philosophical discussion of the relationship between fate and time. He argues convincingly that fate and time are not the same concept: "Fate cannot be calculated, although it was often thought that it could be divined: for it has to do with intuition, not calculation. Fate stands outside of all comprehended nature and hence outside of time: 'Time may show, / But cannot alter, what shall be. / Events will take their way. Even as the prophet's words foreshadowed all' [Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 250-54; 1959:51]. This is the message that we will find confirmed again and again in what follows, no matter that our first intuition is to believe that fate and time must be related by some inner necessity. That fate is, however, a supratemporal concept, seems to have been understood implicitly by many mythologies. Since causality itself has nothing to do with time but instead gives *directedness* to time for human consciousness, the 'three-body problem' reduces to no problem at all: for time≠fate, causality≠time, and fate≠causality. Causality's concern is *that* something happens – not *when* it happens" (Winterbourne 2004:18).

and the similarity between *urðr*, 'fate', and *urðu*, 'happened', is perhaps what has given rise to the interpretation of *Urðr* as 'Past'.¹³⁸ 'Past' as a chronologically bygone period of time, however, does not seem to be especially close to the semantic content of the word *urðr* as it occurs in the literature (see below).

There is broad agreement on regarding the name *Verðandi* as a relatively recent addition to the triad. It, too, is connected to the verb *verða* of which it is the present participle form and thus translatable as 'happening, becoming, taking place now', yielding the interpretation 'Present' (LP:605-606; C/V:695-696).

The name *Skuld* is related to the noun *skuld*, meaning 'debt' or 'something owed', and in Christian interpretation it came to mean 'guilt' as well (LP:514). It is related to the verb *skulu*, cognate with English 'shall', and has a range of different meanings: 'shall, must; bidding, need, duty, obligation'. This modal verb carries, amongst other meanings, a sense of events to come and it can be used to create a periphrastic future tense (there is no non-periphrastic future tense in Old Norse), hence the interpretation 'Future' (Frtz III:394; LP:514; C/V:560). However, one might add that 'debt' certainly also indicates something in the past, when the debt was incurred, not just in the future, when it has to be paid back.¹³⁹ The noun *skuld* is rather far removed from the semantic content of 'chronological future'.

It seems to be this etymologically based interpretation of the three named *nornir* which gives rise to viewing them as representatives for, respectively, past, present and future. The most noteworthy aspect of this interpretation is that it probably goes back as far as both *Snorri* and the author of *Völuspá*; the inclusion of *Verðandi* and *Snorri's* reference to one *norn* as the 'youngest' appears to indicate this (Simek 1993:237). The interpretation cannot therefore be discarded altogether, but it must be emphasised that it is a reading which is closely connected to the triad of names and that certain reservations arise concerning this understanding of the names.

The name *Skuld* appears elsewhere as the name of a *valkyrja*; *Völuspá* 30 mentions her and five other *valkyrjur*¹⁴⁰ and *Gylfaginning* 36 describes her as a cross-over figure, *norn*-and-*valkyrja*, saying that: *Guðr ok Rota ok norn in yngsta er*

¹³⁸ Ström (1985:203) and Stefánsson (2005:169-170) suggest that time was seen as the force of fate and that this is the origin of the *Urðr*-Past interpretation. I am not convinced by the fate-time equation.

¹³⁹ I am grateful to John McKinnell, University of Durham, for suggesting this. John Lindow, however, is of the opinion that "The tangible value of a debt is wholly in the future" (personal communication 3.8.2007).

¹⁴⁰ There is no indication in the poem itself that *Skuld* in *Völuspá* 20 is at all different from *Skuld* in *Völuspá* 30.

Skuld heitir ríða jafnan at kíósa val ok ráða vígum, 'Gunn and Rota and the youngest norn, called Skuld, always ride to choose who shall be slain and to govern the killings' (Faulkes 1987:31). Both names relate to battle activities, *Gunnr* (or *Guðr*) means 'war, battle' (Frtz I:665; 659) and *Rota*, 'heavy downpour' (Frtz III:131), usually of rain but as a *valkyrja*-name probably of arrows or spears. Here, Skuld not only appears in a different group of three, consisting of *valkyrjur*, but is also seen to participate with them in the battle itself which, judging by the fact that Snorri specifies this, appears to be something that he regards as unusual behaviour for *nornir* in general: neither *Urðr* nor *Verðandi* are said to do this. Skuld is also given an age, being 'the youngest *norn*'; a statement that seems based on an interpretation of her as the future, which is yet to come and is therefore 'younger' than the present and the past. But this is as close as she gets to the 'future' she supposedly represents. While it is possible to read a specific type of event that will happen in the future into the associations surrounding Skuld, namely death, there is no general sense of a 'time to come' attached to her.¹⁴¹ The notion of death would also go rather well with her concerns for the battlefield as one of the places where *valkyrjur* and *nornir* are likely to merge in issues of life or death. There is no reason to believe that *skuld* contains associations of a chronological period to come or represents the concept of future as such. To regard this figure as a representative for the 'Future' is a highly selective reading of the name and the way in which this figure is described. If anything, she comes close to Nemesis – a menacing, threatening figure representing the consequences of previous events or actions which will inevitably catch up with the individual in the end.

In the light of the varied occurrences and descriptions of a character called Skuld, it could be argued that the name or the figure has been borrowed from one group of beings into the other,¹⁴² or it may have to be granted that she simply spans that grey area where *nornir* and *valkyrjur* overlap. Warmind (1997:197) notes, and rightly so, that it is a little odd that only one *norn* is mentioned in the long lists of *valkyrjur* – why not the others? Skuld is singled out as being unlike other *nornir* because of this aspect of her behaviour, giving her an individuality in a group of predominantly faceless beings, and so it would seem fair to regard her as a somewhat unusual

¹⁴¹ Death, however, might equally well be regarded as belonging to the past, as those who have died are in neither the chronological present nor the future. I agree with Winterbourne (2004:15-18; 49-59; 115) that the whole idea that fate=time misses the point.

¹⁴² McKinnell (1994:107) suggests that the name was borrowed from the *nornir* into the group of *valkyrjur*, judging by the semantic content of the name and the noun this does seem the more logical option (see III.1.1. and III.1.3.).

norn, if a *norn* at all, possibly one that has metamorphosed into something else or has been incorporated from elsewhere. At the same time, this merging also shows that, certainly around the time when *Völuspá* was composed, *nornir* and *valkyrjur* were seen as very closely related and overlapping groups of beings.

The name Verðandi occurs only in these two texts, *Völuspá* and *Snorra-Edda*, Snorri having probably derived it from *Völuspá*. There is little to say about her as an independent character; the fact that her name is exactly the present participle form of *verða* definitely points towards a temporal interpretation of the *Völuspá-nornir*, but it also makes her appear as little more than a grammatical link between the ones that supposedly represent the past and the future. The transparent relationship between the name and the verb *verða* would seem to point in the direction of a relatively recent name rather than an ancient one, though this may say little about the age of the character hiding behind the name. Holtsmark (1951:88) suggests that the name has been made up *ad hoc* simply in order to complete an ideological triple figure and this may well be the case as nothing else is known about her.

The name Urðr, on the other hand, is certainly old and is closely linked to the concept of fate. As Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson says: "Urðr... is... without doubt the power of destiny in which ancient people generally believed" (1999:47). The name tends to occur in the genitive form, either with ominous content, such as the *urðar máni*, 'weird moon' in *Eyrbyggja saga* 52¹⁴³ that appears on the wall one evening and is regarded as a death omen, or with some other mysterious meaning, such as *urðar magni*, 'with weird power or fateful power' in *Guðrúnarkviða II* 21. It is etymologically cognate with Old English *wyrd*, 'fate'¹⁴⁴ and with Old High German *wurt*, both probably stemming from Indo-European **wert* which means 'to twist' and is related to Latin *vertere*, 'turning' (de Vries 1956:270; IeW:145). As Giannakis says: "The semantic development of words meaning 'turn' into the semantic sphere of 'be, happen', also with reference to terminology pertaining to fate, appears to be quite

¹⁴³ AM 448 4^o c.1686 (copy of the lost *Vatnshyrna*).

¹⁴⁴ This recalls the English phrase 'the weird sisters' referring to 'the three fates', usually the Classical ones. This phrase is often used colloquially about the three witches portrayed by Shakespeare in *Macbeth*, but in fact Shakespeare uses the adjective 'weyward', not 'weird' (Act I, scene 3; Act III, scene 1; Act IV, scene 1). However, the account of the Macbeth story given by Andrew of Wyntoun in his *Orygynale Cronikyl of Scotland*, c.1420, does use 'werd': "Him thoct, till he wes sa sittand, He saw thre women by gangand, And þai thre women þan thoct he Thre werd sisteris like to be." (Amours 1906:274). The quotation is from the Wemyss text, chapter CXVIII, lines 1899-1908, but the Cottonian text, chapter XVIII, line 1862, also uses 'werd', although it differs a little from the Wemyss text in its general orthography. These 'werd sisteris' predict the future of Makbeth (as Wyntoun has the name).

common" (1999:100). What is interesting is that *wyrd* occurs with conspicuous frequency in Old English literature, some 200 instances, with Old High German *wurt* merely once and Old Norse *urðr* 15 times (Weber 1969:17). See also VI.1.1. and VI.1.2. below.

This etymological basis is often taken to provide a connection between fate and the image of spinning, a very prominent image not only in popular imagination but also in scholarship. It is, however, a connection which is in danger of bypassing the semantic development of both verbs, *verða* and *spinna*, because it is uncertain when 'turning around rapidly' became the semantic content of 'spinning' (see also V.2.). The original meaning of 'to spin' was 'to draw out, pull out' (AeW:535; Pokorny 1959:988) – for example a spider 'spins' by 'drawing out', not by 'turning around.' The problem here is the relationship between etymology and semantic content. There is no evidence that a form of the verb *verða* has ever been used to describe the activity of spinning as in 'creating threads', and if spinning was conceived of as 'drawing out' rather than 'turning around' then the *urðr-verða*-spinning constellation falls apart. In English, the first recorded instance of 'spinning' used in the sense of 'revolving, whirling round' stems from 1667 (OED X:602-603), and such a late date indicates that we may have to revise our ideas about how *urðr* and *spinna* relate to one another in Old Norse. Spinning does seem to be related to fate but in ways other than through *verða*, *vertere* and **wert* (see chapter VI). Moreover, the *norn* personified through the name *Urðr* is never portrayed as having links to spinning or to other forms of textile work at all. While it may not be possible to dismiss a link between *Urðr* and spinning altogether, the evidence for it is no more than tentative at best.

As an aside, a connection between fate and turning in a less specific meaning is hinted at in the English phrases 'to turn into' and 'to turn out to be', both using the turning motion to describe the act of becoming. This idea of a relationship between 'becoming' and 'turning' is employed in *Hávamál* 84:

Meyiar orðom
skyli manngi trúa,
né því er kveðr kona;
þvíat á hverfanda hvéli
vóro þeim hiqto skqpoð,
brigð í brióst um lagið.

The words of a maiden
no man should trust,
nor what a woman says;
because on a turning wheel
hearts were created for them,
unreliability placed in their breast.

The stanza says that women's hearts cannot be trusted because they have been made on a *hverfandi hvéli*, 'turning wheel'.¹⁴⁵ No association is made to spinning at all in the image. The idea conveyed is changeability so that the turning motion is associated with change, much as it is on a wheel of fortune. This would seem to point towards unpredictability rather than spinning which, as a work task, is anything but unpredictable.

However, while there seems to be a genuine etymological relationship forming the constellation *urðr-verða*-turning, there is no indication that *urðr* carries associations either of 'spinning' or of 'the past' in general.¹⁴⁶ *Urðr*'s relationship to 'the past' may well be similar to that of *Skuld*'s to 'the future' because what was laid down or came into being in the past has obviously had some influence on events following on from that; in the same way a debt not only has to be paid later on, it has to be incurred first. Thus, these two names that, supposedly, divide into 'the past' and 'the future' do not actually cover the temporal concepts in a way which clearly separates them from one another – both can be seen to incorporate certain aspects of chronological past and future.¹⁴⁷ The names *Urðr* and *Skuld* do not by themselves convey the temporal meaning of 'past' and 'future' and it seems that the idea of *normir* as representatives of time hinges on *Verðandi*, the one whose name looks like a recent addition and of whom we know so little. The triad of names is "in all likelihood not very old" (Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999:47).

The temporal interpretation can certainly be regarded as present in *Völuspá* although the names can obviously also be understood simply as 'fate', 'existence' and 'debt'. If *Verðandi* is truly an *ad hoc* addition then it may be the poet's intention to create an additional layer of meaning to the names *Urðr* and *Skuld*, a connection that can (but must not necessarily) be made, namely the temporal understanding, without erasing their 'original' meanings, namely 'fate' and 'debt'.¹⁴⁸

The temporal understanding of the *normir* does not seem to occur outside of *Völuspá* and *Snorra-Edda* and this makes it somewhat problematic. It does not

¹⁴⁵ The stanza is followed by a whole list of things that one should be wary of, amongst them *vǫlo vilmæli*, 'sayings by a *vǫlva* of what you would like to hear', stanza 87 (see also VI.4.2.).

¹⁴⁶ How such different ideas can be accepted side by side seemingly without raising any questions in the scholarship remains baffling to me. What does 'the past' have to do with 'spinning'? How are these two ideas meant to relate to each other?

¹⁴⁷ Again, this may be indicative of the problems that arise from attempts to correlate fate with time (Winterbourne 2004).

¹⁴⁸ I am grateful to Patricia Boulhosa, University of Cambridge, for pointing this out.

appear to be the original underlying conception of *nornir* and its occurrence in *Völuspá* may be due to later interpretations, possibly Christian.¹⁴⁹

Returning briefly to the notion that these *meyjar* may not actually be *nornir* (see above), there is another way of regarding them as quasi-representatives of past, present and future.

That Urðr, who is almost certainly a *norn*, represents the past is supported by Hallfreðr's stanza where *nornir* are associated with the heathen beliefs that Hallfreðr is turning away from as he becomes Christian. Thus, the *nornir* are now in the past for Hallfreðr. It is at least possible that a similar association is made in *Völuspá* which is itself a product of the period of crossing over from the heathen to the Christian world view and is also on the whole very much concerned with the past, the present and the future.

That Skuld, the *valkyrja*, represents the future may be connected to the fact that the *völva* foresees the battle of Ragnarök; as a *valkyrja* she is closely connected to warfare and the war is coming. In *Völuspá* 30, the *völva* sees Skuld and other *valkyrjur* riding to the battle.

Then there is Verðandi, who represents the present. She could potentially be the *völva* herself who may be seen to determine the course of events as she speaks. That is, by speaking them out loud she is turning her prophecies into reality, making them happen – that is why she is Verðandi 'becoming' (see VI.4.1. and VI.4.2.).

Together, these three otherworldly women from the well determine the fate of human beings and they all bring otherworldly knowledge of some kind.

IV.1.2. Three Nornir?

Concerning the trinity of *nornir*, it is true that *nornir* have a strong tendency to appear in the plural as a collective group of beings instead of easily distinguished individuals, but the number of *nornir* in the group is rarely specified. We cannot tell for sure how many there are; three seems a good suggestion but so does nine.¹⁵⁰ It is possible that *Völuspá* names three because this poem at several points concerns itself with groups of three, mentioning three also when the beings referred to clearly

¹⁴⁹ Christianity might have found good use for the Skuld figure, presenting a notion of sin or guilt and emphasising the idea that past sins must be paid for in the future.

¹⁵⁰ *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* 28 mentions *þrennar níundir meýjar*, 'three times nine maidens', apparently *valkyrjur*; the late medieval *Barlaams ok Josaphats saga* 136 mentions nine daughters of Þórr, whom the text calls *nornir*; Heimdallr is said to have nine mothers, all of whom are sisters (*Hyndluljóð* 34-36; *Gylfaginning* 27), and Ægir has nine daughters. Nine seems to recur as frequently as three when supernatural women are counted.

belong to groups larger than three: in stanza 8 three *pursa meyjár*, 'giant maidens'¹⁵¹ appear and in stanza 17 three *æsir*, but it seems unlikely that we should understand from this that there are only three *pursa meyjár* and only three *æsir*. It is more probable that, in *Völuspá*, such mentions consist of three very significant figures from those groups. The same is possibly the case for the three *nornir* who are given names in this poem, although this also recalls the votive altars dedicated to three mother-figures (III.2.1.).

It is interesting that Snorri mentions not only three named *nornir* but also states, almost as if changing his mind in mid-sentence, that there are other *nornir*, too; this may be due to an attempt to incorporate contradicting sources whilst maintaining that the information given in *Völuspá* is correct. *Fáfnismál* 13 reflects both ideas: that there are three and that there are more than three *nornir*:

Sundrbornar¹⁵² miðk
 segi ek at nornir sé,
 eigot þær ætt saman;
 sumar ero áskungar,
 sumar álfkungar,
 sumar dætr Dvalins.¹⁵³

Of different origins
 are nornir, I say,
 they are not related;
 some are of the æsir,
 some are of the álfar,
 some are the daughters of Dvalin.

The fact that *Fáfnismál* states in the plural that some are of this group and some of that group indicates that the poem considers there to be more than three *nornir*, otherwise one would expect there to be one of this kind and one of that kind. The formulaic *sumar sumar sumar* of this stanza strongly recalls the *suma suma suma* list of supernatural women found in the *First Merseburg Charm* (see V.7.; cf. Lindquist 1923:17-18). In fact, the impression given by *Fáfnismál* could even be that the term *norn* describes some sort of occupation rather than a separate class of beings as the *nornir* are said here to be of the *æsir*, the *álfar* and the *dvergar*,¹⁵⁴ and therefore might not represent an independent class of beings. The stanza could refer to three families of *nornir* (Holtsmark 1951:88; Lindow 2001:245) so that *dverga-nornir* attend the births of dwarves, *áss-nornir* those of *æsir* and so on (although see also Kragerud 1981:14). However, it might also be that the term *nornir* has merged with *völur* who emulate *nornir* by making prophecies and by being able to access knowledge hidden from most people (see VI.4.). It is furthermore possible that

¹⁵¹ These *pursa meyjár* are sometimes interpreted as *nornir* (Larrington 1996:264; Kragerud 1981:14).

¹⁵² *Völsungasaga* 18 has *sundrlausar*, 'unlike each other' (Grimstad 2000:140).

¹⁵³ A similar division, only four-part, occurs in *Hávamál* 143.

¹⁵⁴ Liberman 2002 discusses the idea of female dwarves, a seemingly exclusively male race.

Fáfnismál lists three kinds of *nornir* due to some more or less vague recollection of the triple formula in the much older *First Merseburg Charm*.



Figure 2.
This tapestry shows how the *nornir* are commonly imagined: a group of three. That each is looking in a different direction probably reflects the understanding of them as representing past, present and

Finally, the idea of three *nornir* in *Völuspá* and *Snorra-Edda* may be influenced by Classical tradition, which portrays a number of beings rather like *nornir* and often, though by no means always, as triple. The parallel most often drawn is to the *moirai* (see III.3.),¹⁵⁵ but Greek tradition provides another rather striking example of a three-in-one figure in the form of Hekate. Although she belongs with the Titans, Hekate is accepted into the group of Olympian gods where she is a highly honoured, if somewhat uncouth, goddess. Her domain is the night, her animal is the dog and she is patroness of the Greek version of the Wild Hunt (Hjortsø 1984:19-20),¹⁵⁶ but she was also worshipped as a goddess of fertility, which means that she encompasses a similar set of benign and evil associations as is attached to the *dísir* and *nornir*. She is connected to roads and to journeying, possibly primarily journeying to the world of the dead (Rudebeck 2002:179). Statues of her were displayed at cross-roads and at times these consisted of three female bodies, at times of a pole with three masks, each of the three facing in a different direction so as to enable Hekate to look in all directions at once. She appears to have been

¹⁵⁵ Brednich 1964 discusses female triads in folktales about fate, esp. ATU 930-934.

¹⁵⁶ The Wild Hunt refers to a belief in a ghostly host riding through the stormy skies around midwinter. In southern Scandinavia the concept was, at least in later times, connected to Óðinn as god of the dead and of ecstatic fury (cf. the Swedish term *Odens jakt*, 'Óðinn's hunt'). It has been connected to the cult activities of warrior bands (Simek 1993:372-373).

worshipped primarily by women (Hjortsø 1984:19-20). This triple goddess recalls both the Old Norse Urðr and also Hel, who overlap with one another (see IV.2.2.). The Urðr-figure encountered in *Vpluspá* may possibly also be seen as triple: the most dominant one out of a group of three.¹⁵⁷

As mentioned above (III.1.1.), the Saami have a group of female beings sometimes regarded as a group of three, namely the *akkas*.¹⁵⁸ The three daughters of Maderakka whose names are Sarakka, Juksakka and Uksakka (Bäckman 1984:32; Friis 1871:87). Of these four goddesses, one is the mother of the other three and so she is a figure who can in herself be seen as a three-in-one representation of them all. The three daughter-figures fulfil different but closely related roles: Sarakka gives an unborn child its appearance and physical skills and she appears to be closely connected also to the actual birth and to female children; Juksakka seems to be a goddess of masculinity and of hunting who is connected to male children (her name derives from *juoksa*, 'hunting bow');¹⁵⁹ Uksakka seems to be connected to doorways and her role is to protect the child after it is born. Her name derives from the word *uksa* 'door'. The name of Maderakka is etymologically related to words for 'ancestress' and 'great-grandmother', perhaps also to words meaning 'earth' and 'ground' (Ränk 1955:17-18).¹⁶⁰

The group of three *normir* found in Old Norse tradition seems to hint a little at the dominance of one of the three figures, namely Urðr, but simultaneously also at a functional differentiation in singling out Skuld as doing something different from the other two. In this way, both Urðr and Skuld may be seen to stand out from the group. It may be that the three *normir* constitute an Old Norse version of beings

¹⁵⁷ Although *Vpluspá* does not portray her as more dominant than Verðandi or Skuld, the fact that her name means 'fate' arguably gives her more weight than the other two.

¹⁵⁸ However, traditions about their enumeration vary: "The South Saami tradition has numerous *aahka* female divinities... In the North Saami areas of Finland, only *Máttaráhkká* was known, not her daughters" (Kulonen 2005:281).

¹⁵⁹ In this respect she recalls the Norse Skaði.

¹⁶⁰ Also interesting is the strong Celtic tradition of female deities in triple form, for example the three Brighids where Brigid is a goddess of poetry, divination and prophecy whilst her two sister Brighids are associated with, respectively, healing and craftsmanship (MacCana 1996:33-34). There are also the three Machas, all of whom are associated with war but who furthermore connect closely to the land, its fertility and cultivation (MacCana 1996:87-89; MacKillop 2004:412-413; ÓhÓgáin 2006:325-327). The triple form also comes across with male deities in Celtic tradition, for example the god Lug who is said to have two brothers (Sjoestedt 2000:43) – perhaps somewhat reminiscent of the Norse Óðinn and his two obscure brothers Vé and Vili. Also Celtic iconography shows "the frequent images of a three-headed divinity" (MacCana 1996:43) and one of the golden horns from c.400 AD found at Gallehus in southern Denmark depicts a three-headed figure, too (Page 1987:28). Clearly, there is much that can be said about triads, but this is a discussion which lies outwith the scope of the present study.

similar to Hekate, *moirai* and *akkas*. There are no exact cross-cultural parallels but neither would one expect this to be the case; each geographical and chronological entity conjures up its own figures with their specific associations. Even within the Old Norse cultural area and period we cannot be certain that ideas about *nornir* did not change from one region to another, even if the same word was used. There is a strong tendency for them to occur as a group consisting of an unspecified number of individual beings whereas the number three is only mentioned a few times.

The idea of three *nornir* may be very old, as the Germanic votive altars could indicate (see III.2.1.), though in text sources we have little to go by outside of *Völuspá* and *Snorra-Edda*; yet the three names: Urðr, Verðandi, Skuld, does not seem to be an ancient set (cf. de Vries 1956:272-273).

IV.1.3. Good and Evil Nornir?

As seen in *Gylfaginning* 15 above, Snorri focuses on the appearance of *nornir* at childbirth as well as on their ability to allot good and bad to human beings. This deviates strongly from the evidence of skaldic poetry and possibly points to some degree of Classical influence. His statement that good *nornir* allot good lives whereas evil *nornir* allot bad lives, so like the division into white and black *dísir* in *Piðranda þáttr*, looks rather like a late, systematic rationalisation of their benign and terrifying aspects into two separate categories of *nornir*. If we accept this division, then it would appear that the *nornir* encountered in the poetry come almost exclusively out of the evil group, perhaps because it is easier to recognise their powers when these are employed with negative results but more likely because they always had strong connotations of death.¹⁶¹ Bæksted (1965:180) says about *nornir*: *Det er gennemgående ikke lys tillid og glad forhåbning, der kommer til orde, hvor deres forhold til mennesket omtales*, 'It is generally not happy confidence and cheerful hopes that are expressed when their relationship to mankind is mentioned.' An understatement indeed. There are precious few good and kind *nornir* to be found in the sources; I count only two examples of such outwith *Snorra-Edda* and *Völuspá*.¹⁶² Quite typical is the remark in *þulur*: *Nornir heita þær er nauð skapa*, 'Nornir they are called, who create necessity [distress]' (Faulkes 1998:115), underlining the notion

¹⁶¹ Kragerud (1981:12-13) discusses good and evil *nornir* as a traditional division, although it seems that all the examples he draws on portray the evil kind.

¹⁶² *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* and *Torf-Einarr* being the clearest examples (see V.2. and III.1.1.1.).

that *nornir* represent all sorts of hardship that one may encounter in life and there is an air of unyielding inevitability about the phrase. The fate which they stand for is rarely a good one. Out of a total of 29 occurrences of the word *nornir* or forms thereof, a tiny majority of 15 occur with clearly negative value.¹⁶³ This means that 14 occur with non-negative value. Most of these non-negative references are more neutral, some are enigmatic but few can be said to be directly positive, although such value judgements are obviously dependent on interpretation. When looking at the whole, the negative portrayals do not have a strong majority; more interesting is the fact that the positive portrayals have such a clear minority.

Whereas *nornir* are normally defined by their actions – by verbs describing what they do – some instances use adjectives to describe what they are. *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* 7 is an example, referring to *líótar nornir*, ‘loathsome *nornir*’ as well as *grimmar urðir*, ‘grim fates’ (see III.1.1.2.) and *Reginismál* 2 mentions a *norn* of a similar kind:

Andvari ek heiti,
Óinn hét minn faðir,
margan hefi ek fors um farit;
aumlig norn
skop oss í árdaga,
at ek skylda í vatni vaða.

Andvari I am called,
Óinn my father was called,
I have passed over many a waterfall;
a miserable norn
decided for me long ago,
that I should wade the water.

This *norn* is described as *aumlig*, which translates as ‘pitiable’ (Frtz I:99), ‘miserable’ (AeW:19), ‘poor, wretched’ (C/V:34). According to the dictionaries, the word seems to encompass both meanings of ‘miserable’: it can mean that you feel pity for the person who is miserable but it can also mean that they are evil. Here, it seems to be the latter sense because Andvari evidently feels sorry for himself rather than for the *norn*. He appears to make a moral judgement on the *norn*, finding her decisions contemptible and therefore he considers her to be despicable.

In *Atlakviða* 16 we get a picture of *nornir* which initially looks remarkably humane:

Betr hefðir þú, bróðir!
at þú í brynio færir,
sem hiálmom aringreyppom,¹⁶⁴
at síá heim Atla,
sætir þú í sǫðlum

It were better, brother
if you’d come in armour,
like hearth-encircling helmets,
to see Atli’s home,
had you sat in the saddle

¹⁶³ Clearly negative mentions are: *Borgund*; *Norna-Gests þáttr*; *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*; *þulur*; *Krákumál*; *Kveldúlfr*; *Ynglingatal* 24; *Hamðismál* 29,30; *Guðrúnarhvot*; *Atlakviða*; *Sigurðarkviða in skamma*; *Fáfnismál* 11; *Reginismál*; *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*.

¹⁶⁴ *Aringreyppom*, ‘hearth-encircling’, an obscure word found only in *Atlakviða* 1, 3, 16.

sólheiða daga,
 náí nauðfqlva
 létir nornir gráta,
 Húna skialdmeyiar
 hervi kann,¹⁶⁵
 en Atli síalfan
 létir þú í ormgarð koma –
 nú er sá ormgarðr
 ykkur um folginn!

through sun-heated days,
 made the norns weep
 at corpses deathly pale,
 taught Hun shield-maidens
 how to work the fields,¹⁶⁶
 and Atli himself
 you could have put in a snake pit,
 now is that snake pit
 reserved for you.

The image here is that even the *nornir* would have wept over the tremendous number of men whom Gunnarr would have killed had he only come to Atli's place prepared for war. Making *nornir* weep is, one would imagine after the description given, no easy matter and the allusion is indeed to some indescribable carnage. Thus, while it is revealed to us that *nornir* can feel pity for human life, this must be seen as a reference to their gloomy aspects given what it would actually take to make them feel that way. It is telling that, although *Atlakviða* 16 describes them as possessing humane feelings, this is made clear only in the context of death and battle. That is, although the emotion must be said to be a positive one it nevertheless requires a negative situation to produce it and so the *nornir* remain associated with the darker aspects of life and with death. The description makes it clear that *nornir* would not weep over one life, nor over two or three or a mere handful – one hesitates to imagine exactly what it would take to make them weep; indeed, Jón Helgason (1962:154) interprets the phrase as meaning no tears at all. Of interest is the alliterating combination of *nornir* with the word *nauðr*, 'need, necessity, distress', found also in the *þulur* and *Fáfnismál* 12; *nauðr* is used as the name for the N-rune, too (Frtz II:794; LP:422),¹⁶⁷ a connection evidently made between *Sigrdrífumál* 7: *ok merkia á nagli Nauð*, 'and mark your nail with *nauð* [presumably the N-rune]' and 17: *á nornar nagli*, 'on the nail of the *norr* (cf.

¹⁶⁵ ÁBM:321 suggests *hervi* means 'to harrow', working the soil. The English metaphorical use of this, meaning 'to ravage', does not work in Old Norse because the words have separate forms: *Herja*, 'to ravage' and *hervi*, 'to harrow'.

¹⁶⁶ Perhaps understood as 'doing slave work' (Clunies Ross 1970; Dronke 1969:58; Jón Helgason 1962:154).

¹⁶⁷ McKinnell, Simek and Düwel (2004:140) say about this: "The name of the rune n (*nauð*) seems to have meant originally 'need; destitution', but also 'strong (sexual?) compulsion', and probably also 'fetter, captivity'. Whatever its meaning originally was (and in the charm it seems to involve some sort of negative compulsion, and elsewhere in ON literature some sort of danger to one's existence or wellbeing), it clearly became associated through the name of the rune with the rune itself, and the alliterating formula *níu nauðir* 'nine *nauðs*' was used as a charm for warding off evil." Could this mean that we have to revise our understanding of the word *nauðgönglar* (see III.1.1.2.) away from 'women in childbed' to 'people in deadly peril'? (see also note 65).

McKinnell, Simek and Düwel 2004:31-39). This apparently close connection between *nornir* and *hauð* seems to emphasise that they were thought of primarily in relation to issues of distress, although this may have found positive (*Fáfnismál*) as well as negative (*pulur*, *Atlakviða*) expression. If anything, *Atlakviða* 16, despite its reference to emotional sympathy on their part, reinforces the stern aspect of the *nornir*.

This situation is reiterated in one of the runic inscriptions, c.1180 (Olsen 1957:150), from Borgund church in Sogn, Norway, which reads:

Þórir ræist runar þissar þan olaus messo æþþan [e]rhan for herum bæþeþerþono(r)ner uæl ok illa mikla mœþe g skapaþu þærmer

(normalised: *Þórir reist rúnar þessar þann Ólausmessuaptan, er hann fór hér um. Bæði gerðu nornir vel ok illa; mikla mæði [g]¹⁶⁸ sköpuðu þær mér*)
(Olsen 1957:149)

'Þórir cut these runes on the Olav's mass evening¹⁶⁹ when he came by here. The *nornir* decided on both good and evil, for me they have decided on much suffering.'

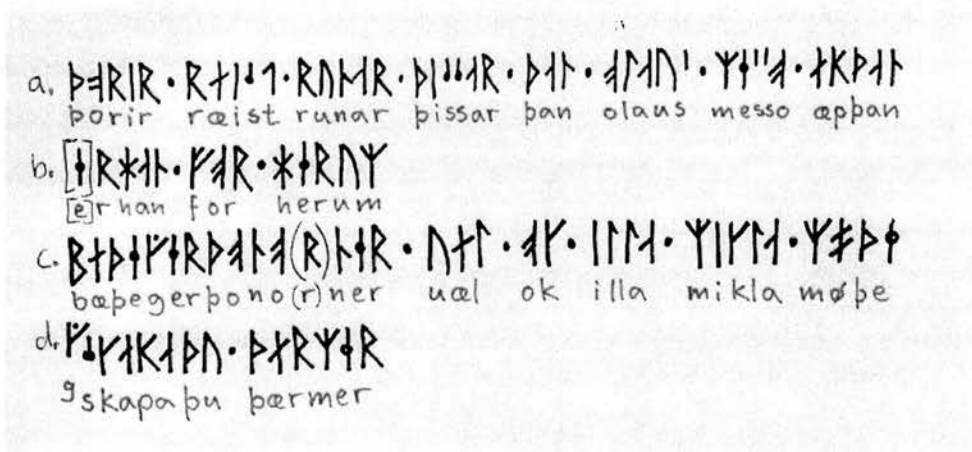


Figure 3. Runic inscription no. IV from Borgund.

This inscription, number IV of the Borgund inscriptions, has *nornir* in charge of both good and bad, after which it goes on to lament that they seem to have laid only evil things in Þórir's path. The inscription, however, attaches both good and evil aspects to the same one group of *nornir*, it does not refer to two separate types of *nornir* the way Snorri does.

¹⁶⁸ About this loose G-rune, McKinnell, Simek and Düwel (2004:130) say: "The single g ... may have been the beginning of the verb *gerðu*, with the carver then realising that he had already used this verb and that *skapa* would be preferable. The Christian context and the cruciform shape of the inscription make it seem unlikely that Thorir believed in the norns as more than a figure of speech."

¹⁶⁹ Olav's mass evening falls on July 28 (Olsen 1957:150).

A systematisation into good and evil *nornir* similar to Snorri's is found in the late *Norna-Gests þáttr* 11,¹⁷⁰ but here it is difficult to distinguish between supernatural and human prophecy makers as the text employs a range of different words to describe the women in question. Although this story belongs to the relatively late medieval material, that is the *fornaldarsögur*, it is of some interest here for the very detailed account it gives:

Þar fór þá um landit vödur, er kallaðar vóru spákonur ok spáðu mönnum aldr. Því buðu menn þeim ok gerðu þeim veizlur ok gáfu þeim gjafir at skilnaði. Faðir minn gerði ok svá, ok kómu þær til hans með sveit manna, ok skyldu þær spá mér ørlög. Lá ek þá í vögg, er þær skyldu tala um mitt mál. Þá brunnu yfir mér tvau kertisljós. Þær mæltu þá til mín ok sögðu mik mikinn auðnumann verða mundu ok meira en aðra mína foreldra eða höfðingja syni þar í landi ok sögðu allt svá skyldu fara um mitt ráð. In yngsta nornin þóttist of lítills metin hjá hinum tveimr, er þær spurðu hana eigi eftir slíkum spám, er svá vóru mikils verðar. Var þar ok mikil ribbalda sveit, er henni hratt ór sæti sínu, ok fell hún til jarðar.

Af þessu varð hún ákafa stygg. Kallar hún þá hátt ok reiðiliga ok bað hinar hætta svá góðum ummælum við mik, - "því at ek skapa honum þat, at hann skal eigi lifa lengr en kerti þat brennr, er upp er tendrat hjá sveininum."

Eftir þetta tók in ellri völván kertit ok slökkti ok biðr móðir mína varðveita ok kveykja eigi fyrr en á síðasta degi lífs míns. Eftir þetta fóru spákonur í burt ok bundu ina ungu norn ok hafa hana svá í burt, ok gaf faðir minn þeim góðar gjafir at skilnaði.

(FSN I:333)

'Then there were *vödur* travelling about the country, who were called speywives and who foretold men's lives. People used to invite them to attend feasts and give them gifts when they left. My father also did so and they came to his place with a flock of people and they were to prophesy my fate. I lay in the cradle and they were to foretell my destiny. There were two candles burning above me. They then spoke and said that I would be a very lucky person and more so than both my parents or any chieftain's son in the country and they said that such would be the long and the short of my lot. The youngest *norn* thought she was not appreciated by the other two as they did not ask her to give a prophecy of such importance. There was also a group of thugs that pushed her off her seat so that she fell to the ground.

Therefore she was very angry. She calls out loud and in an angry manner and told the other two to stop saying such favourable things to me, "because I lay down for him that he shall not live longer than the candle burns, the one which is lit beside the boy."

After that the older *völvá* took the candle and put it out and bade my mother take care of it and not light it until on the last day of my life. After this the speywives went away and bound the young *norn* and then took her away like that, and my father gave them good farewell-gifts.'

(My translation)

¹⁷⁰ One of the *þættir* inserted into *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar hin mesta* in *Flateyjarbók* c.1387-1395.

The phrase: "There were *vǫlur* travelling about the country, who were called speywives" serves to underline the fact that the terminology employed is loose at best; in this text the women are referred to as *vǫlur*, as *spákonur* and also as *nornir*.¹⁷¹ Yet, it may not be quite as coincidental a use of terms as it first seems. Only one of them is referred to as a *norn*, namely *in yngsta nornin*, 'the youngest *norn*'. The terms *vǫlur* and *spákonur* are used collectively and apparently entirely interchangeably for this group of three women so it is very hard to discover any useful distinction between these two words here. However, it may well be of some significance that the one who is singled out as a *norn* is also the troublesome one who wishes to shorten the boy's life as much as possible; it is after all the word *norn* which takes on the meaning of 'witch' during the Middle Ages.¹⁷² It seems that the association of *nornir* with things such as death, suffering and bad luck was perhaps even predisposed to dominate their image, possibly because they carried these connotations even in heathen times, although later Christian demonisation of all types of heathen beings must also be allowed as influence. *Vǫlur* and *spákonur* have mostly affable associations in this text.¹⁷³

The one who is the *norn* is also said to be the youngest, recalling Snorri's phrase in *Gylfaginning* 36: *norn hin yngsta er Skuld heitir*, 'the youngest *norn* who is called Skuld', and where Skuld is described as going off to the battlefield in the company of *valkyrjur*, so that she is singled out in relation to the other *nornir*. There is a correspondence between *norn hin yngsta* and *in yngsta nornin* and it may be that she is regarded as especially bloodthirsty and active when it comes to the taking of life. However, this can only be said for those few and fairly late sources that actually specify that the *nornir* are a group of three and regard one as younger than the

¹⁷¹ *Norna-Gests þáttur* is alone in employing the term *norn*; elsewhere such prophetesses are referred to as *vǫlur*, *spákonur* or *seiðkonur* (cf. *Eiríks saga rauða* 4, ÍF 4:206; *Qrvar-Odds saga* 2, FSN II:205) but not as *nornir*.

¹⁷² A section from Montgomerie's *Answer to Polwart*, part of *The Flyting Betwixt Montgomerie and Polwart*, c.1580, portrays three 'weird sisters', here the Classical Fates, supposedly making predictions at Polwart's birth (Bawcutt and Riddy 1987:282-285). They are described as being like witches and unanimously agree on pronouncing only bad things for Polwart, culminating in an interesting description of a three-fold death for him; he should die "surely of a shot", "of a running knot" and "by throwing of the throt" (1987:284). That is, he will feel a sharp pain (which is the sense of the word 'shot' here), he will be hanged and drowned (cf. *Gautreks saga* 7 [FSN IV:31], c.1600-1700). I am grateful to Neill Martin, University of Edinburgh, for this reference. However, in *The Flyting*, the three 'weird sisters' act "all in ane voyce" (1987:284), whereas in *Norna-Gests þáttur* the third one is different from the first two (cf. the birth of Meleagros, see note 268).

¹⁷³ Only one of these three women is evil, the other two are good; the benign ones prevail in the story, showing the mother how to combat the evil prediction.

others. It seems sensible to be very careful about what arguments can be based on Snorri's good *nornir* and evil *nornir*.

Gesta Danorum Book 6 (4,12) paints a similar picture of two women who make favourable prophecies about Fridleuus's son, Olauus, whereas the third one 'was evil' and therefore makes an unfavourable prophecy:

Mos erat antiquis super futuris liberorum euentibus Parcarum oracula consultare. Quo ritu Fridleuus Olai filii fortunam exploraturus, nuncupatis solenniter uotis deorum eedes precabundus accedit, ubi, introspecto sacello ternas sedes totidem nymphis occupari cognoscit. Quarum prima indulgentioris animi liberalem puero formam uberemque humani fauoris copiam erogabat. Eidem secunda beneficii loco liberalitatis excellentiam condonauit. Tertia uero, proteruioris ingenii inuidentiorisque studii foemina, sororum indulgentiorem aspernata consensum ideoque earum donis officere cupiens futuris pueri moribus parsimonię crimen affixit. Ita aliarum beneficiis tristioris fortunę ueneno corruptis accidit, ut Olauo pro gemina munerum ratione permixta liberalitati parcitas tribueret cognomentum. Quo euenit, ut prioris indulgentię suauitatem inserta beneficio nota confunderet.
(*Saxo Grammaticus* 2005:378)

'It was a custom among the ancients to consult the oracles of the Fates concerning the future lives of their children. Fridlef intended to investigate the fortunes of his son by this ritual, and having offered solemn vows approached the goddesses' temple in prayer; here, peering into the shrine, he recognised the three maidens sitting in their respective seats.¹⁷⁴ The first indulgently bestowed on the boy a handsome appearance and a plentiful share of men's good-will. The second presented him with abundant generosity. The third, a woman of rather petulant and jealous disposition, spurned the unanimous favours of her sisters and, in a wish to mar their blessings, implanted the fault of meanness in the boy's future character. That was how Olaf, when the others' benefits had been vitiated by the mischief of a gloomier destiny, received a name from the two types of offering, niggardliness mixed with liberality. So it was that this blemish, conferred as part of the gift, upset the sweetness of the earlier kindness.'
(*Saxo Grammaticus* 1979:169)

The words used by Saxo are *Parcae* and *nymphis*, 'Fates' and 'maidens' and the fact that he uses them suggests that people were at least aware of the Classical Fates at the time. The image is close to the folktale motif employed in stories of the Sleeping Beauty-type:¹⁷⁵ The last of a number of supernatural women gives an evil prediction in an attempt to cancel out the good wishes bestowed by her sisters; the 'maidens' described by Saxo each have their individual character traits and the third, evil one is working against the two good ones. This may be what is slipping into Snorri's description of the 'third' *norn*, Skuld, as well as his division of *nornir* into subgroups

¹⁷⁴ This recalls the *norna stóll*, 'norn-seat', mentioned in *Sólarljóð* 51 (see IV.2.2.).

¹⁷⁵ ATU 410.

of good ones and bad ones. As noted, *Fáfnismál* 13 (see V.6.) yields an image that allows for the interpretation that there are separate groups of *nornir*, but there is little evidence that the notion of certain *nornir* being particularly evil whilst others are particularly good should be regarded as a stable idea going back to ancient times (de Vries 1956:271).

Saxo's account seems to be the only one that indicates any formal worship of *nornir*. Only the late Norwegian and Faroese, respectively *nornagraut* and *nornagreytur*, support this (see III.1.1.2.); the early Icelandic sources do not seem to know of it. It may be that Saxo is merging his idea of *nornir* with other figures such as *dísir* or ancestress figures and we should probably allow for a certain amount of *interpretatio christiana* of whatever native traditions were still alive in Denmark at the time, but the dividing lines between different groups were most likely already blurred. *Nornir* do not normally seem to be regarded as ancestress figures, although they appear somewhat related to such figures (cf. the Saami *akkas*, see III.1.1.2.). Fridleuus offers 'solemn vows' after which the women 'bestow' on the boy, 'present' him with and 'implant' in him certain personal qualities; this is probably the most detailed description of the way in which *nornir*, if that is what they are, determine the life of a single individual. Presumably the scene is imagined as spoken, possibly accompanied by certain actions, but there is little indication as to exactly what Fridleuus does or what vows he offers. Accounts of *vǫlur* in the *Íslendingasögur* at times refer to gifts offered to the prophesying women but these seem to be material gifts or gifts of food rather than verbal gifts.¹⁷⁶

IV.1.4. 'meyjar margs vitandi'

The gloomy vision of evil *nornir* is often the one brought to the fore and receiving most attention as it is also the one most easily detected in the literary evidence. It is, however, not the picture drawn by *Vǫluspá* 19-20 (quoted in IV.1.1.), and not by Snorri either in *Gylfaginning* 16:

Enn er þat sagt at nornir þær er byggja við Urðar brunn taka hvern dag vatn í brunninum ok með aurinn þann er liggir um brunninn, ok ausa upp yfir askinn til þess at eigi skyli limar hans tréna eða fúna.
(Faulkes 1982:19)

¹⁷⁶ For example *Qrvar-odds saga* 2 shows material gifts, *Víga-Glúms saga* 12 and *Eiríks saga rauða* 4 show gifts of food.

'It is also said that the norns that dwell by Weird's well take water from the well each day and with it the mud that lies round the well and pour it up over the ash so that its branches may not rot or decay.'
(Faulkes 1987:19)

Snorri describes the *nornir* as nurturing the tree of life, Yggdrasill, and the same appears to be implied in *Völuspá* 19, although here the *nornir* are not said to be actively tending the tree. It is a picture of their motherly, life-sustaining aspect, furthering life and ensuring its continued growth. The tree seems to represent the fate of the whole world and this is what the *nornir* are concerned with here; they nourish its roots in an image which conveys rather well the power and importance of these underground women – without them there would be no life.

Völuspá 20 lists several activities carried out by the three *meyjar*. That they are very knowledgeable recalls the *völva* who supposedly speaks the poem of *Völuspá* and in stanza 2 says about herself:

Ek man iqtna
ár um borna,
þá er froðom mik
fædda hqfðo;
nío man ek heima,
nío íviði,¹⁷⁷
miqtvið¹⁷⁸ mæran
fyr mold neðan.

I remember jötnar,
born very early,
those who nurtured me
long ago;
I remember nine worlds,
nine giant women,
the great measuring tree
below the ground.

The impression is of an extremely old woman with strong connections to the *jötunn* race who possesses special knowledge about what has gone before and what will come. The *völva* says how she remembers the 'great measuring tree below the ground', perhaps understood in the sense of 'when it was still a mere seed' before it grew (Schjødtd 1992:160), and at the end of the poem the tree tumbles and falls as the world disintegrates into the chaos of Ragnarök. The very last phrase of the poem is: *nú mun hon søkkvaz*, 'now she will sink', as if the speaker herself has come from a lower level, out of the ground or out of a spring (see IV.2.1. and IV.2.2.).¹⁷⁹ Perhaps these two phrases: *fyr mold neðan* and *nú mun hon søkkvaz* form a sort of reverse image of each other, a beginning and an end – of the prophecy, of the

¹⁷⁷ *Íviði* – an obscure word the meaning of which is disputed. *Hauksbók* has *íviðior* which occurs also in *Hyndluljóð* 48 with the meaning 'troll-women or *jötunn*-women living in the forest' (Sigurður Nordal 1978:9-10). Another suggested translation is 'immense distances' (LP:325) which, however, does not seem to make very clear sense.

¹⁷⁸ On the words *miqtvið* and *mjqtuðr*, see VI.1.2.

¹⁷⁹ In sagas, *völur* are often said to be sitting on a platform when prophesying (Price 2002:162-163), which can also relate to the idea of rising and sinking.

world, of the power of the *vǫlva* who in many ways seems to emulate the *nornir*. In the literature, *nornir* are never consulted for the sake of their knowledge but *vǫlur* are; somehow *vǫlur* are more accessible, possibly because they are conceived of as relatively human where *nornir* are relatively conceptual (see also VI.4.).¹⁸⁰

Regarding the phrase *skáro á skíði*,¹⁸¹ that they 'carved on slips of wood', the suggestion that the *nornir* are carving runes¹⁸² has been rejected by both Holtsmark (1951:82) and Sigurður Nordal (1978:40), because *Vǫluspá* uses the verb *skera*, which is the wrong verb for carving runes. When one is carving runes, the verb employed is usually *rísta*.¹⁸³ Holtsmark goes on to suggest that what the *nornir* are doing instead is making marks in a plank of wood in order to tally up years and she refers to several similar traditions that existed in Norway and Denmark, probably from pre-Christian times:

Hvorom allting er, vi kan på denne måten følge en skikk å avmerke folks alder på telle-stokk ved at det blir skåret et hakk for dem hvert år så lenge de lever, tilbake til middelalderen. Det er ingen grunn til å tro at skikken er innført med kristendommen.
(Holtsmark 1951:84)

'However that may be, we can trace back to medieval times a custom of marking off people's age on a counting-stick by cutting a mark for them each year for as long as they live. There is no reason to think that the custom was introduced with Christianity.'
(My translation)

This could be what is going on in the verse – *nornir* keeping track of time and of how long each person lives which feeds into the interpretation of the *Vǫluspá-nornir* as representatives of chronology. A problem with Holtsmark's suggestion is that we would probably expect the verb *skora* to be used for counting, not *skera* (Frtz III:368).¹⁸⁴ The verbs are obviously related but appear to be used in different

¹⁸⁰ The *vǫlva* in *Vǫluspá* seems more mythical than human but the point is that *vǫlur* are more or less willing, some even eager, to share their understanding with people; *nornir* hardly show any such inclinations.

¹⁸¹ I am grateful to Haraldur Bernharðsson, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, and Patricia Boulhosa, university of Cambridge, for help with this phrase.

¹⁸² This is probably what Raudvere is hinting at when she says that *nornir: omtalas som rístande runor*, 'are referred to as carving runes' (2003:63); cf. Sijmons and Gering (1927:26).

¹⁸³ *Rísta* is the verb consistently used in *Sigrdrífumál* 6, 7, 9, 10 and 11, where the talk is clearly of runes; it is also the one employed in *Skírnismál* 36 and *Hávamál* 157.

¹⁸⁴ I am grateful to Patricia Boulhosa, University of Cambridge, for this observation. Fritzer (III:368) writes: "*skora* 3) incise on something ... make a line, incision for [some-]one (in a *kefli* [chunk of wood of a size that can be held in the hand; Frtz II:270] which later shows how many one has counted)."

contexts.¹⁸⁵ Perhaps it could also refer to marks scratched on the individual lots used for lot-casting, as is described with the use of the verb *skera* in the account of Sigurður jórsalafari in *Morkinskinna*¹⁸⁶ (1932:377), although *skíði* is an unlikely description of lots; *hlutr* seems more likely.¹⁸⁷

The verb *skera* is unusual, albeit not impossible, in a context of runes but that it can be used to carve someone's image is evident in *Fóstbræðra saga* 23: *á brúðum stólsins var skorinn Þórr*, 'on the back of the chair Þórr was carved', and also in *Landnámabók* 330 (284, 245), where Tjörvi enn háðsami carved the images of the woman he loved and the man to whom she was married on the handle of his knife: *Eptir þat skar Tjörvi þau á knífsskapti sínu* (*Landnámabók Íslands* 1925:134-135).¹⁸⁸ Read this way, the phrase perhaps points back to *Völuspá* 17 where Askr and Embla are created, seemingly from two tree trunks,¹⁸⁹ but it might also recall wooden statues found in bogs and the occasional references to carved images of gods.¹⁹⁰

Furthermore, the line may recall the phrase *skapa ok skera* (cf. Holtsmark 1951:87) 'to decide or settle', attested in *Egils saga* 81: *Nú vil ek, Egill, at þú skapir einn ok skerir um þessi mál* (ÍF 2:286), 'I shall leave it up to you to rule and judge here, Egil'¹⁹¹ (CSII:170), and the corresponding nouns *skop*, 'fate' and *skor*, 'decision' (Frtz III:417). Suggestions regarding *skáro á skíði* are many and varied; all we can really say is that the *nornir* carve onto wood something pertaining to fate (Gísli Sigurðsson 1998:7).

Jackson (1999:86) suggests that *Völuspá* 20 contains "an interlocking list linking device" with the enumeration in line 3 as one of the keys. *Þriár* in the introductory part of the stanza is an indication that we should expect three names to be

¹⁸⁵ This recalls the English 'score', another cutting- and counting word (OED IX:239-42). It may be significant that 'score' also has the meaning: "to record (debts) by means of notches on a tally; hence to write down as a debt" (OED IX:242), potentially pointing towards the connection between *Skuld* and 'debt'. I am grateful to Patricia Boulhosa, university of Cambridge, for this suggestion.

¹⁸⁶ C.1275.

¹⁸⁷ Also Dronke (1997:128) and Sigurður Nordal (1978:40) suggest that the drawing of lots is involved. That lot casting was practised in heathen Scandinavia is evident from *Vita Anskarii*: 18.195, 19.245-250, 27.378-383, 30.409-412 (Rimbert 1986:34, 40, 55, 59).

¹⁸⁸ I am grateful to Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, Háskóli Íslands, for this reference. For a discussion of the episode, see Sayers 1993.

¹⁸⁹ That humans are created from trees is mentioned only in *Gylfaginning* 9, not in *Völuspá*.

¹⁹⁰ The one-eyed mask in Hegge stave church from c.1200, Valdres in Norway, has been interpreted by some as a representation of Óðinn (Davidson 1969:29). This may be a correct interpretation, but it should be said that Hegge stave church has several such carved masks (Lindholm and Roggenkamp 1969: plates 86-91) and they may not bear any relationship to the heathen gods.

¹⁹¹ See also *Hrafnkels saga Freygoða* 9 (ÍF 11:131).

mentioned but, before the third name, the poet inserts a new key which opens another list of three: 1) *þær lǫg lǫgðo*, 2) *þær líf kuro*, 3) [*þær*] *skáro á skíði, alda þornum, ørlǫg seggia*. According to this, *skáro á skíði* would serve not only to alliterate with Skuld but also to show that the stanza does not finish immediately after the list of names.¹⁹² A major problem with this, however, is the orthography in the *Konungsbók* MS itself because everything indicates that what is usually rendered as stanza 20 actually breaks into two, the last four lines forming a separate stanza, as in *Hauksbók*.¹⁹³ If Jackson (1999:86-87) is correct in saying that the last two lines refer back to the verb *skáro* then they should be read: 'they carved on wood for humanity the fate of men.' However, in the *Konungsbók* MS there is a clear indication of a break between sentences at this point; there is a full stop after *þriðio* and *þær* begins with a capital (*Konungsbók* 2001:2). This contradicts Jackson's argument because the MS seems to break the stanza into two and one can hardly expect a verb to be carried through into a new stanza. The last four lines (see IV.1.1.) thus appear to constitute a separate entity.

The idea that the *nornir* 'lay down laws' can yield several nuances of meaning. The relationship between 'law' and 'laying down' is strong (AeW:373; ÁBM:594-595) and the phrase *þær lǫg lǫgðo* is probably a *figura etymologica*. The phrase essentially conveys something like a set of 'natural laws', or supernatural laws, beyond the grasp of humans and which humans cannot go against. The laws that *nornir* lay down probably concern those events which frame life itself: birth and death, those special points in the twilight zones of our understanding of life during which *nornir* typically turn up. The 'law' could then be seen as synonymous with the given and unalterable framework of birth and death, forming a basic structure around which life is lived but from which it is never detached.¹⁹⁴

The lines 'they chose life for the children of men, the fate of men' follow immediately after, and it seems reasonable to assume that *lǫg* and *ørlǫg* are closely connected here, possibly so that the *lǫg* laid down by the *nornir* is the *ørlǫg* of men. The phrase 'they chose life' is frustratingly vague but two things seem clear: 1) it is *nornir* who choose rather than people themselves, and 2) the choice of words, *kiósa líf*, 'to choose life', could look like a deliberate opposition to the words *kiósa val*, 'to

¹⁹² *Rígsþula* 13 apparently falls into a similar structure (Jackson 1999:76-79).

¹⁹³ I am grateful to Patricia Boulhosa, University of Cambridge, for this observation which highlights the importance of consulting the MSS themselves, not just previous scholars' editions of the MSS.

¹⁹⁴ Pokorny derives both Old Norse *lǫg* 'law' and Old High German *lehter* 'womb, afterbirth' from the same root: *legh-* (1959:659).

choose the slain', which is what *valkyrjur* are said to do.¹⁹⁵ These two activities – choosing life and choosing death – are of course part of the same thing, but the former is a positive, life-affirming way of expressing it whilst the latter is more negative and gloomy. If it is correct to connect the phrase *kiósa líf* with *kiósa val*, then it is of interest that it is the positive one that crops up with *nornir*. In *Völuspá* 63, *kiósa* is used for lot-casting: *Þá kná Hæmir hlautvið kiósa*; it is not impossible that such a connection should also be understood from stanza 20 (Sigurður Nordal 1978:40).

As noted earlier, the version of *Völuspá* that survives in *Hauksbók* is slightly different from the one in *Konungsbók*, not only because editors of *Hauksbók* normally break the passage into two stanzas: 20 and 21:

Þaðan koma meyar,
margs vitandi,
þriár, ór þeim sal
er á¹⁹⁶ þolli stendr;
Urð héto eina,
aðra Verðandi,
-skáro á skíði-
Skuld ina þriðio.

From there come maidens,
very knowledgeable,
three, from that hall
which stands under the tree;
one they called Urðr,
another Verðandi,
-they carved on slips of wood-
Skuld the third one.

Þær lög lögðo,
þær líf kuro
alda börnum,
ørlög at segia.

They laid down laws,
they chose life
for the children of men,
fate to speak.

Here, the *nornir* come out of a **hall**, *salr*, by the tree rather than a **lake**, *sæ* (see IV.2.1). A further discrepancy occurs in the last line of stanza 21 which reads *ørlög at segia*, using the verb *segia*, 'to speak' rather than *ørlög seggia*, using the plural genitive form of *seggr*, 'man'. Thus, *Hauksbók* introduces an extra verb here, emphasising the role of speech, but according to Jackson (1999:87) the extra verb undermines the structure of the stanza as a whole and can only be a later revision (cf. Sijmons and Gering 1923:26).¹⁹⁷ It is certainly correct that *alda börnum* and *ørlög seggia* fit together as a pair as do *þær lög lögðo* and *þær líf kuro*, and the

¹⁹⁵ Quinn (2006:56) argues that: "Etymologically it may seem that the valkyries' act of choosing the slain ... is the obverse of the norns' act of choosing life ... yet for the eddic valkyrie the exercise of choice is effectively to deselect the one fated by the norns to be slain."

¹⁹⁶ The preposition *á* normally means 'on' but it is hard to make sense of it this way. Most editors read it as meaning 'under' in accordance with *Konungsbók*.

¹⁹⁷ Jackson suggests that the revision is made either because the understanding of oral listing devices was in decline or as a deliberate attempt at 'modernising' the poem for a literate audience (1999:87-88).

Konungsbók structure looks much tidier, both grammatically and because it presents two couplets, each giving two variants of the same image: 1) they laid down the laws and they chose life; 2) children of men and fate of men. I agree with Jackson that the verb *at segja* looks superfluous (see also VI.2.3.).

Considering how often *nornir* are elsewhere described in negative terms, associating them with death and doom, the portrayals given in both *Gylfaginning* 15-16 and in *Völuspá* 19-20 are remarkably positive. Here, *nornir* are to a large extent seen as giving and sustaining life rather than taking it away, a side of them not often expressed, or perhaps predominantly expressed in other beings who overlap with *nornir*. It also seems as if the *Völuspá-nornir* are particularly concerned with order, something that will be discussed further below.

IV.2. Dark and Humid Places

The following discussions centre around the well of Urðarbrunnr out of which *nornir* are said to come, according to *Snorra-Edda*, *Völuspá* and *Kormákr*, and around comparisons of the well to places like it which are connected to beings overlapping with *nornir*. In this, both versions of *Völuspá* (*Konungsbók* and *Hauksbók*) may be regarded as important and, in fact, as mutually supportive in a number of ways.

IV.2.1. In the Water

The well beneath Yggdrasill, the well of the *nornir* or, according to Snorri, of some *nornir*, is called Urðarbrunnr and is a place of great significance. *Gylfaginning* 15 informs us that:

Þriðja rót asksins stendr á himni, ok undir þeiri rót er brunnr sá er mjök heilag er heitir Urðar brunnr. Þar eigu guðin dómstað sinn.
(Faulkes 1982:17)

'The third root of the ash extends to heaven, and beneath that root is a well which is very holy, called Weird's well. There the gods have their court.'
(Faulkes 1987:17)

The relevance of Urðarbrunnr to the gods appears to be echoed in *Hávamál* 111: *Mál er at þyllia þular stóli á, Urðar brunni at*, 'There are words to recite from the wise one's seat, at the well of Urðr'. Here, too, the place seems to have significance in a legal, or perhaps in a supernatural, quasi-legal sense (see III.1.1.1. and VI.2.3.), as both the meeting place, or even the court, *dómstaðr*, of the gods and the place of origin of *nornir* who hold power over the lives of gods as well as men. The place

occupied by *nornir* in people's mental space seems to have been rather significant, if intangible, as Lindow points out:

The skald Hallfred Óttarson vandræðaskáld coined the expression "long-maintained fates of the norns" to refer to the paganism he abandoned when he converted to Christianity.
(2001:245)

Hallfreðr's stanza (discussed above in III.1.1.) is interesting for the central role it allocates to *nornir* in the heathen belief system but this seems to be matched by the centrality of Yggdrasill, the *axis mundi*, and of Urðarbrunnr, a legal centre for the gods.¹⁹⁸

This well beneath the tree is of interest, partly because it provides a link to *dísir* who seem to be connected to the Uppsala sacrifice and the sacred tree with a well or spring beneath it (cf. *Ynglingasaga* 29),¹⁹⁹ partly because it connects *nornir* to a whole range of other female supernatural figures.

As mentioned above, the two renditions of *Völuspá* differ slightly in this particular detail, *Konungsbók* referring to a lake,²⁰⁰ *Hauksbók* to a hall, but both mention the well of Urðarbrunnr. Snorri, after mentioning the well, says that a hall stands beneath the tree and that this is the place out of which the *nornir* come, thus combining the idea of a well with that of a hall.

The well is also mentioned in two pieces of skaldic poetry. Kormákr Qgmundarson says: *komsk Urðr ór brunni* (Faulkes 1998:70),²⁰¹ 'Urðr rose from the well', providing an image easily paired off with the one in *Völuspá* 66: *nú mun hon sökkvaz*, 'now she will sink' and the one in *Helreið Brynhildar* 14: *sökkstu, gýgiarkyn*, 'now sink, trollwoman',²⁰² but also the one in *Völuspá* 20: *þaðan koma meyjar*, 'from there come maidens.' Kormákr uses the image of Urðr coming from the well as one of several mythological allusions, one at the end of each stanza of the poem,

¹⁹⁸ By extension, the centrality of Urðarbrunnr would seem to connect *nornir* to a central place whereas they appear otherwise to be connected to transition and borderlines. I am grateful to Terry Gunnell, Háskóli Íslands, for pointing this out.

¹⁹⁹ Adam of Bremen mentions this in Book 4 of his *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, 26/skolion 138: "Near this temple stands a very large tree with wide-spreading branches, always green winter and summer. What kind it is nobody knows. There is also a spring at which the pagans are accustomed to make their sacrifices, and into it to plunge a live man. And if he is not found, the people's wish will be granted" (1959:207).

²⁰⁰ A lake is, in fact, a rather different body of water from a well. I choose to overlook this detail but am aware that it could turn out to be of some significance.

²⁰¹ The line is connected to Kormákr's *Sigurðardrápa*, allegedly c.960 (*Skj.* BI:69-AI:79) but is found only on *Skáldskaparmál* 49.

²⁰² In *Helreið Brynhildar* the *gýgr* seems to be sitting on a burial mound; presumably that is the place which she is commanded to sink into.

seemingly providing images analogous to his descriptions of what goes on in the human realm (*Skj* BI:69-A:79). Given the connections drawn between *nornir* and violent death elsewhere in skaldic poetry (see III.1.1.1.), it seems striking that he picks *Urðr* for a stanza describing warfare. The fact that all his other references direct themselves towards mythical persons points to an understanding of *Urðr* as a person, too, rather than as a purely conceptual version of fate. That she rose from the well could also be taken to mean that the well is primary and she is secondary (Weber 1969:149-154); perhaps the *norn* has her name from the well rather than the other way round.

In Eilífr Guðrúnarson's stanza about Christ, apparently c.1000 (*Skj* BI:144), the well is mentioned again (quoted in III.1.1.2.). This stanza crosses Christian and Norse ideas, leaving the *nornir* out altogether and instead having Christ sitting at the well of *Urðr* (placing the well in Rome, even, an important Christian centre), but the notion of this well as the central place in the world and as a central place of those, or of him, who hold the fate of human beings in their hand, remains the same. The apocryphal *Book of James*, XI.1, also mentions a well as the place where Mary is when the Annunciation takes place (James 1945:43), thus connecting Christ to a well (see below).

Urðarbrunnr appears to be a well beneath a tree to which certain supernatural and predominantly female beings are connected, either in the water or in a hall that is somehow within the water and it is a feature which *nornir* share with a number of other female supernatural creatures. However, before going into a discussion of these, a point about the well itself needs clarification.

The well is called *Urðarbrunnr* but there seems to be reason to consider it the same well as the ones referred to as *Mímisbrunnr* (*Völuspá* 28; *Gylfaginning* 15, 51) and *Hvergelmir* (*Gylfaginning* 15, 16, 39, 52; *Grímnismál* 26).²⁰³

Mímisbrunnr is connected to the enigmatic character of *Mímir* whom Snorri claims in *Ynglingasaga* 4 to be one of the *æsir* but who in the *pulur* seems to be of the *jǫtnar* (Faulkes 1998:110). The name has connotations of wisdom and memory – abilities commonly associated with *jǫtnar* and also *vǫlur*.²⁰⁴ The association of *Mímir*,

²⁰³ *Mímisbrunnr* and *Hvergelmir* deserve much more attention than I can devote to them here.

²⁰⁴ There are different forms of the name: *Mímir*, *Mím*, *Mími*. "This suggests that more than one figure may have been conflated to make the *Mímir* we have in the mythology" (Lindow 2001:231).

or of Mímir's head,²⁰⁵ with wisdom is evident in *Völuspá* 46 and *Gylfaginning* 51 where it is said that Óðinn consults *Míms hofuð*, 'Mím's head', and at the same time Mímir is closely and strongly associated with the well and the tree.²⁰⁶ The name *Sökkmímir*, apparently 'sunken Mímir' (*sokkr* means 'a state of being sunken', Frtz III:653), occurs as the name of a *jötunn* in *Grímnismál* 50 where he is involved in one of Óðinn's exploits, in *Ynglingatal* 2 where he inhabits a shining hall, and in the *pulur* as a *jötunn*, a sword-*heiti* and a *heiti* for the heavens (Faulkes 1998:110, 119, 133).

In comparison, the name *Hvergelmir* seems also to be closely related to the realm of the *jötnar*; names ending in *-elmir* are otherwise names of *jötunn* characters (Simek 1993:167). *Hvergelmir* is only known from *Snorra-Edda* where it is a spring in *Niflheim* (*Gylfaginning* 4) and a spring under *Yggdrasill* (*Gylfaginning* 15, 39), and from *Grímnismál* 26 where it is the source of all rivers in the world. Centrality is a clear feature of all three wells.

Mímir represents some kind of otherworldly knowledge that is of immense value, certainly to Óðinn, and here he overlaps significantly with the *völva*. Through his close association with the well he comes close to the *nornir*, except he is male and he is nowhere connected with ideas about fate. The overlaps between *Hvergelmir*, *Mímisbrunnr* and *Urðarbrunnr* seem too many for them to be completely separated out as individual unrelated wells. In all likelihood we have several expressions of the same idea: the otherworldly well of wisdom guarded by beings associated with the underground and with *jötnar*.

Völuspá 33 names Frigg's dwelling place *Fensalir*, a name which literally means 'hall in the fens' and *Grímnismál* 7, in a parallel image, states that Óðinn and the goddess *Sága* drink in a place called *Søkkvabekkr*, which means 'sunken benches.' *Sága* is little known outside of *Grímnismál* 7 and this makes it difficult to understand exactly what she is.²⁰⁷ Interestingly, Frigg and *Sága* both alliterate with the names of their dwelling-places: **F**rigg in **F**ensalir and **S**ága in **S**økkvabekkr (Grundy 1996:62)²⁰⁸ and they seem closely connected to each other; they both stand in some relationship

²⁰⁵ According to *Ynglingasaga* 4, the *vanir* behead Mímir and Óðinn magically preserves the head which speaks to him.

²⁰⁶ Some *kennings* for the world tree involve names seemingly alluding to Mímir: *Hoddmímis holt* (*Vafþrúðnismál* 45) and *Mímameiðr* (*Fjölsvinnsmál* 20, 24).

²⁰⁷ *Sága* is mentioned in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*:39, apparently as a place-name.

²⁰⁸ Several similar alliterations exist in *Grímnismál*: **B**aldr in **B**reiðablikk, **N**jörðr in **N**óatún, **F**reyia in **F**ólkvangr, **H**eimdallr at **H**iminbiörg; but there are likewise exceptions: **Ó**ðinn in **V**alhöll and **F**reyr in **Á**lfheimr.

to Óðinn and both relate to ideas about prophecy and fate. The etymological meaning of Sága is probably 'seeress' (AeW:459), recalling Frigg's knowledge of fate in *Lokasenna* 29 (see VI.5.). Furthermore, Þjóðólfr ór Hvini in *Haustlǫng* 9, supposedly c. 900, preserved in *Skáldskaparmál* 22 (Faulkes 1998:30-33), states that the goddess Iðunn lives in a place called *Brunnakr*, 'field of wells', a name indicating a watery place like Fensalir and Sökkvabekkr. Iðunn is also a figure in charge of life and death as she holds the apples said to keep the gods young (*Gylfaginning* 26; *Skáldskaparmál* G56). Thus, these three goddesses, like *nornir*, relate to water sources found below ground.

As noted, the two versions of *Vǫluspá* refer to, respectively, a lake and a hall as the place of origin of *nornir*, both situated beneath the tree, but we need not see in this any great discrepancy between the two images because Fensalir provides us with a two-in-one solution: there is a hall in the water. The same idea is clearly expressed in the Old English poem *Beowulf*, lines 1492-1517, where Beowulf dives into the water in pursuit of the wounded Grendel and finds a hall deep down. Lines 1492-1496 read as follows:

Æfter þæm wordum Weder-Geata leod
 efste mid elne, - nalas andsware
 bidan wolde; brimwylm onfeng
 hilderince. Ða wæs hwil dæg,es,
 ær he þone grundwong ongytan mehte.
 (*Beowulf* 1950:56)

After these words the Weather-Geat prince
 dived into the Mere - he did not care
 to wait for an answer - and the waves closed over
 the daring man. It was a day's space almost
 before he could glimpse ground at the bottom.
 (*Beowulf* 2001:54)

The description continues in lines 1512-1517:

Ða se eorl ongeat,
 þæt he [in]niðsele nathwylcum wæs,
 þær him nænig wæter wihte ne scepede,
 ne him for hrofsele hrinan ne mehte
 færgripe flodes; fyrleoht geseah,
 blacne leoman beorhte scinan.
 (*Beowulf* 1950:57)

Then the man found
 that he was in some enemy hall
 where there was no water to weigh upon him
 and the power of the flood could not pluck him away,
 sheltered by a roof: a shining light he saw,

a bright fire shining clearly.
(*Beowulf* 2001:55)

The Old English poem portrays the woman whom Beowulf encounters down there in the 'enemy hall' in the water, Grendel's mother, as an absolute monster;²⁰⁹ yet, at the same time as being the terrifying enemy of the humans above the surface she is also the mother of a son whose death causes her both anger and grief. "She is not so much a 'bad' mother, uncaring, unfeeling, unnurturing, as too good a one. Vengeful, son-obsessed, her maternity makes her an anti-social being, murderous and monstrous" (Stafford 1997:80). The double-sided nature of the woman inhabiting the underwater hall is evident in *Beowulf*, even if we are not meant to have any sympathy for her.²¹⁰

Frigg, mother of Baldr, carries this double-sidedness, too. It is clear that she holds power over his death because she is the one who knows the secret of how he can be killed (*Gylfaginning* 49). As his mother, Frigg is the natural protector of Baldr's life but this means that she is simultaneously the one who is able to take his life away (see III.1.4), like Sigurðr jarl's mother Eðna in *Orkneyinga saga* (see IV.3.). Frigg does not cut a terrifying, gloomy figure in the sources; she is said to know about fate (*Lokasenna* 29), but is rather a passive character who does not often enforce the powers that she nevertheless has. She is most active in the prose introduction to *Grímnismál* which portrays her as genuinely powerful and almost a rival to Óðinn.²¹¹ She is predominantly the good mother, her nurturing side made clear when she seeks to protect Baldr and later retrieve him from the dead (see VI.5.). There is no doubt that Grendel's mother, too, loves her son, but her behaviour turns her into a grotesque, monstrous mother, the very opposite of the properly behaved Frigg.²¹² Yet, it is possible to see both these figures as connected to the giving as well as the taking of life – the same features that are so characteristic of *nornir* and *dísir*.

²⁰⁹ Interestingly, *Beowulf* has both a male and a female inhabitant of the water.

²¹⁰ In line 1506, Grendel's mother is referred to as *brimwylf* [f], 'mere-wolf', and it is tempting to compare this to the Norse Fenrisúlfr whose name may indicate that he originally lived in the fens. This may relate to the connection between troll-women and wolves (see note 42).

²¹¹ The introduction to *Grímnismál* corresponds closely to the story told by Paulus Diaconus in his *History of the Langobards* from c.790 (1907:16-17).

²¹² Stafford (1997:159) discusses Grendel's mother in relation to Wealhtheow who here compares to Frigg: "*Beowulf's* Lady with the Mead Cup and Grendel's mother delineate the acceptable and unacceptable faces of the queen-in-the-household. As a holder of treasure, a maker of gifts, counselling and speaking, she was the necessary cup-bearing lady. But when engaging in such activity for her own ends, she was monstrous, Grendel's mother fighting the hero alone in her hall beneath the mere."

In relation to these supernatural female beings in the water, Tacitus' description of the cult of the goddess Nerthus in *Germania* 40 is of some interest:

nec quicquam notabile in singulis, nisi quod in commune Nerthum, id est Terram matrem, colunt eamque intervenire rebus hominum, invehì populis arbitrantur. est in insula Oceani castum nemus, dicatumque in eo vehiculum, veste contectum; attingere uni sacerdoti concessum. is adesse penetrali deam intellegit vectamque bubus feminis multa cum veneratione prosequitur. laeti tunc dies, festa loca, quaecumque adventu hospitioque dignatur. non bella ineunt, non arma sumunt; clausum omne ferrum; pax et quies tunc tantum nota, tunc tantum amata, donec idem sacerdos satiatam conversatione mortalium deam templo reddat. mox vehiculum et vestis et, si credere velis, numen ipsum secreto lacu abluitur. servi ministrant, quos statim idem lacus haurit. arcanus hinc terror santaque ignorantia, quid sit illud quod tantum perituri vident.

(*Tacitus* 1938)

'There is nothing noteworthy about these tribes individually, but they share a common worship of Nerthus, or Mother Earth. They believe that she takes part in human affairs, riding in a chariot among her people. On an island of the sea stands an inviolate grove in which, veiled with a cloth, is a chariot that none but the priest may touch. The priest can feel the presence of the goddess in this holy of holies, and attends her with deepest reverence as her chariot is drawn along by cows. Then follow days of rejoicing and merrymaking in every place that she condescends to visit and sojourn in. No one goes to war, no one takes up arms; every iron object is locked away. Then, and then only, are peace and quiet known and welcomed, until the goddess, when she has had enough of the society of men, is restored to her sacred precinct by the priest. After that, the chariot, the vestments, and (believe it if you will) the goddess herself, are cleansed in a secluded lake. This service is performed by slaves who are immediately afterwards drowned in the lake. Thus mystery begets terror and a pious reluctance to ask what that sight can be which is seen only by men doomed to die.'

(*Tacitus* 1948:134-135)

This description comes from a Roman consul who lived around the first century AD and is far removed from the Old Norse world of Scandinavia at the time of c.800-1100 AD.²¹³ A number of features are shared between Nerthus and the female figures described above: she stays on an island, a place surrounded by water, and she brings peace and prosperity but also death.

With regard to the name, Nerthus corresponds linguistically to the name of one of the later Norse gods, Njǫrðr of the *vanir*, and the apparent change of gender from the female Nerthus to the male Njǫrðr has been a point of discussion.²¹⁴ Much has

²¹³ The Baltic island which it describes is possibly Als or Fyn in present day Denmark (Simek 1993:230).

²¹⁴ It has been argued that the deity was in fact masculine and that Tacitus made it into a feminine figure because of certain correspondences to the Roman cult of Magna Mater in

been said about the connection between these two names (cf. Simek 1993:230; McKinnell 2005:51; Lindow 2001:237-238, 243; Lehmann 1919:1); what is clear is that they are, indeed, connected but whereas Njǫrðr is male, Tacitus imagines Nerthus as female, even if the name he gives her is grammatically masculine.²¹⁵ This type of confusion is likely to arise when the writer did not have first-hand knowledge of what he was describing and Tacitus is unlikely to have had that. McKinnell's opinion seems a reasonable one: "It seems more likely that the deity had both a male and female form (cf. *Freyr/Freyja* ...), and that Tacitus's error was simply to use the name of the male deity for the female one" (McKinnell 2005:52).

It is possible that this notion of a dual deity somehow relates to the story about Grendel and his mother recounted in *Beowulf* where both these characters are known by just one name with only the motherhood of the female to differentiate between them: *Grendel* and *Grendel's mother*. The son's name is used to describe her, too. If there were both a male and a female deity lurking beneath the surface of the water, this might also explain the apparent ease with which both Mímir and Urðr inhabit wells of knowledge, wisdom or fate.²¹⁶

Further to these considerations of predominantly literary sources, it is relevant to take into account what we know from archaeology. Northern Germany, Denmark and England have provided us with a substantial number of bog finds dating to the early Iron Age, around the first century AD – the well-preserved bodies of people who met their deaths in these places.²¹⁷ Many of them seem to have been ritually killed, probably sacrificed in the bogs to a deity of whom we obviously know little. Apart from the human bodies, wooden carvings presumed to portray gods, both male and female, have also been found (Müller-Wille 2002:146-150; Glob 1969:126-128).

which the goddess was washed in the River Tiber. McKinnell (2005:51) gives an overview of this argument but holds the opinion that the Germanic cult probably featured both a male and a female deity.

²¹⁵ The name occurs in several variant forms in the MSS: Neithum, Nerthum and Nertum (McKinnell 2005:51).

²¹⁶ The presence of both genders in the pool in *Beowulf* recalls the two words *urðr*, of which the masculine version means 'death' and the feminine 'fate'; cf line 1260 of *Beowulf* where the pronoun *se*, 'he' is used to refer to Grendel's mother. I am grateful to Rory McTurk, University of Leeds, for this reference.

²¹⁷ See Todd (1992:112-115); Glob 1969; Ström (1985:33-38).

IV.2.2. Below the Ground

Apart from the characters inhabiting wells, fens, pools and bogs,²¹⁸ a number of other female supernatural characters merit at least a mention in relation to what has so far been said about *nornir*, though two of them, namely Þorgerðr Hølgabrúðr and Hel, remain marginal. Neither character is said to inhabit water but both dwell below the ground and are strongly chthonic figures comparable to, if not identical with, the ancestress figures. Here, we might also recall the Saami *akkas* who dwell below the floor and are of the dead (Bäckman 1984:35; see III.1.1.1.).

The character of Þorgerðr Hølgabrúðr is mentioned in *Skáldskaparmál* 45 and turns up in a number of sagas²¹⁹ under varying names (Hølgabrúðr, Høðabrúðr, Høðatröll though always Þorgerðr).²²⁰ She appears to be a type of ancestress figure whose cult, relating to wealth in gold and silver and to battle magic, perhaps also fertility, was well known in western Norway and parts of Iceland in the tenth century. Hákon jarl in particular is mentioned in connection with her (McKinnell 2002 and 2005). The relationship between her and her sister Irpa is especially interesting: whereas Þorgerðr is referred to as *brúðr*, 'bride', the name Irpa means 'swarthy' (AeW:287, 291), potentially indicating a positive and a negative aspect of the same figure: a goddess and her 'dark sister'. Þorgerðr contains aspects of both a benign ancestress (she is never called a goddess) and a troll-hag, and Irpa may represent a hypostasis of her gloomier aspects. Þorgerðr is said to inhabit, variously, temples (*Njáls saga* 88) and a forest clearing (*Færeyinga saga* 23), but she is also connected to a burial mound (*Skáldskaparmál* 45), which is how she fits into a discussion of underground characters. Although she is closely connected to death, battle and wealth (typical aspects of *vanir*), there is little indication that she relates to prophesying or fate and her relationship to *nornir* looks somewhat marginal.

Hel is an epithet used to describe both the chthonic realm and the guardian of this realm.²²¹ *Gylfaginning* 34 describes her thus:

²¹⁸ I have not looked at figures inhabiting the sea but it is possible that the characters of Rán and Ægir may be relevant to the discussion at hand.

²¹⁹ *Njáls saga* 88; *Færeyinga saga* 23; *Jómsvíkinga saga* 34; *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar* 185; *Harðar saga* 19; *Ketils saga hængs* 5.

²²⁰ For fuller discussions of Þorgerðr, see Storm 1885; Steinsland (1991:220-226); McKinnell 2002; McKinnell (2005:81-85).

²²¹ The goddess Hel appears as a protagonist only in *Grímnismál* 31 and *Snorra-Edda*; elsewhere Hel is the name of the realm or a personification of death. I am grateful to Chris Abram, University College London, for pointing this out.

Hel kastaði hann [Óðinn] í Niflheim ok gaf henni vald yfir níu heimum ... Hon er blá hálf en hálf með hqrundar lit – Því er hon auðkend ok heldr gnúpleit ok grimlig.
(Faulkes 1982:26)

'He [Óðinn] threw her into Niflheim and gave her authority over nine worlds ... She is half black and half flesh-covered – thus she is easily recognizable – and rather downcast and fierce-looking.'
(Faulkes 1987:27)

No references to the goddess Hel are found in early skaldic poetry; Snorri's description is by far the most detailed one and she appears to be a relatively late poetic personification. What is particularly relevant in the present context is the idea that she rules over nine worlds, is a strongly chthonic figure and that she is clearly a half-and-half figure – half dead and half living. That she is a powerful character who is able to go against the wishes of the gods comes across in the Baldr story according to *Gylfaginning* 49 where she keeps the dead Baldr within her realm, but in this respect she may also be seen simply as a personified form of death itself; the gods of the Old Norse pantheon are subject to death. She is not portrayed as a figure of knowledge, is not connected to the wells discussed above and may not be an ancient figure. Clearly, Snorri's rationalisations that evil and unworthy people go to Hel and that her realm is exquisitely undesirable as a place of habitation have been somewhat coloured by Christian influence. Other figures relating to Hel and the underworld are of greater significance at present.

In *Baldrs draumar* Óðinn travels to the underworld in order to consult a long dead *vǫlva* about the fate of his son Baldr.²²² It seems noteworthy that the *vǫlva* encountered in this poem is not simply dead and buried in a normal way because she is in the underworld realm of the dead and even there, amongst the dead, she is buried. As such she is doubly dead, or at least buried twice.²²³ It seems that this *vǫlva* possesses knowledge about the future that Óðinn himself does not have, and in stanza 4 he employs a magical spell in order to bring her back from her grave and to compel her to speak to him:²²⁴

Þá reið Óðinn

Then Óðinn rode

²²² It is interesting that Óðinn does not consult Frigg at this point, although she is said to know about the future and about fate. When he wants to obtain such kinds of secret knowledge, Óðinn seeks out the *vǫlva*, even though *Ynglingasaga* 7 says that Óðinn himself is able to obtain knowledge about fate through practising *seiðr*.

²²³ As a dead woman, she may recall the *konor dauðar*, 'dead women' in *Atlamál* 28 (see III.1.2.).

²²⁴ The awakening of a dead woman in order to obtain otherworldly knowledge from her is rather like the opening of both *Sigrdrífumál* and *Vǫluspá* (Helga Kress 1993:74-77).

fyr austan dyrr,
þar er hann vissi
vǫlo leiði:
nam hann vitugri
valgaldr kveða,
unz nauðig reis,
nás orð um kvað.

East of the door
to where he knew
a vǫlva was buried:
he began reciting to the wise woman
a magical corpse-spell
until reluctantly she rose
and spoke corpse-words

He proceeds to question the dead woman, not only about the impending death of Baldr but also about events further into the future. She gives him answers, albeit with the greatest of reluctance, and the situation between Óðinn and the vǫlva has the character of a contest of power: she has the knowledge but he has the means to make her impart that knowledge to him, at least for a while. She answers the first three of Óðinn's questions but finishes each of her stanzas with the phrase: *nauðug sagðak, nú mun ek þegja*, 'reluctantly I spoke, now I will be silent.' In stanza 12 Óðinn puts his fourth question, the meaning of which is characteristically cryptic and difficult to interpret, but somehow this question reveals Óðinn's identity to the vǫlva (he has hitherto concealed his real identity by using the name Vegtarnr) and with this he loses his power over her.

The reluctance of the revived vǫlva to share her knowledge is by no means unique to her but seems to be reflected in the voice of the vǫlva who speaks *Vǫluspá*.²²⁵ In the middle section of the poem she finishes off several stanzas with the phrase: *vitoð ér enn, eða hvat?*, 'do you know yet, or what?' She is not as outspokenly hostile as is the vǫlva from *Baldrs draumar* and the situation surrounding her speech also appears to be of a different kind. But in *Vǫluspá* she is closely associated with the *jǫtnar*, a race with which the gods are generally at odds and of which particularly the females can be very hostile (many of Þórr's adversaries amongst the *jǫtnar* are actually females; Clunies Ross 1994:105; McKinnell 2005:109-125) and, although she appears to speak willingly, we might imagine that she has somehow been compelled or paid to do so.

The very last phrase of the poem: *nú mun hon sǫkkvaz*, 'now she will sink',²²⁶ could mean that perhaps she, too, has been made to rise from the dead for the sake

²²⁵ Most often, *Vǫluspá* is imagined as Óðinn questioning a vǫlva (Steinsland and Meulengracht Sørensen 2001:58; Dronke 1997:52; Hermann Pálsson 1996b:76), but some scholars (Gísli Sigurðsson 2000-2001; Kure 2006) have argued that the opposite is the case. Although both Gísli and Kure make valid points regarding stanza 29, there is a clear indication in stanza 1 that the vǫlva is speaking at Óðinn's request. However, I agree that the exact relationship between the two figures is problematic in the poem.

²²⁶ The vǫlva employs both first and third person singular forms in the poem, apparently using both to refer to herself.

of her knowledge and that she is returning to a place below ground or even a source of water at the end of her prophecy. The phrase closely matches the reference to the tree *fyr mold neðan*, 'below ground', in stanza 2, and the idea that she remembers nine worlds recalls Hel who is said to rule over nine worlds. Much remains unknown to us concerning this *vǫlva*, her relationship to Óðinn and the *spá* she makes; her relationship to the well itself may be marginal but her chthonic underground aspect does seem to be quite clear. Also clear is the familiar wrestling over and reluctance to part with otherworldly knowledge.

Lokasenna 29 says about Frigg: *ørlög Frigg hygg ek at ǫll viti, þótt hon siálfgi segi*, 'Frigg, I think, knows all fate, although she herself does not speak' (see VI.5.), a phrase repeated in stanza 21 where it is attached to Gefjun. It seems, then, that Frigg and Gefjun are also reluctant to speak of the hidden matters of fate. It is clearly knowledge of an otherworldly and therefore dangerous and powerful kind – not easily obtained or parted with, precious as well as deadly.

Of relevance also is the poem *Hyndluljóð*, found in the late 14th century *Flateyjarbók* but not in *Konungsbók*.²²⁷ In this, Freyia consults a *jǫtunn*-woman or troll-woman in order to obtain knowledge about the ancestry of her lover Óttarr. In stanza 1, Freyia addresses Hyndla thus:

Vaki, mæR meyia!
vaki, mín vina,
Hyndla systir,
er í helli býr!
nú er røkkR røkkra:
ríða vit skolom
til Valhallar,
ok til véS heilagS.

Wake up, girl of girls!
wake up, my friend
Hyndla sister,
who lives in a cave!
now is the darkest of darkness:
we two shall ride
to Valhøll,
and to the sanctuary of the gods.

The poem is interesting for a number of reasons. It involves consulting an otherworldly woman in order to make her part with knowledge of the past, it is reminiscent of a prophecy and, significantly, contains what is known as *Vǫluspá hin skamma*, 'The Shorter *Vǫluspá*' (stanzas 29-44 of *Hyndluljóð* comprise this), and Freyia and Hyndla have been interpreted as rivals for Óttarr's favour which makes it possible to see them as counterparts of each other, like Þorgerðr and Irpa (see above) (McKinnell 2002:272-279 and 2005:85-89). It is clear that Hyndla is the one who possesses not only the knowledge (which she willingly communicates to Óttarr, although she sneers at Freyia) but also the precious drink, called *minnisǫl*, 'memory-

²²⁷ For fuller discussions of this poem, see McKinnell 2002 and 2005; Steinsland 1991.

ale', stanza 45, which Hyndla gives to Óttarr at the end.²²⁸ Hyndla seems closely related to *vǫlur* and of particular interest is the notion that she guards a chthonic type of knowledge also represented as a drink which is given to the male protagonist of the story.

Of further interest in *Hyndluljóð* is the description of Heimdallr as the son of nine *jǫtunn*-mothers, particularly stanza 38:

Sá var aukinn
iarðar megni,
svalkǫldom sæ
ok sonardreyra²²⁹

He was strengthened
with the power of the earth,
with the cold sea
and with sacrificial blood

The stanza is remarkably similar to *Guðrúnarkviða II* 21 lines 5-8:

þat var um aukit
urðar magni,
svalkǫldom sæ
ok sonar dreyra

it was strengthened
with fateful power,
with the cold sea
and with sacrificial blood

In *Guðrúnarkviða*, the phrase describes a drink given to Guðrún to make her forget the past. This has been discussed by, amongst others, Steinsland (1991:282-283) who suggests that the close similarities may stem from ideas about a ritual drink of some sort.²³⁰ This would allow the two stanzas to be seen simply as variations of the same piece of knowledge instead of one being regarded as a corrupt form of the other. The relationship between *iarðar megni* and *urðar magni* may be more than just accidental linguistic similarity as both could be seen as ways of referring to supernatural forces below the ground (cf. Steinsland 1991:282-283; Reichborn-Kjennerud 1933:61).

The last woman to be included here is not dead but she does have her dwelling below the ground; nor is she living in water, yet she has a strong connection to liquids. *Skáldskaparmál* G57-G58 tells the story of how Óðinn obtained the mead of poetry which the *jǫtunn* Suttungr was keeping deep inside the mountain of Hnitbjörg, with his daughter Gunnlǫð to guard it. When Suttungr refuses Óðinn's request for a drink of the mead, Óðinn bores a hole through the mountain, changes

²²⁸ This recalls the drink given to Sigurðr by Sigrdrífa in *Sigrdrífumál* 5 and by Brynhildr in *Vǫlsungasaga* 21 (Grimstad 2000:148-148).

²²⁹ A difficult word. Fritzner (III:478) translates it as *Offerblod*, 'sacrificial blood', supposing *sonargaltadreyri*, 'blood of a sacrificial boar' to be a more original form of it. Why he supposes this is not immediately obvious.

²³⁰ Further on on drinks, see Enright 1996.

himself into a snake and enters the mountain to get to the precious liquid. The story continues:

Fór Bolverkr [Óðinn] þar til sem Gunnlōð var ok lá hjá henni þrjár nætr, ok þá lofaði hon honum at drekka af miðinum þrjá drykki. Í inum fyrsta drykk drakk hann allt or Óðreri, en í qðrum or Boðn, í inum þriðja or Són, ok hafði hann þá allan mjōðinn.
(Faulkes 1998:4)

'Bolverk [Óðinn] went to where Gunnlod was and lay with her for three nights and then she let him drink three draughts of the mead. In the first draught he drank everything out of Odrerir, and in the second out of Bodn, in the third out of Son, and then he had all the mead.'
(Faulkes 1987:63)

The story is also referred to in *Hávamál* 104-110 but in a rather different version from Snorri's. Scholarly tradition has often seen the two renditions as different variants of the one story and has therefore often taken *Skáldskaparmál* as the basis on which to interpret the more fragmentary *Hávamál* (Meletinskij 1973b; Simek 1996:124-125, 208-209; Edwards and Pálsson 1998:29-30). However, Svava Jakobsdóttir has shown that the two versions of the story about Gunnlōð should not be regarded as one and the same:

It is clear that the *Hávamál* stanzas in question must be examined, once and for all, without the help of Snorri Sturluson. It seems to me that they will remain obscure if we turn to Snorri uncritically for explanation and read into the poem on the basis of the younger work. It may well be that many points of *Hávamál* seem obscure only because attempts are made to force them into fixed conceptions imported from other times and places – or perhaps because of simple misunderstandings.
(Svava Jakobsdóttir 2002:31)

Svava goes on to discuss the *Hávamál* stanzas independently of *Skáldskaparmál*, finding that the story they tell bears much closer resemblance to royal consecration ceremonies associated with the *hieros gamos*, described in Celtic sources as *banais ríghes* or *feis temrach*, than it does to Snorri's account (see 'kingship' in ÓhÓgáin 1990:263-265; MacKillop 2004:285-286). Celtic tradition tells of:

a woman (the goddess) who grants the king-figure (or hero) mead and goes to bed with him... The goddess (or her personification) is called 'sovereignty,' and she grants the king authority to reign with a 'sacred marriage.'
(Svava Jakobsdóttir 2002:34)

Svava further points out that whereas Snorri tells the story of a theft, *Hávamál* places much stronger emphasis on betrayal; *Skáldskaparmál* has Óðinn use trickery to worm his way into the mountain where he is clearly not supposed to be, whereas in *Hávamál* he is openly allowed in, apparently even expected and welcomed.

Moreover, *Hávamál* only introduces the *heiti* *Bólverkr*, 'Evil-doer', after the betrayal, whilst *Skáldskaparmál* uses it throughout the story. The betrayal motif is clear, for example in stanza 105 where Gunnlǫð is first introduced:

Gunnlǫð mér um gaf gullnom stóli á drykk ins dýra miaðar; ill iðgiǫld lét ek hana eptir hafa síns ins heila hugar, síns ins svára sefa.	Gunnlǫð gave me from her golden seat a drink of the precious mead, a poor return I let her have after that for her sincerity, for her heavy mind.
---	---

The argument made by Svava Jakobsdóttir seems to have considerable validity as she manages to show that the Gunnlǫð-story told in *Hávamál* makes good sense in itself, independently of Snorri's version and that it is relevant to the present discussion.

Although the mead, of poetry or of sovereignty, may not be an exact equivalent to Urðarbrunnr, there is a level of correspondence even so. The mead seems to relate especially clearly to Mímisbrunnr with its connotations of wisdom and knowledge and as the object of Óðinn's quest in *Völuspá* 46 where Óðinn seeks out Mímisbrunnr to get counsel from Mímir. Thus, Óðinn seeks out three wells with similar intentions: Mímisbrunnr in *Völuspá* and *Gylfaginning* 51, Urðarbrunnr in *Hávamál* 111 and Gunnlǫð's mead in *Hávamál* 104-110. All three sources of liquid are connected to wisdom and to some kind of power, be it through knowledge or sovereignty; they are underground and at least two of them are guarded by strongly chthonic figures, Mímir and the *nornir*, and two of them by female figures, the *nornir* and Gunnlǫð. All of the guardians can be seen to have close affiliations to *jǫtnar*.

The story about Gunnlǫð does not portray a hall in a well in the same way as Fensalir, Sökkvabekkr and Grendel's mother's lair in *Beowulf*, but it seems to give the reverse image: there is a source of special liquid in the underground dwelling of this supernatural woman; there is a well in the hall. Interestingly, Eyvindr skáldaspillir, in *Háleygjatal* 2, apparently c.985, alludes to the story using the name Sökkdalr to refer to Hnitbiörg, the mountain inside which Gunnlǫð is found (*Skáldskaparmál* 2). Hnitbiörg means 'clashing rocks' (LP:270; Frtz II:28), a name corresponding to the Symplegades,²³¹ the dangerous entrance to the otherworld through which only the hero can enter, but Sökkdalr translates as 'sunken glen' or 'deep valley' (LP:561), a name strongly recalling Fensalir, Brunnakr and especially Sökkvabekkr, all of them

²³¹ Known from *Argonautica*, Book 2:593-595 (1995:50-51; 174).

dwellings of goddesses who relate to fate. Interestingly, Óðinn comes to Hnitbiörg/Sökkdalr in search of the mead, whilst in *Grímnismál* 7 he is said to drink with Sága from golden cups in Sökkvabekkr. There is a strong correspondence in the images portrayed by *Grímnismál* and *Hávamál* in this respect and it therefore seems relevant to include Gunnlǫð in the discussion of *nornir* and the other women in the well.

An interesting point about Gunnlǫð is her name, which means 'war-invitation'. In terms of the other supernatural female beings (see III), this name would seem rather close to the *valkyrja*-type although she is said to be the daughter of a *jǫtunn*, a connection not usually made for *valkyrjur*. McKinnell discusses how the legendary rulers of Haðaland in southeast Norway might have regarded Gunnlǫð as their mythical ancestress, claiming descent from her and Óðinn (McKinnell 2005:166-167), and this would seem to make good sense in the light of the sovereignty motif of *Hávamál* 104-110 – Óðinn receives the mead from Gunnlǫð and this is what grants him the position of ruler (cf. Steinsland 1991). In this respect, Gunnlǫð could come close to the *dísir* as a sort of ancestress figure whilst also sharing this feature with Skaði, Gefjun²³² and perhaps Þorgerðr Hǫlgabrúðr.

Immediately after the story of the mead, *Hávamál* introduces the well of fate in stanza 111:

Mál er at þyia	There are words to be declared
þular stóli á,	from the wise one's seat,
Urðar brunni at;	at the well of Urðr;
sá ek ok þagðak,	I saw and I was silent,
sá ek ok hugðak,	I saw and I thought
hlýdda ek á manna mál:	I listened to the speech of men
of rúnar heyrða ek dæma,	of runes I heard talk – nor were
né um ráðom þogðo,	they quiet about good counsel
Háva hǫllo at,	at the High One's hall,
Háva hǫllo í,	in the High One's hall,
heyrða ek segia svá:	I heard them say thus:

This is followed by the so-called *Loddfáfnismál*-section of the poem.

Stanza 105 shows Gunnlǫð, seated on a golden seat, guarding the mead deep inside a mountain; stanza 111 describes another seat, by Urðarbrunnr but also, seemingly, at and in some hall where Óðinn hears 'talk about runes' and 'good counsel'. Perhaps it is not entirely coincidental that the mention of Urðarbrunnr follows straight after the Gunnlǫð story; a woman guarding three vats of mead is

²³² *Ynglingasaga* 8 and *Háleygjatal* 3-4 refer to Skaði as an ancestress figure for a Norwegian jarl; *Ynglingasaga* 5 has Gefjun as the ancestress of the Skjǫldungar in Denmark.

described first, then the action shifts to the well of fate, guarded by *nornir* who may have been conceived of as a group of three.²³³ From these places Óðinn obtains very precious things, sovereignty followed by runic knowledge in *Hávamál*, poetry in *Skáldskaparmál*, of which the latter two may be regarded as corresponding to each other as poetry and wisdom were considered very close relatives in the Old Norse mind-set.²³⁴

Another 'seat' perhaps akin to the ones discussed here is mentioned in the strongly Christian poem *Sólarljóð* 51:²³⁵

Á norna stóli
satk níu daga,
þaðan vask á hest hafinn,
gýgjar sólir
skínu grimmliga
ór skýdrúpnis skýum
(*Skj* BI:643-AI:635)

On the seat of the nornir
I sat for nine days,
whence I was lifted up onto a horse,
the suns of the troll-wives
were shining grimly
out from the clouds in the sky

There have been different interpretations of this *norna stóll*, 'seat of the *nornir*', whether it is a deathbed from which the soul of the dead is eventually lifted or an image of Purgatory.²³⁶ It has also been compared to Óðinn's self-sacrifice on the tree, *Hávamál* 138-141 (Fidjestøl 1979:48-49; Njörður P. Njarðvík 1991:80-81). Whether it is one or the other, the varying interpretations seem to agree on the fact that it is an intermediate space and most scholars regard it as a decidedly unpleasant place to be – as it would be to any Christian. The *norna stóll* reflects the heathen association of *nornir* with the chthonic realm, and in this Christian poem *nornir* are probably regarded as wholly negative beings.

IV.3. The Dyngja

Having looked at similarities between the places where *nornir* and other related female beings are said to come from, the question of why figures representing fate

²³³ This could be another set of reverse images: in the hall in the well three women guard one well; in the well in the hall one woman guards three 'wells'. This observation, however, might just be coincidental.

²³⁴ This is by no means unique to Old Norse society; for a thorough discussion of the idea, see Bloomfield and Dunn (1989:106-119).

²³⁵ AM 166 b 8° c.1600-1700, though the poem is allegedly from the 13th century (Njörður P. Njarðvík 1991:7).

²³⁶ Price (2002:208) relates it to shamanic ritual and to the *seiðhjallr* described in, for example, *Eiríks saga rauða* 4 (2002:162-167). This is possible, but *Sólarljóð* is hardly intended to describe a non-Christian ritual though it might draw on folk traditions.

almost always seem to be feminine will be addressed.²³⁷ The idea presented below is in some ways speculative but does appear to be strongly relevant to the discussion. I am aware that I am shifting into a somewhat conjectural mode at this point.

To begin with, it can be pointed out that the above-discussed places below the ground and especially in the water seem to be places that carry strong feminine connotations and where masculinity is somehow marginal. They relate to physical places in the human world,²³⁸ but do they relate directly to the actual lives of human women? And if so – how? I believe they do, but on highly symbolic levels, and my theory about this concerns two specifically feminine spaces encountered in the human world.

The Norwegian skald Þórbjörn hornklofi, in *Haralds saga ins hárfagra* 15 (the poem is known as *Haraldskvæði*), supposedly c. 900, says:

Úti vill jól drekka,
ef skal einn ráða,
fylkir enn framlyndi
ok Freys leik heyja,
ungr leiddisk eldvelli
ok inni at sitja,
varma dyngju
eða vottu dúns fulla.
(ÍF 26:112)

Outside he will drink Yule,
if he has it his own way,
the foremost prince
and play Freyr's game;
as a child he detested the fireside
and sitting indoors,
the warm *dyngja*
and mittens filled with down.

The place described in the last two lines, the *dyngja* (plural *dyngjur*), is, as can be gauged from Þórbjörn's stanza, regarded as a space not suitable for men, it is a certain building or room where women would do women's work, particularly textile work (Brednich 1964; Zimmermann 1982:110; Østergård 2004:58-59; see also V.3. and V.3.2.). Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson (1997:150) says about this: *Spunakonur í Asíu og á meginlandi Evrópu mynduðu víða með sér eins konar leynifélög sem karlmönnum var stranglega bannaður aðgangur að*, 'Female spinners in many parts of Asia and mainland Europe formed among themselves some sort of secret societies from which men were strictly excluded'. This looks akin to what Wolfram (1933) refers to in his descriptions of a ritual surrounding the flax harvest in the border area between Styria and Carinthia in Austria. There, tending the drying flax in a special outbuilding was a job for women only:

²³⁷ Fate is feminine throughout most European cultures (Grimm I 2004:411-414).

²³⁸ The watery places recall the archaeological finds of human bodies, male and female, some of which appear to have been sacrificed to deities in bogs (Todd 1992:112-115; Ström 1985:33-38; Glob 1969).

Besonders die Brechbadstube, wo der Flachs gedörret wird, darf von niemand als dem Hårpåtsch oder Hårpåtschin²³⁹ betreten werden; so heißt das Weib, welches den Brechlerinnen aus der stark rauchenden und rußigen Dörrstube den Flachs zuträgt. Sie ist von ihrem Geschütze schwarz an den Händen und im Gesicht. Erspäht sie zufällig ein Knechtlein, so führt sie es unter schallendem Gelächter gewaltsam zum Tanze, daß er sich auf und auf berußt. (Wolfram 1933:138)

'Especially the drying house where the flax is dried may not be accessed by anyone except the *Hårpåtsch* or *Hårpåtschin*; that is the name of the woman, who brings the flax to the flax breakers, coming from the sooty and smoky drying room. Her hands and face are black from her work. If she spies a male farm servant, she forces him, accompanied by loud laughter, to dance so that he becomes sooty all over.'²⁴⁰

That the women involved in this hot, smoky work would look frightening when they came out of the drying room and might somehow use this to their advantage is a practical detail; what is interesting is the idea that men were forbidden to enter the area at all: *Die eigentlichen Vorrechte der Brechlerinnen bestehen darin, daß jedes männliche Wesen, das mit oder ohne Absicht in ihre Nähe gerät, dafür büßen muß*, 'The actual privilege of the woman who does the breaking is that every male being that, with or without intent, comes near her, will have to pay for it' (Wolfram 1933:139).²⁴¹ The fact that the ritualistic aspects of flax harvesting continued in the area long after flax had lost most of its practical value and meaning to the communities would seem to hint at some very strong symbolic aspects attached to it (Wolfram 1933:137).

In certain ways, the flax drying room is comparable to the Norse *dyngja* which seems to be a manifestation of some specifically female space. It represents a separate area that only women would normally enter or in which it would at least be somehow unmanly to find oneself. It is a workshop space, akin to a smithy,²⁴² and would not be frequented unless for specific reasons or because it is one's own. All

²³⁹ *Hår* is an Austrian word for flax, German *Flachs* (Wolfram 1933:138).

²⁴⁰ Translation kindly provided by Peter Graff. Baines (1989:167-181) describes in detail the processes involved in flax husbandry: after harvesting, the flax stalks are placed in wet conditions to make the hard stems mould (retting), then they must be dried and afterwards comes the breaking which extracts the fibres from the stems. The broken flax straw then has to be removed from the fibres (scutching) and finally the fibres are separated from each other (hackling); then they are ready for spinning.

²⁴¹ Translation kindly provided by Peter Graff.

²⁴² There is a degree of correspondence between the processes of textile work and those of blacksmithing as both are ways of 'creating something out of nothing', as Terry Gunnell has phrased it; that is, giving shape to that which has no shape (see also V.3.). Furthermore, the verbs *smíða* and *skapa* are often used with similar semantic content: 'to create' (Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 2004:194-197).

the same, it is an everyday room; we are hardly meant to consider the *dyngja* a ritual space as such.

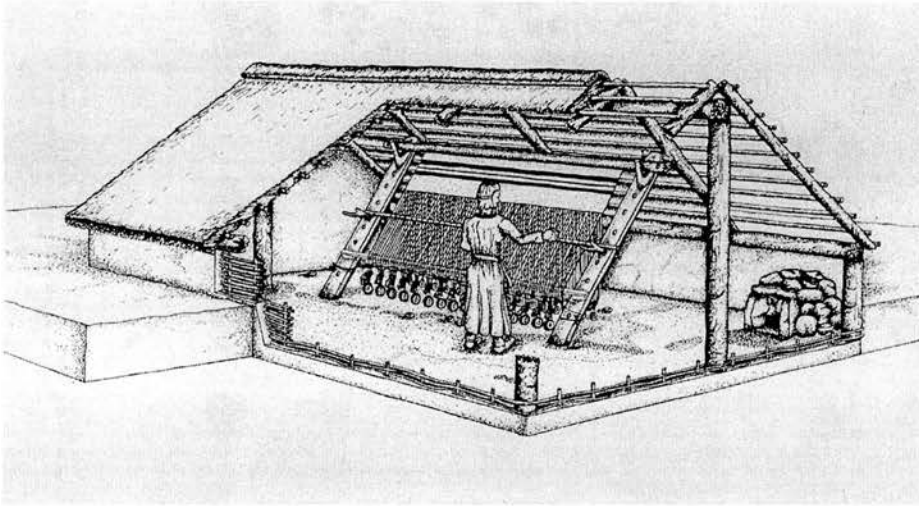


Figure 4. Drawing of a reconstructed *dyngja*, based on archaeological finds. The low floor level is clearly visible.

In archaeological excavations of settlements, *dyngjur* have been shown to be recognisable as rooms containing many textile-related tools and implements, particularly loom weights, which were used to keep the warp taut on an upright loom. This space was often physically separate from other parts of the house.

Østergård writes:

From a review of the find-spots of loom weights in excavations from, among other places, the Old Town in Oslo and from Scania, it is evident that they [*dyngjur*] are often found on the northern side of the room in the dwelling or towards the northeast in pit-houses and it has been possible to see that a door or entrance was placed on the opposite side. The placing of the loom in relation to the door has therefore been interpreted as the result of a wish to receive any light that came in. On the Greenland farms the *dyngja* was placed in the northern or northeastern part of the farms but may not have had anything to do with light, since no outside doors were found in these rooms.

(Østergård 2004:59)²⁴³

And further, concerning one of the Norse farms in Greenland:

The weaving room at the Farm Beneath the Sand (64V2-III-555) [Western settlement] was sunken, and there was no door out to the open air. The low-lying placing may therefore not be the result of a wish for diagonally falling light. On the other hand, in the weaving room the largest fireplace registered in the farm complex was found, and this may have something to do with the light, since in a large fireplace there is room for a lot of fuel, which besides heat would also provide a good deal of light.

²⁴³ Whether the direction north-northeast is of any significance is uncertain.

(Østergård 2004:60)

This latter description conjures up an image not unlike the warm *dyngja* with the firelight, mentioned by Þorbjörn. One might wonder why people would want to weave inside in dark, half-underground places when there is plenty of light outside, and Østergård (2004:69) suggests that the looms might have been moved outside in the summer. Yet, archeological scholarship appears not to mention traces of weaving found at outside locations. Loom weights always seem to be found inside the houses rather than outside them and there are good reasons not to move an upright loom outside. One reason is that the Scandinavian summer, apart from being very light, can be very wet, and it would seem undesirable to be weaving in the rain – even if somewhat humid conditions are a help when weaving linen.²⁴⁴ Another reason is that once the loom is set up it would be very cumbersome to take it down again in order to move it and one can hardly imagine attempts at shifting a loom after it has been set up. In Scandinavia, weaving was probably an indoor activity and in shieling cultures, such as most of Norway, Iceland and parts of Sweden, but also in Denmark, it was traditionally a winter activity (Højrup 1978:177). Otherwise, looms would presumably have left traces also at shieling sites, not just farm sites. Spinning, however, is a portable activity and has left archaeological traces at shielings as well as house sites. Spinning was not confined to the *dyngja*, weaving probably was.

In certain symbolic ways, the *dyngja* corresponds to Fensalir, to Sökkvabekkr, to the hall in or by Urðarbrunnr, to Sökkdalr – Gunnlǫð's dwelling deep inside the mountain and to the hall of Grendel's mother deep down at the bottom of the pool (see IV.2.1.). This space is charged with some kind of feminine powers, it has to do with creation, with transformation, and one expects to find primarily women inside it.

The word *dyngja* is itself of some interest here. Dictionary definitions describe it as a space for women: 'a lady's bower' (C/V:111). The *dyngja* was probably originally a separate building, half underground and with muck spread over the rooftop for warmth: *frauengemach unter der erde*, 'women's quarters below ground' (AeW:90;

²⁴⁴ Zimmermann (1982:116), discussing pit houses as weaving houses, explains how weaving wool is unproblematic but for flax fibres a constantly humid atmosphere is desirable, and that shallow oblong pits thought to increase dampness are often found at sites where looms have stood. This accords well with the idea of half-underground and probably damp *dyngjur* heated by fires. Baines (1989:26) also points out that flax fibres need to be wetted in order to be spun; cf. note 121.

cf. Frtz I:276-277). It is etymologically related to the Danish noun *dyngje*, 'a disorderly heap', but also to English 'dung'.

It is not the intention here to claim that the *dyngja* was some kind of holy or sacred space but, as a specifically feminine space set aside for feminine types of work, it seems to have the potential for taking on connotations of magic and, moreover, of issues which were outside of the masculine realm. As spinning could at certain times and in special circumstances have some magical significance (see V.8.), so the *dyngja* might likewise at times have obtained similar connotations. Most of the time, spinning is just work needing to be done, the *dyngja* is just the place where it is done and there is nothing strange about that; both of these should probably on the whole be regarded as everyday matters. Yet, we do come across spinning carried out with magical or at least with special and unusual intent (see V.7.); in such special situations it is possible to consider that the space in which this activity is carried out might also gain similar status, even if this is just a temporary status.²⁴⁵ The *dyngja*, then, might be regarded not in itself as a magical space but as a place wherein certain magical or quasi-magical things might take place under certain circumstances; simultaneously, it has a specifically feminine identity.

Connections between the earth and feminine deities are well-known; indeed, Old Norse mythology personifies the earth as female: Jǫrð, mother of Þórr (cf. ÓhÓgáin 1990:263-265 on ancient Irish kingship). Furthermore:

Belief in the goddess is connected with the earth in the most literal terms. It is not unlikely that the religion of the ancient Scandinavians was associated with hills, or that religious ceremonies derived from belief in the earth and in re-birth took place in specially prepared hills or caves. Innumerable traditions associated with such places survive in the *fornaldasögur* and in folklore. It is clearly not sensible to lay too much emphasis on these traditions, but there is a weight of evidence to suggest that such ceremonies continued into the saga age. Men entered into foster brotherhood with one another by carving up the earth and going under an arch of raised turf where they drew their own blood and mixed it together with the soil (*Gísla saga* ch. 6 [IF 6:22-23]). This is obviously a re-birth ritual where belief in the earth as mother is implicit in the actual form of the ceremony. When men entered into foster brotherhood, the earth was not merely a symbol of re-birth; it was also the ceremony's frame, the shrine itself, the actual womb of a mother. (Svava Jakobsdóttir 2002:40)

This would seem to connect to the goddesses below the ground as well as to the *dyngja*, that feminine space half underground. No direct line can be drawn between

²⁴⁵ Gunnell, discussing ritual space in pagan Icelandic houses, says: "The idea that these buildings were multifunctional implies that the meaning of their daily space was 'transformed' in some way at certain points in time" (2004b:4).

the *dyngja* and the notion that it was a symbolic womb in Old Norse literature, but the womb is a protective and confining space – as is the *dyngja* described by Þorbjörn – and it is also akin to the *dyngja* as a place where things are generated. The womb is a wet, dark place on the inside and it is decidedly feminine. One text passage seems quite plausibly interpreted in the light of this idea; the feminine connotations of the *dyngja* are potentially indirectly referred to in the words of Eðna as she gives the infamous raven banner to her son Sigurðr jarl in *Orkneyinga saga* 11.²⁴⁶

Ek mynda þik hafa lengi upp fætt í ulllaupi mínum, ef ek vissa, at þú myndir einart lífa, ok ræðr auðna lífi, en eigi, hvar maðr er kominn; betra er at deyja með sæmð en lífa með skómm.
(ÍF 34:24-25)

'I would have nurtured you for a long time in my wool basket, if I knew that you would live forever, but it is fate which rules life, and not where a man happens to be; better to die with dignity than to live with shame.'
(My translation)

These somewhat enigmatic words can be understood in the light of the notion proposed here because we can liken the idea of being inside the wool basket to being inside the *dyngja*²⁴⁷ and we can do this in two ways: 1) the *dyngja* is a protective but also confining environment, fit for women and children but not for grown men. Thus, a young boy may spend time with the women in the *dyngja* but when he grows up this is no longer regarded as proper for him to do. In order to grow up properly he must go into the dangerous world outside. 2) The wool basket contains wool that is as yet untreated, it is a mass of potential but is still without shape or order. In this way it is like the womb where human beings are put together and to remain there would, in fact, mean to remain unborn. What I am arguing is that there is a symbolic connection between textile work on the one hand and giving birth on the other hand (see further below).

In both cases, to remain in the wool basket would be an unnatural thing to do. A man who spends his time in the *dyngja* cannot be reckoned a proper man and an unborn person cannot be reckoned a person. What Eðna seems to be saying is that for someone to live forever, time has to be suspended at the in-between point when the person is still in the protective sphere of the wool basket, womb or *dyngja*, yet she also knows that this is impossible because the lives of humans are controlled by

²⁴⁶ *Flateyjarbók* c.1387-1395 and other MSS.

²⁴⁷ The image of the wool basket corresponds rather well to Þorbjörn's cosy mittens.

the powers of fate more than by people themselves. Once you have been given the basic equipment for living, you are shoved out of the *dyngja*, out of the womb.

At the same time as Eðna is saying this to Sigurðr, she is handing him what is effectively his death, the magical raven banner, seemingly emulating the *nornir* as givers and takers of life. She, his mother, has given him life and now she gives him death (cf. III.2.1.).

The suggested connection between Eðna's wool basket and the *dyngja* works on two levels: one is that of human social conventions, the other is a more symbolic interpretation not explicitly present in the text. The first level works in this way: were Sigurðr, literally, to remain in the wool basket, or the *dyngja*, that physical workshop space that is considered specifically female, he would not be a 'proper' man. This reading is quite straightforward. The second level works in this way: it is the fate of whatever is put into the symbolic *dyngja*, the womb, to come out, transformed from raw and unshaped mass into a human being the same way as untreated wool in the wool basket is transformed into ordered threads which can be made into useful things. The raw mass cannot remain inside once it has gained the form given to it by the 'supernatural' powers at work inside the symbolic *dyngja*; that is the fate of human life: it leads to death and no one can live forever. This could be what Eðna means: that it is not possible to suspend life on the threshold between one state and another. Whether she is actively hurrying her son's life to an end would appear to hinge on whether we regard her as an evil woman who is using sorcery with malicious intent, or as a human messenger of some higher force who is simply stating the inevitable. It must be kept in mind, however, that this reading works on a highly symbolic level and is an interpretation of the text in *Orkneyinga saga* 11.

The suggestion of a connection between what goes on in the womb and what goes on in the *dyngja* finds further support in other European traditions, also Christian ones.²⁴⁸ In the apocryphal *Book of James* (also known as the *Protevangelium*) there is a description of the Annunciation which has Mary spinning when the angel comes to speak to her:

But Mary took the scarlet and began to spin it.

XI. 1 And she took the pitcher and went forth to fill it with water: and lo a voice said: Hail, thou art highly favoured; the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.

And she looked about her upon the right hand and upon the left, to see whence this voice should be: and being filled with trembling she went to her

²⁴⁸ I am grateful to Florentina Badalanova Geller, British Museum, for introducing me to this material.

house and set down the pitcher, and took the purple and sat down upon her seat and drew out the thread.

2 And behold an angel of the Lord stood before her saying: fear not, Mary, for thou hast found grace before the Lord of all things, and thou shalt conceive of his word. And she, when she heard it, questioned in herself, saying: Shall I *verily* conceive of the living God, and bring forth after the manner of all women? And the angel of the Lord said: Not so, Mary, for a power of the Lord shall overshadow thee: wherefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of the Highest. And thou shalt call his name Jesus: for he shall save his people from their sins. And Mary said: Behold the handmaid of the Lord is before him: be it unto me according to your word.

(*Apocryphal New Testament* 1945:43)

Two things are of interest here: 1) that Mary is spinning when she conceives, and 2) that she first hears the voice when she goes to fetch water.²⁴⁹



*The Annunciation; fresco fragment, twelfth century.
Church of Sorpe, Spain.*

Figure 5.
This 12th century Spanish icon clearly shows Mary spinning when the angel comes to her.

The idea of the spinning Virgin Mary is strongly supported by Eastern European iconography of the Annunciation. Two such icons are found in St. Sofia cathedral in Kiev, dating from the 11th century, another in St. George's Cathedral in Novgorod, dating from 1103, and a 12th century fresco fragment from the Church of Sorpe in Spain reveals that the same tradition existed in Western Europe although it was discontinued there in later times. That it was kept up in Eastern Europe is evident

²⁴⁹ In Baltic traditions, Laima, goddess of fate and childbirth, is associated with water as well as textiles (Vaitkevičienė 2002:138-9).

from later icons, such as the 15th century altar gate in the village church in Boboshevo, Bulgaria, the 16th century altar gate at Preobrazhenski Monastery, Bulgaria, and others (Badalanova 2006). All of these icons portray Mary holding a spindle, some of them even show the baby Jesus inside of her just where the thread crosses her abdomen between her hands.²⁵⁰

The connection between spinning and giving birth is also expressed in other forms:

Many Slavonic riddles play with this archetypal metaphor, showing the distaff as an allegorical image of the mother who is spinning the thread of life, while the yarn on the spindle is considered a child growing in her womb: "The mother shrinks, the child grows. What is it?" ... In a number of similar riddles the distaff is also allegorically described as a mother who is spinning her offspring's life into form out of her own body. (Badalanova 2006:231)²⁵¹

Inside of the *dyngja*, on both levels, 'something' is made from 'nothing', 'nothing' is put together, structured and ordered into one coherent 'something.' In the actual *dyngja*, masses of untreated wool and flax are transformed into threads and the threads are ordered and put together in weaving, embroidery and other types of textile work. In this space, human women are at work, ordering and putting together cultural goods in an environment to which men do not normally have, or even want to have, access, although children, boys and girls, are allowed. The powers that women have here are mainly practical but at times they may extend into the realm of magic. The actual *dyngja*, then, may be seen as a sort of protected area of feminine creativity, giving order and shape to unformed masses of potential.

In the symbolic *dyngja*, the womb, supernatural powers are at work, those feminine powers represented by *nornir* that structure and order and lay down the laws for the little human inside its mother. This power is beyond the reach of humans, male or female.

It is of interest here to mention a typological parallel to the theory proposed above, namely that the Tzutujil Maya of Guatemala make particularly close connections between the act of creating textiles and that of giving birth: "the weaving process is thought of as a birthing process" so that: "weavings are not just woven but in fact born" (Prechtel and Carlsen 1988:123). This notion works in terms

²⁵⁰ Cf. the Gotland-Swedish expression *spinnä pa* [*spinna på*], 'spin onto (oneself)' meaning 'to become pregnant' (Säve 1941-45:953). I am grateful to Eldar Heide, Universitetet I Bergen, for this reference.

²⁵¹ On the connection between 'text' and 'textile', see V.5.

of a perceived correspondence between a warp and the body, and the stakes placed in the ground in order to facilitate warp-making are referred to as parts of the body: head, heart, foot etc. "Interestingly, there is a belief amongst the Tzutujil that the human body is woven. The common denominator to the belief that weavings are born and humans woven is, of course, the moon – the goddess of both weaving and birthing" (Prechtel and Carlsen 1988:124).²⁵² Furthermore, the Dogon people of Mali in West Africa draw an extremely close connection between textile work and human life and death:

Spinning cotton and weaving clothing is exactly the same as a man and a woman entering the house to sleep together and produce children. The weaver, representing a dead man, is also the male who opens and closes the womb of the woman, represented by the heddle. The stretched threads represent the act of procreation. The cotton threads of the weavers and the numerous men in the world are all one. The making of the cloth symbolizes the multiplication of mankind. The craft of weaving in fact... is the tomb of resurrection, the marriage bed and the fruitful womb. (Griaule 1965:73).

This even incorporates the life-giving and death-bringing duality of the women in the well.

The Guatemalan and African evidence is far removed from Old Norse culture but the fact that similar symbol complexes exist in other cultures may be seen to support my argument; that the fate-textile-*dyngja* complex is not exclusively specific to Old Norse culture would seem to strengthen the reasons for accepting the validity of the metaphor. It also fits with the apparently shared root, *legh-*, of Old Norse *lög*, 'law' and Old High German *lehter*, 'womb, afterbirth' (Pokorny 1959:659).

The force at work in the symbolic *dyngja* is neither good nor bad and what it brings forth may be good or evil. It may sometimes produce good things and at other times bad things. The power is not in itself inherently positive or negative, it is just an ordering principle that structures and puts together the physical form of human bodies and also the lives they will live, sometimes with beautiful or peaceful, sometimes with violent or disastrous, results. This seems to be very close to the portrayal of *nornir* in *Völuspá* 20, since it is an ordering principle which is indifferent or blind to the individual person but concerned with the greater whole; it is neither good nor bad, or – which is the same thing – both benign and evil at the same time. It has, then, the same double-sided nature as do *nornir*.

²⁵² I am grateful to Laurie Webster, University of Arizona, for introducing me to this material.

This notion of receiving form and shape seems to be carried in the word *skop*, 'fate'. *Skop* is cognate with the English word 'shape' and has a verb-form, *skapa*, 'to create', as well as a noun-form, *skop*, 'fate' (see VI.1.2.). Both forms of the word can carry a sense of fate, for example the latter half of *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* 28 reads:

Vantattu vígi,
var þér þat skapat,
at þú at rógi
ríkmenni vart

You could not stop the fighting,
that was dealt to you
so that you were the cause of strife
among powerful men

The latter half of *Fáfnismál* 44, on the other hand, reads:

máat sigdrífar
svefni bregða,
skiöldunga niðr,
fyr sköpom norna.

A descendant of heroes
May not break
Sigrdrífa's sleep,
that is the decision of the nornir.

The sense of *skapa* and *skop* here is that which the *nornir* have shaped, created for or decided on behalf of a person, their fate (see also VI.1.).

IV.4. Summary: Fate comes from the Well

In this chapter, I have tried to find answers to two major questions: 1) what can we make of the idea that there are three *nornir* presented to us in *Völuspá* and *Snorra-Edda*? and 2) why is fate so strongly associated with the feminine? As regards the three names, Urðr, Verðandi and Skuld, it was found that the evidence for this constellation is not only relatively late but also confined to only two sources, Snorri probably copying the number three from *Völuspá*. Some evidence for a triple division of *nornir* is supported by *Fáfnismál* 13 which in turn may be related to the *First Merseburg Charm* (see V.6.). The strongest evidence for a triad of *nornir* is the Roman-inspired votive altars depicting three 'mothers' but the extent to which those relate to the Old Norse *nornir* cannot be determined exactly.

On the whole, it seems a futile quest to argue for or against any specific number of *nornir*; were there any such ideas in heathen tradition, these are likely to have been subject to change throughout time and space anyway and the question in itself does not really bring us any closer to an understanding of what *nornir* are. Of greater interest are the names given to the three *nornir*. The temporal interpretation of the names as 'Past', 'Present' and 'Future' seems to be evident in, even built into, the idea of there being three, but on the other hand Verðandi was found to be a late addition, serving primarily as a grammatical link between the other two. Urðr and

Skuld, however, are certainly old, not as representatives for specific chronological periods but rather for notions of death and fate. Both portray an image of fate, Urðr specifically related to the well, Skuld to battle. Whereas Urðr is closely connected to *nornir*, Skuld appears to span the grey area dividing *nornir* from *valkyrjur*.

It is hard to reach any firm conclusions regarding a group of three *nornir*, the evidence for it is inconclusive and probably reflects a situation similar to that of the Saami *akkas* – different regions knew different traditions concerning their enumeration (Kulonen 2005:281).

The arguments presented in this chapter establish a connection between specific supernatural female figures – *nornir*, *vǫlur*, Frigg, Sága, Grendel's mother and Gunnlǫð – on the grounds that they share in a certain set of features. They are all associated with the underground and many of them with wet or damp places and in the present context this dark abode is aligned with the specific feminine work space of the *dyngja*. *Dyngjur* are by no means the only type of half-underground pit houses revealed by archaeology, yet it is not only their physical layout but also their strong feminine connotations which make them relevant to a discussion of ideas about fate in its many female guises. As has been shown, a number of the female figures described in this section find their abode not only below ground but in wetlands and other watery places; while *dyngjur* are not exactly wet places comparable to fens or bogs they are nonetheless damp places. Also emphasised here is the symbolic value of the type of work which goes on inside the *dyngja*, namely weaving, combined with the association of textile work with magic, with birth and with women in general.

What I have attempted to do in this chapter is to discover something about the *nornir* through a close analysis of certain aspects of their place of origin and through seeking out parallel female figures whose places of origin seem strikingly similar. This has directed me towards an attempt at explaining why fate has such strong feminine connotations and the explanation I have found points to the womb as a perceived magical space in which human fate is laid down, the *dyngja* of the *nornir*, so to speak, where shape (and *sköpp*) is given to the unshaped and out of which life emerges, created seemingly from nothing.

Little is said about *dyngjur* in Old Norse literature (see V.3.2.), but little is said about *nornir*, either, and even less about the practicalities of childbirth. There may be a dearth of hard evidence but this in itself does not invalidate the metaphorical aspects of this explanation. We know that fate is thought of predominantly in terms of feminine beings like *nornir*, we know that *nornir* are particularly concerned with

birth and death – with the womb and the tomb. Furthermore, the fate-textile-*dyngja* complex is significantly supported by evidence from other European traditions and from cultures across the world. It is the very fact that the *dyngja* also has strong female connotations that makes it such a good analogy for the womb: both are spaces where female creativity is exercised, one on human terms, the other on supernatural terms. The situation would seem to lend itself easily to the blending together of these two levels.

V. Fate and Threads

As noted earlier, it is a common conception that *nornir* spin and/or weave fate.²⁵³ Numerous artistic representations of *nornir* centre around this image, which is also widely accepted in academic work, and the focus of this chapter will be on the connections between the concept of fate and various types of textile-related activities, items and phrases. Fate does relate to textile (and I have precisely discussed the *dyngja*), but not necessarily in the ways commonly imagined.

By 'threads' as used in the chapter heading, I mean not only strings and threads but also spinning and the use of threads in different contexts, such as binding, knotting and tying or as a part of textiles such as embroidery, sewing and weaving. The 'threads' explored in this section thus span the whole complex of making and using threads as well as metaphorical or symbolic references to threads.

V.1. Are the Spinning Nornir just a Yarn ?

The idea of the spinning *nornir* has long been present in scholarship and remains so today; it is, in fact, virtually taken for granted. However, the truth of the matter is that one looks in vain for an absolutely clear and unequivocal representation of spinning or weaving *nornir* in Old Norse literature. It is not there. This, of course, does not in itself mean that they do not do these things but it does mean that one has to be careful about making statements concerning the idea. The intention in this chapter is not to discard the portrayal of *nornir* as spinners and weavers but, indeed, to explore it in detail to see what the justification for it might be.

Mentioning *nornir* who spin and/or weave apparently requires no references to explicit text passages at all. Eiríkr Magnússon (1910a:17) says about *Darraðarljóð*: "Of course the weaving of the spear web is a magic function... Thus the Valkyrior here are acting in the capacity of their not very distant relatives, the Norns" – the implication of this statement being that *nornir* themselves weave in a magical way, but Eiríkr fails to mention where this image may be found. Bauschatz (1982:38) states: "We know that weaving and spinning are among the evolved or related attributes of Urth", but does not reveal how it is that we know this. Larrington (1992:155) says that: "[The name *Urðr*] is derived from the verb 'to become', cognate with Latin *vertere* – to turn. This suggests spinning, and indeed the idea of

²⁵³ Examples of this are so many that only a few can be mentioned here: Holtsmark (1939:93); Bauschatz (1982:21); Ólafur Briem (1985:209); Larrington (1996:278); Grimstad (2000:183); Winterbourne (2004:92).

an individual's destiny as woven is prevalent in Old Norse." Enright (1996:111) writes: "As far as one can tell, peoples of Germanic culture always associated such looms [warp-weighted looms] with the warp and woof of fate and the women who worked them were often associated with magic." Meulengracht Sørensen and Steinsland (2001:53) describe the *nornir* according to *Völuspá* 19-20 saying: *I andre kilder fortælles det, at nornerne væver eller spinder skæbnen for guder og mennesker*, 'In other sources it is said that the *nornir* weave or spin fate for gods and humans'; and Raudvere (2003:63) says about them: *De omtales som ristende runor eller vävande öden*, 'They are spoken of as carving runes or weaving fate.'

None of the statements quoted here actually provide references to passages of Old Norse literature where this image can be found, the 'other sources' mentioned by Meulengracht Sørensen and Steinsland, and by others who have dealt with the issue, have a tendency to remain entirely unspecified, the notion is taken for granted to such an extent that referencing it is apparently thought to be unnecessary. This is curious because, when one goes to the literature in search of spinning and weaving *nornir*, it turns out that these are by no means common at all. Of all the appearances that *nornir* and beings related to them make in the *Eddas* and in skaldic poetry, one poem, *Darraðarljóð*, found in the *Íslendingasögur*, mentions *valkyrjur* weaving, one eddic poem, *Völundarkviða*, portrays women spinning, and one eddic poem, *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, shows *nornir* working in some way or other with threads. That makes three occurrences of which only two can be said to involve the metaphor for fate (see III.2.2.). Proportionately, text passages involving supernatural textile work are quite rare, it is simply not the most common activity for *nornir* to be engaged in – even if it was the most common female activity in daily life and even if it has become one of the most commonly conceived images of the *nornir*.²⁵⁴

While most scholars have made a point of the *nornir's* involvement in the textile industry, Simek (1993:237) makes the following observation: "the typical motif of the *Parcae*, namely spinning or weaving fate which is only recorded in Scandinavia for the valkyries (-*Darraðarljóð*) is missing with regard to the *norns*." While this is true, the situation regarding the motif of fate-as-textile is a little more nuanced than this.

²⁵⁴ Continental saga material brings in the idea of 'three sisters' who spin, though the word *nornir* is not actually used: *Alexanders saga* V:79 (1925:77, 134) AM 519 a 4° c.1280; and *Adonias saga* 33 (1963:140) AM 593 4° c.1400-1500; but, as Icelandic translations of continental stories, these are rather far removed from Old Norse mythology, in terms of both time and content. The earliest MS of *Alexanders saga* is from c.1280, whilst *Konungsbók* is from c.1270; this opens the question of borrowing from Classical tradition.

The textile analogy cannot be rejected altogether but I would like to point out the paradox of combining the well-established image of spinning *nornir* with the dearth of evidence for such in the actual source material.

Connections between fate, spinning and weaving exist in Old Norse tradition but we ought to be careful about how we refer to this image because, with regard to the *nornir*, it seems to be one which occurs by implication rather than directly. The evidence that is there is much more subtle than we tend to assume.

In the following, the two passages from Old Norse tradition which turn up when the question of spinning and weaving *nornir* is raised will be treated. They are: *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* and *Darraðarljóð*.

V.2. Helgakviða Hundingsbana I

As mentioned, Old Norse literature presents us with only one very clear instance of *nornir* working with threads, namely *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* 2-4:²⁵⁵

Nótt varð í bæ,
nornir kvómo
þær er qðlingi
aldr um skópo:
þann báðo fylki
frægstan verða
ok buðlunga
bestan þikkia.

Night fell on the place,
nornir came,
those who were to shape
fate for the prince;
they said the king
should be most famous
and that he'd be thought
the best of leaders.

Snæro þær af afli
ørloqþátto,
þá er borgir braut
í Brálundi;²⁵⁶
þær um greiddo
gullin símo
ok um mána sal
miðian festo.

They twisted very strongly
the strands of fate,
as the fortifications were broken
in Brálundr;
they arranged
golden threads
and fastened them in the middle
of the moon's hall.

Þær austr ok vestr
enda fálo:
þar átti lofðungr
land á milli;
brá nipt Nera
á norðrvega
einni festi,
ey bað hon halda.

East and west
they put the ends,
the prince should have
the land between;
the kinswoman of Neri
to the north
threw across one fastening;
bade it hold for ever.

²⁵⁵ This section forms the basis of my forthcoming article: "Are the Spinning *Nornir* just a Yarn?", in *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* vol 3.

²⁵⁶ Brálundr is the name of the place where Helgi is born. That he is born *þá er borgir braut* has been read so that he is born while there is a battle at Brálundr (for example Jakobsen

Stanza 3 mentions *ørlogþátto*, 'fate-threads', a term clearly conveying the notion of fate as a thread although the word in itself in no way describes the relationship between threads and fate. The *nornir* are said to twist these threads together, fastening them in the sky ('the moon's hall') with three separate strands stretching out from there in compass directions, and it is stated in stanza 4 that Helgi will possess the lands in between. These actions have been vaguely interpreted by some as an act of weaving, for example Larrington who footnotes stanza 2 of the poem thus: "norns, female fate figures who determine the lives of men. They are associated with weaving" (1996:278), and Davidson who finds that the scene: "represents the Norns setting up a huge loom whose threads stretch across the sky" (1998:119). Others have suggested spinning: *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* *beschreibt die N[ornen] präzise als Spinnende*, '*Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* describes the *nornir* exactly as spinners' (Dillmann 2002:391).

But neither interpretation stands up to close scrutiny if a practical approach to these activities is adopted and attention is also paid to the three crucial verbs: *snúa*, *greiða* and *bregða*. The first verb used is *snúa*, 'twisting', not *spinna*, 'spinning', as one might expect were the intention to portray spinning unequivocally – as happens in *Völundarkviða*. This does not in itself prove that they are not spinning but it does leave open the option that it might be a description of something else. Furthermore, the way in which these threads are used is described in quite a detailed way and in a way that matches neither the process of spinning nor that of weaving on a practical level. Certainly, the fastening of vertical threads may be likened to setting up a warp on a loom and a horizontal thread could then be seen as the weft. But apart from the lack of any words or allusions connected with weaving,²⁵⁷ the poem refers to only three threads, all of which appear to be running downwards, and that is hardly enough to weave with. For the lack of threads, it seems the weaving interpretation must be discarded. On top of this, the purpose of the threads appears to be revealed

1966), but if we read *borg* as a *kenning* rather than in the literal meaning of 'fortress' it can refer to the womb (cf. *hugborg*, 'fortress of the will, heart or thought' in *Guðrúnarkviða I* 14) and the phrase would simply mean that he is born. I am grateful to Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, Háskóli Íslands, for this suggestion.

²⁵⁷ *Snúa*, 'to twist' does not describe the act of weaving on a loom, though it fits with the physical motion of threads in tablet weaving. In modern Icelandic, *snúa* can be used to mean 'translate': *snúa á ensku*, 'translate into English'; I am grateful to Sverrir Tómasson, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, for this observation. This recalls the term *bundið mál*, 'bound language' for poetry and *óbundið mál*, 'unbound language' for prose (see also VI.3. and V.5.).

in the phrase: *þar átti lofðungur land á milli*, 'the prince should have all the land between.'

Two things happen here: 1) separate threads are united into one, and 2) threads are used to mark off boundaries in physical space.

Concerning the unification of threads, the image employed in the poem does not describe spinning very well; spinning means drawing out and twisting together strands of wool or flax into a single thread, but in the poem the *nornir* already have three threads. They are not making these from scratch. Rather than spinning, the image seems to portray the process of plying.²⁵⁸ When a thread has been spun, it is often plied, either with one or more other threads or with itself, in order to stabilise it before it is put to practical use; otherwise it is likely constantly to curl back on itself. Single, un-plied threads can, however, be stabilised using steam but the danger of using un-plied yarn is that the finished result may be skewed because the yarn will have a tendency to pull in one direction;²⁵⁹ however, it is not unusual to use un-plied yarn as warp (Baines 1989:60).²⁶⁰ On a spindle, plying can be done by fastening the ends of the threads onto the spindle and, whilst carefully keeping the individual threads separate (which accords well with the verb *greiða*, 'comb, keep separate' in stanza 3), twisting them together by turning the spindle in the opposite direction from that in which the threads were initially spun. This releases the tension built up in the spun strands, it makes them softer and also strengthens the plied thread by letting the strands twist into one another.

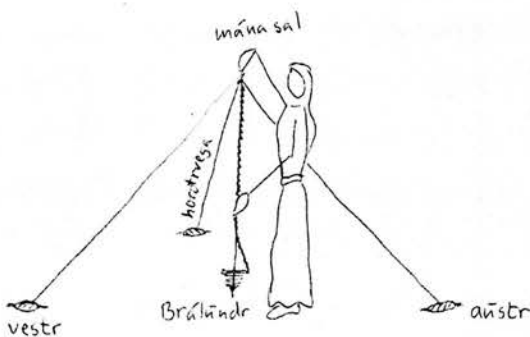


Figure 6.

Plying: the three strands are held out in separate directions, coming together at the top – as held by the person doing the plying – and the plied thread with the spindle at the bottom hangs down in the middle.

²⁵⁸ 'Plying' is the technical term normally used, although 'twining' may also be used.

²⁵⁹ Personal communication from Freda Bayne, Holmwood Textiles, Orkney.

²⁶⁰ In turn, this may explain the double meaning of the English word 'warp'; the noun refers to the vertical threads on a loom and the verb refers to a degree of bending or distortion, and a warp consisting of unplied yarn is more likely than one of plied yarn to yield a skewed result.

The plying process gives exactly the same visual image as that described in the poem: the three threads are held out each in its own direction, coming together in a meeting point at the top and from here the plied thread stretches down in the middle with the turning spindle at the bottom.²⁶¹ Already Jacob Grimm seems to have come to the same conclusion with regard to what the *nornir* do in these stanzas: "nowhere in Romance or German folk-tales do we meet, as far as I know, with the Norse conception of *twining* and *fastening* the *cord*, or the Greek one of *spinning* and *cutting* the *thread of life*" (Grimm I 2004:413). The somewhat casual manner in which Grimm here distinguishes between spinning and twining appears not to have been understood by all scholars.²⁶²



Figure 7.
Spinning with a distaff. The distaff is held under the arm whilst the spindle hangs at the end of the spun thread.

If we shift from the image of plying to that of spinning, there would be only one thread, not three.²⁶³ The spinning image is also likely to include not just a spindle but

²⁶¹A similarly structured image is described in Plato's *Republic* 616C, depicting the movement of the celestial bodies using the idea of a spindle as an *axis mundi*: "and from the extremities they saw extended the spindle of Necessity, by which all the revolving spheres are turned" (Adam 1902:447). The Norse image, however, is unlikely to relate directly to Plato's.

²⁶² Some have understood it; notably Steinsland (2005:329), Hansen (1911:134).

²⁶³ I cannot see how one would spin three threads simultaneously on the one spindle.

a distaff, too. The distaff is the tool that holds the unspun material while the spindle is the tool onto which the spun thread is wound.²⁶⁴ The spinning scene with distaff and spindle seems to accord particularly well with the idea suggested by Hjortsø (1984:95): that the spindle is a human being around whom the thread is wound during the course of their life; when the spindle can hold no more, the thread is cut.²⁶⁵

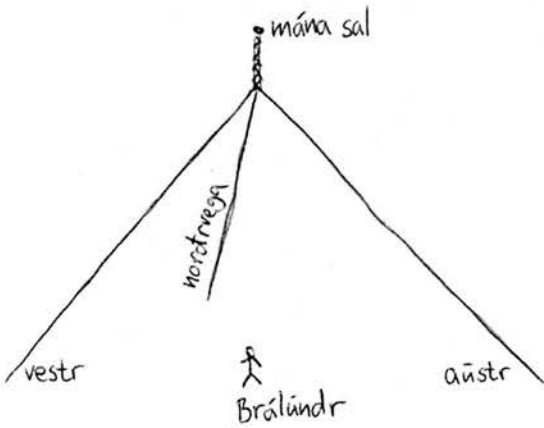


Figure 8.
Braiding: the three strands must continue to change places as the thread is braided. As braiding progresses, the ends will move closer to the centre.

One might also imagine that the scene portrays braiding, as indicated by the verb *bregða*, 'to braid or throw across' in stanza 4. This interpretation would change some things because braiding involves continuously moving the loose ends of the threads, letting them trade places as they are laid over one another in succession. The ordering described as *greiða* is also necessary for braiding, lest the loose ends should tangle up, but it would mean that the motion takes place where the individual strands separate rather than where they come together. In the image of plying, the top ends are fastened in the skies and the strands twist together as the firmament turns around, forcing the strands together in a cord. In the image of braiding, the bottom ends that stretch out are the ones that are in motion, continuously shifting places with one another. Whether the poem depicts one or the other is hard to tell but the contest is clearly between plying and braiding, not spinning and weaving. I believe that plying in some ways is the better image, as it contains the spindle

²⁶⁴ It is perfectly possible to spin without a distaff, in which case the unspun wool may be kept in a basket at the spinner's one side while the spindle with the spun thread hangs down on the other side. In Homer, spinning seems to be done sitting down (*Odyssey* 6:52; 17:97), and Onians (1951:305-306) argues that this is the image behind the phrase 'in the lap of the gods' (*Iliad* 17:514; *Odyssey* 1:267) because the actual transformation from unspun wool to spun thread takes place on the knees of the spinner.

²⁶⁵ See also the Slavonic riddles mentioned by Badalanova (2006:231), V.5. below.

hanging down in the middle, possibly symbolising Helgi; braiding shows only the thread itself, running between the skies and the land, but is not attached to Helgi.²⁶⁶

This, then, is what happens in the one clear example of *nornir* working with threads. Rather than spinning or weaving, the activity described in the poem seems to be that of plying: three threads are plied together into one, one end of each thread fastened in the sky – as held by the hand of the person doing the plying – and the other ends, where the individual threads split apart, are fastened in three of the compass directions: east, west and north. The textile analogy in this poem cannot be disputed: the one reference to *nornir* working with threads shows them plying a fate-thread together at the moment of Helgi's birth and this thread ties together the area which is his 'lot' by having its ends anchored in cardinal directions.

The notion of fate as a thread is also conveyed in *Reginismál* 14 where the smith Reginn says of the young Sigurðr:

Ek mun fæða
fólkdiarfan gram;
nú er Yngva konr
með oss kominn!
síá mun ræsir
ríkstr und sólo,
þrymr um ǰll lǰnd
ǰrlǰgsímo

I will nurture
the battle-brave prince;
now the offspring of Yngvi
has come to us,
he will be a king
the most powerful under the sun,
his fate-threads
will remain in all lands.

This stanza, however, is no clearer in its association of fate with threads than is *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*. The meaning of the last two lines depends on interpretation as *þrymia* means either 'to remain in one place' (LP:649; Frtz III:1046) or 'to move rapidly forward, to spread out' (KLE 5:314; Gísli Sigurðsson 1998:225). Whether these fate-threads are 'extending' or 'remaining', it seems clear that they are somehow connected to a geographical area. This strongly recalls the plying image and here it should be said that: *HH. I 3 und Rm. 14 bieten zugleich die einzigen expliziten Erwähnungen eines Schicksalsfadens in der anord. Dichtung*, 'At the same time, *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I 3* and *Reginismál 14* offer the only explicit references to a fate-thread in Old Norse poetry' (KLE 4:177). These are the only two references and it is noteworthy that *Reginismál* makes no direct mention of *nornir*. If we choose to see *nornir* in *Reginismál* then it is because we know *Helgakviða*

²⁶⁶ *Bregða* has many meanings and can also be used to describe an activity being brought to an end, that the appearance or constitution of something is changed, and, interestingly, it can mean to ensure that something which has been decided is not carried out as intended (Frtz I:181). This last meaning recalls the third seeress in *Norna-Gests þátr* or the last fairy-godmother in *Sleeping Beauty* (ATU 410), the one who stops the good prophecies from swinging into action.

Hundingsbana I beforehand; there is little else to justify connecting *nornir* to this stanza. It presents the notion of fate in the form of a thread, and whether or not this implies spinning seems to me entirely conjectural, it could just as well refer to some sort of binding.²⁶⁷ Different types of threads, uses of threads and thread production may well serve as poetic variations of the same theme but this does not change the fact that there are no *nornir* in *Reginsmál* 14.

The supernatural spinners, so rare in Norse tradition, are, however, common in Classical tradition (see III.3.).²⁶⁸ A 1st century epigram by Martial²⁶⁹ comes especially close to the scene in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*:

Nascere Dardanio promissum nomen Iulo²⁷⁰
vera deum suboles; nascere, magne puer,
cui pater aeternas post saecula tradat habenas,
quique regas orbem cum seniore senex.
ipsa tibi niveo trahet aurea pollice fila
et totam Phruxi²⁷¹ Iulia nebit ovem.
(Liber VI-III)

'Be born, Dardanius, that has been promised a name by Iulus
true offspring of the gods; be born, great boy,
to whom your own father after centuries will hand over the reins
and who will rule as an old man together with an older one.
Julia herself will draw with her snowwhite thumb²⁷² the golden threads
and spin all the wool of Phrixus' sheep.'²⁷³
(My translation)

²⁶⁷ The term *þond* is not uncommonly used for the Old Norse gods, but never for *nornir*.

²⁶⁸ *Moirai* are commonly known as spinners of fate, although in Homer this image is used but once and spinning is attributed to the *aisa*, *klothes* or to the gods; in later sources it is more frequently associated with *moirai*, especially at births (III.3.). Ovid uses it in his description of the birth of Meleagros, *Metamorphoses* 8:451-455, and in *Tristia* V:13,24, where he says that a career 'not so black' was spun for the poet. In Statius' *Thebaid* (1st century AD) death is described in terms of threads breaking or crumbling: I:632, III:642, VIII:10. Numerous other examples exist.

²⁶⁹ Marcus Valerius Martialis, Liber VI:III (Oxford 1903). The poem was apparently written on the expected birth of an heir to the empire after Domitian. It may refer to an expected child of Domitian and Julia, Domitian's niece, with whom he lived after he had repudiated Domitia. Possibly, the expectation expressed here was never realised (Stephenson 1929:293).

²⁷⁰ Also known as Ascanius, son of Aeneas. His presence in the epigram apparently emphasises the claim of the Roman emperor to be descended from the gods (Grant and Hazel 2004:52).

²⁷¹ Phrixus was the son of king Athamas who, obeying an oracle, had to sacrifice his son, but the boy was rescued by a fabulous ram with a fleece of spun gold. Later, Phrixus sacrificed the ram; the fleece was eventually acquired by Jason (Grant and Hazel 2004:272-273).

²⁷² The same phrase occurs in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 8:450-455. The white colour evidently indicates a good fate; black would indicate an evil fate (Grewing 1997:91).

²⁷³ I am grateful to Chris Yocum, university of Edinburgh, and to Ture Larsen for help with the translation.

There is quite a high degree of correspondence between the image in this Latin epigram and that in our Norse poem: the birth of a great boy, a future ruler and the golden threads. Combining this with the dearth of further references to it in Norse makes me wonder whether we are talking about a medieval borrowing or appropriation, something which other scholars have also mentioned: *Die Nornen-Darstellung in HH.I 2-4 zeigt Einflüsse antiker Vorstellungen*, 'The representation of *nornir* in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* 2-4 shows the influence of Classical ideas' (KLE 4:171). Furthermore, Classical sources often portray the fate figures in connection with births whereas this is actually rather rare in Old Norse tradition (KLE 4:173), *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* and *Norna-Gests þáttr* being the only sources which show such scenes, although they are also mentioned in *Gylfaginning* 15 and possibly *Fáfnismál* 12. Norse sources portray *nornir* predominantly in connection with deaths.

Helgakviða Hundingsbana I shows neither spinning nor weaving but it does show *nornir* involved with textiles and fate at the same time and so it may justify a view of *nornir* as spinners, even if spinning is not what they actually do here. It is, however, the only evidence and this ought to make us a little suspicious; out of 29 direct mentions of *nornir* only this one involves textiles of any kind. Snorri does not seem to know the image, neither does *Völuspá*. It seems a narrow base of evidence on which to build extensive arguments about spinning *nornir*. If we choose to focus single-mindedly on that one text passage, we will end up overlooking the vast majority of references to *nornir* and thereby in all likelihood leave ourselves with a skewed perception of how these beings were really conceived of at the time. It cannot be proven that the spinning *nornir* did not exist but the evidence does not seem to provide the 'wealth of *nornir* and *valkyrjur* who weave fate for men' that many scholars believe exists. Given the relatively late date of *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* (it may be from the 11th century; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1962:478) and the rather close correspondence to Classical texts, perhaps we are dealing with a borrowing (Weber 1969:124; Holtsmark 1990:85).

V.2.1. Threads and Space

The image in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* may relate to medieval maps of the world,²⁷⁴ so-called T-O maps that:

surrounded the land by a world ocean, which forms an O, while the Mediterranean and the Red Sea and Tánais rivers divide the land, which

²⁷⁴ I am grateful to George Clark, Queen's University, Canada, for making this connection.

forms a T. This form was a schematic representation of God's ordering of the world; it was certainly not a cartographic instrument. The T shape reflected the points of the cross, with east, the location of Paradise, on top. Jerusalem is at the center, representing a city that was considered both secular and divine.

(McNaughton 2000:258)

The image does not square entirely with that found in the poem because the map points towards north, south and west, the poem towards east, west and north.²⁷⁵ But whether we draw this parallel to the map or not, Helgi's fate-threads are seen to cover the whole of the northern half of the world, probably as an intended indication that he is the greatest hero in that part of the world.²⁷⁶

Another question is what actually happens with the loose ends of the threads in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* 4. We are told that the *nornir enda fálo*, that they 'hid the ends', apparently in the east and west.²⁷⁷ In the image of plying, it appears to mean simply that the end of the thread is at the centre of the ball of wound up thread or, with spinning, that the end has not yet been spun and is hidden somewhere in the unspun masses attached to the distaff or kept in the basket. But the verb *fela* can also mean 'to give something into someone's keeping' or 'to entrust', so that *enda fálo* can mean both that the ends are hidden and also that they have been passed over to someone for safekeeping. The latter suggestion seems to go well with what is said of the 'kinswoman of Neri' in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* 4, namely that she would hold the thread forever; it also fits with the meaning of *þrymr*, 'to remain in one place'.

The textile work is done at the moment of Helgi's birth; the separate parts which make up a human being are plied together into one balanced, coherent thread. The phrasing is: *snæro þær af afli ørlögþátto, þá er borgir braut í Brálundi*, 'they twisted very strongly the strands of fate, as the fortifications were broken in Brálundr.' That

²⁷⁵ A seemingly parallel image of a four-corner structure with a fifth point in the middle connected to birth and to creation in the womb is found in the *ragaraga*, the seat of the Silaon na Bolon, the High God of the Toba-Batak people of Sulawesi in Indonesia. This is a square tray of sorts, suspended from the roof of a house with four ropes, on which the people would place sacrifices to the god in certain ritual contexts. The *ragaraga* seems to be a representation of the world with the four compass points (Tobing 1963:78-82). I stress that this parallel is typological rather than generic. I am grateful to Emily Lyle, University of Edinburgh, for this reference.

²⁷⁶ The poem leaves out the direction of south which Eilífr associates with Urðarbrunnr (see III.1.1.2.). A number of *valkyrjur* and other supernatural women are (pleasantly?) associated with the south; e.g. *Völundarkviða* 1, *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* 45, and *Haustlǫng* 10.

²⁷⁷ A similar phrase is used in *Völuspá* 31: *Ek sá Baldri, blóðgum tívur, Óðins barni, ørlög fólgin*, 'I saw for Baldr, for the bloody god, Odin's child, his fate concealed'. Sigurður Nordal (1978:65) interprets 'fate concealed' as referring to a fate-thread.

the threads are twisted very strongly or very hard together gives the impression of a hard, solid cord being made; there is nothing loose or flimsy about this thread. Also, it is made of gold, not just any old material; it is clearly a special thread. The hard twisting refers perhaps to Helgi's heroic and aristocratic personality – that he is hard and unyielding – or perhaps to the course of his life – that it is hard and unbending. In this image, the *nornir* establish a thread, guideline or some kind of framework which spans the full geographical potential of Helgi's life, seemingly uniting eastern, western and northern areas of land into one over which Helgi will rule. The creation of boundaries looks very clear – what lies within the threads is Helgi's realm; the *ørlögþættir* appear to bind Helgi to a certain area of land, a geographical space.²⁷⁸

Finally, the story of the death of Hildigerus in *Gesta Danorum*, Book 7 (9,15), provides an image which, although presented in Latin and therefore using the term *Parcae*, might represent native ideas about binding and loosing (see also V.7.):

Sed quęcunque ligat Parcarum præsciꝰ ordo,
 Quęcunque arcanum superę rationis adumbrat
 Seu quę fatorum serie præuisa tenentur,
 Nulla caducarum rerum conuersio tollet.
 (*Saxo Grammaticus* 2005:488-490)

'Whatever foreknown links are fastened by the Fates,
 whatever the mysteries of divine reason sketch out,
 whatever events are foreseen and held in sequence
 of destiny, no change in our transitory world will cancel.'
 (*Saxo Grammaticus* 1979:224)

Here, the Latin *ligare* means 'to tie up, to bind', referring to the use of threads or strings (it is related to 'ligament'), and *tenere* means 'to hold, to maintain or to adhere' (related to 'tenacity'). The notion conveyed in these lines, then, seems to be that the *Parcae* bind or string events together in a certain sequence, or they might be plying threads together as the *nornir* do in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*. One wonders whether the unfolding of events over time might then be likened to the loosening of threads or to unravelling them. With regard to Saxo's mention of the *Parcae*, one might well consider the extent to which Classical ideas could have influenced his description (this would not be unusual for a historian during the 12th century renaissance; Friis-Jensen 2000:93-94), but it is noteworthy that the image he presents is probably very like that of the Old Norse *ørlögþættir* – threads which bind people to certain events, courses or places. At any rate, the image presented by

²⁷⁸ This recalls *Egils saga* 56 where *véþond* are used to mark off the area of the court (ÍF 2:154); cf. English 'lot' for 'destiny' or 'an area of land'.

Saxo seems more reminiscent of the warp on a loom or the binding and loosing of the *First Merseburg Charm* (see V.6.) than of spinning.

V.3. Darraðarljóð

The only description of Old Norse supernatural weaving comes from the poem *Darraðarljóð*,²⁷⁹ preserved in *Njáls saga*.²⁸⁰ Here we encounter a number of *valkyrjur* (the poem has six, the prose twelve) who are engaged not only in weaving but in preparations for a faraway battle. The poem, which is framed by two prose passages, describes in detail what happens on the loom as well as on the battlefield.²⁸¹ It is worth quoting in full:

Føstumorgininn varð sá atburðr á Katanesi, at maðr sá, er Dørruðr hét, gekk út. Hann sá, at menn riðu tólf saman til dyngju nökkurrar ok hurfu þar allir. Hann gekk til dyngjunnar ok sá inn í glugg einn, er á var, ok sá, at þar váru konur inni ok hqfðu vef upp færðan. Mannahqfuð váru fyrir kljána, en þarmar ór mǫnnum fyrir viptu ok garn, sverð var fyrir skeið, en qr fyrir hræl.²⁸² Þær kváðu þá vísur nökkurar²⁸³

'On the morning of Good Friday, this event occurred at Caithness, that a man called Dørruðr went out. He saw that twelve persons rode together to a dyngja and there all of them disappeared. He went to the dyngja and looked in through a window which was set in it, and saw that women were inside and had set up their weaving. Men's heads served as loomweights and intestines from men as weft and warp, a sword as the sword-beater and an arrow as the pin-beater. Then they spoke some verses'

1 Vít er orpit
fyrir valfalli

Far and wide
with the fall of the dead

²⁷⁹ The poem carries this name in scholarship, not in the sources. The *kenning vefr darraðar*, from which the name is constructed, has been the subject of some debate, interpreted variously as 'web of spears' or as 'web of banners', whilst the medieval compiler of *Njáls saga*, in giving the man who sees the women the name Dørruðr, understood it as 'Dørruðr's web.' (Dørruðr has in turn been seen as a *heiti* for Óðinn who is in the habit of seeking knowledge from supernatural women; Dronke 1969:49). 'Web of banners' or 'weaving of banners' seems the most probable explanation of the name (Holtmark 1939:85-93).

²⁸⁰ The poem is found, with some variations, in different MSS, the earliest of which is *Reykjabók* c.1300-1325. I follow the text in ÍF 12 (*Möðruvallabók* c.1330-1370) with some changes: In the last two lines of stanzas 9 and 10, ÍF 12 follows *Gráskinna* c.1300 (now only in a 17th century transcript).

²⁸¹ A similar motif occurs in *Víga-Glúms saga* 21 (ÍF 9:71-72).

²⁸² The heads at the bottom conjure up an image of reverse body-order (heads are normally at the top); these are, quite literally, hanging by a thread. They recall the Celtic cult of the head (Ross 1967:94-171) and also the Irish gloss *mesrad machæ, .i. cendæ doine iar na nairlech* 'Macha's fruit crop, i.e. the heads of men that have been slaughtered' (Hennessy 180-1872:36; Goedheer 1938:83).

²⁸³ The scene is not unlike one described in *Íslendinga saga* 165 [23; 28] where a man in a dream sees some women inside a house, rowing and singing gory songs; they have *valkyrja*-names: Gunnr and Gøndul (*Sturlunga saga I* 1988:165).

rifs reiðiský:
rignir blóði;
nú er fyrir geirum
grár upp kominn
vefr verþjóðar,
er þær vinur fylla
rauðum vepti
Randvés bana.

a warp is set up:
blood rains down.
Now, with the spears,
a grey woven fabric
of warriors is formed,
which women friends
of Randvér's killer
complete with a red weft.

2 Sjá er orpinn vefr
ýta þormum
ok harðkléaðr
høfðum manna;
eru dreyrrekin
dørr at skøptum,
járnvarðr yllir,
en ørum hrælaðr;²⁸⁴
skulum slá sverðum
sigrvef þenna.

The fabric is warped
with men's intestines
and firmly weighted
with men's heads;
bloodstained spears serve
as heddle rods,
the shed is ironclad
and pegged with arrows.
With our swords we must strike
this fabric of victory.

3 Gengr Hildir vefa
ok Hjörþrimul,
Sanngríðr, Svipul,
sverðum tognum;
skapt mun gnesta,
skjöldr mun bresta,
mun hjálmgagarr
í hlíf koma.

Hildir goes to weave
and Hjörþrimul,
Sanngríðr, Svipul,
with unsheathed swords:
the shaft will break,
the shield will shatter,
the sword will
pierce armour.

4 Vindum vindum
vef darraðar,
þann er ungr konungr
átti fyrri!
Fram skulum ganga
ok í fólk vaða,
þar er vinir várir
vápnum skipta.

Let us wind, let us wind
the weaving of the pennant
which the young king
had before:
we must go
and advance into the throng
where our friends
set weapon against weapon.

5 Vindum vindum
vef darraðar
ok siklingi
síðan fylgjum!
Þar sjá bragna

Let us wind, let us wind
the weaving of the pennant
and follow the prince
afterwards:
there [Guðr] and Gøndul

²⁸⁴ Interestingly, Onians (1951:343-348) discusses the Greek words *καίπος*, 'the target which archers aimed at in practice', apparently an opening or series of openings (*Odyssey* 19:573-580), and *καίρος*, 'the shed between the warp-threads on a loom', that is, the triangular opening through which the shuttle passes, carrying the weft threads. The meanings 'opportunity, critical time' also relate to these words.

²⁸⁵ *Gráskinna* has: *er sóknvarðar syngja kunnu*, 'while the slaughter-wardens sing their song' (CSI III:217), quoted in ÍF 12; I follow *Möðruvallabók*.

²⁸⁶ *Gráskinna* has: *geirfljóða hljóð ok gumum segi*, 'the tones of spear-women and tell them to men' (CSI III:217), quoted in ÍF 12; I follow *Möðruvallabók*.

blóðgar randir
Guðr ok Gøndul,
er grami hlífðu.

6 Vindum vindum
vef darraðar,
þar er vé vaða
vígra manna!
Látum eigi
líf hans farask;
eigu valkyrjur
vals of kosti.

7 Þeir munu lýðir
londum ráða,
er útskaga
áðr of byggðu;
kveð ek ríkum gram
ráðinn dauða;
nú er fyrir oddum
jarlmaðr hniginn.

8 Ok munu Írar
angr um bíða,
þat er aldri mun
ýtum fyrnask.
Nú er vefr ofinn,
en völlr roðinn;
mun um lond fara
læspjöll gota.

9 Nú er ógurligt
um at litask
er dreyrug ský
dregr með himni;
mun lopt litat
lýða blóði
er spár vára²⁸⁵
springa kunnu.

10 Vel kváðu vér
um konung ungan
sigrhljóða fjöla,
syngjum heilar!
en hinn nemi,
er heyrir á,
geirfljóða hlóð,²⁸⁶
ok gumum segi!

11 Ríðum hestum
hart út berum
brugðnum sverðum

who protected the king
saw men's shields
covered in blood.

Let us wind, let us wind
the weaving of the pennant
there where the standards
of fighting men go forth:
let us not permit
his life to be lost;
the Valkyries have
their choice of the slain.

Those men will
rule the lands
who dwelt until this time
on the outlying headlands:
I say that death is decreed
for the mighty king;
now the earl has sunk down
before the spears.

And the Irish will
undergo grief
which will never fade
in men's memories;
now the fabric is woven
and the field dyed red;
the tidings of men's destruction
will travel throughout the land.

Now it is fearsome
to gaze around
as blood-red clouds
gather in the sky:
the heavens will be stained
with men's blood
when our prophecies
can spread abroad.

We spoke well
of the young king;
let us sing with good fortune
many songs of victory:
and let him
who listens
learn many a spear-song
and entertain men.

Let us ride out fast
on our bare-backed horses,
away from here

á braut heðan.

with brandished swords.

Rifu þær þá ofan vefinn ok í sundr, ok hafði hver þat, er helt á. Gekk hann þá í braut frá glugginum ok heim, en þær stigu á hesta sína, ok riðu sex í suðr, en aðrar sex í norðr.
(ÍF 12:454-459)

'Then they tore the weaving down and ripped it apart, each one retaining the piece which she was holding. Then he left the window and went back home, while they mounted their horses and rode six to the south and the other six to the north.'
(Poole 1991:116-119)

It is not the intention here to discuss all the details of the poem as this would amount to a separate study altogether. Instead, I will focus on a number of aspects which I consider relevant in the present context, the main intention being to look specifically at the weaving motif employed in this text. *Darraðarljóð* is probably the most common point of reference for a connection between textile work and the concept of fate in Old Norse literature and a number of scholars have interpreted the poem along these lines. Holtsmark may serve as a representative for this view:²⁸⁷

Darraðarljóð er en visjon, og de som synger den, er en del av visjonene. ... Det er vevende norner i arbeid, de vever liv og død for mennesker; ... Vevningen er ikke 'metafor', den er magi. De vever og synger om det som hender – og det hender.
(1939:93)

'*Darraðarljóð* is a vision and those who sing it are part of the vision. ... These are weaving *nornir* at work, they weave life and death for people; ... The weaving is no 'metaphor', it is magic. They weave and sing about what happens – and it happens.'
(My translation)

Holtsmark sees in the weaving motif an act of sympathetic magic; the *valkyrjur* are not only in the house in Caithness, they are also present on the battlefield near Dublin and their weaving directly influences the fighting. In this metaphor the women are, so to speak, weaving the battle as it is going to progress and the web is symbolic of the fate of the warriors.

However, other scholars are of the opinion that fate has no place at all in this poem.²⁸⁸ Poole, representing this view, writes: "similarities were perceived between weaving and battle in the type of persons who participate, the implements they use, and the appearance of the finished product" (1991:139). He further argues: "that

²⁸⁷ See also Eiríkr Magnússon 1910a and Cook (2001:343).

²⁸⁸ von See 1959; Poole 1991.

'vefr' in *Darraðarljóð* is not a representation of fate but a reflection of the visual appearance of battle" (1991:141). Thus, he sees the weaving motif simply as poetic circumlocution with no magic at all. In his view, the weaving reflects the visual impression of the goings-on of the battlefield, the red and grey colours of blood and weaponry intertwining, and there is neither magic nor fate involved. All of it is merely a poetic description of battle scenes.²⁸⁹

The crux of both interpretations rests in the weaving activity.

Part of the metaphor in *Darraðarljóð* is a correspondence between the activities of human women and those of supernatural women: "Just as weaving was archetypically women's work ... so the guidance of battles was archetypically the work of supernatural women" (Poole 1991:136). Yet the correspondence, according to Poole, concerns only the visual appearance of these activities (guiding a battle looks like weaving) and does not extend to the deeper meaning of the activities so that the connections between weaving and fate "do not explain *Darraðarljóð* very well" (Poole 1991:140). Poole's argument seems to be that the poet associates human women's weaving with supernatural women's powers over life and death in battle but then disassociates the *valkyrjur* from those powers or somehow fails to notice that he could be alluding to ideas about female supernatural guardians of life and death. This seems to me a stretch of the imagination and I believe that some idea about fate must have been in the poet's mind.

Holtmark (1939) argues for a different view, namely that weaving on a loom does not look anything like a battlefield, therefore something else must have inspired the poet to use this motif. In her mind, the connecting point is the notion of fate and the magical raven banner carried by Sigurðr jarl of Orkney in the Clontarf battle to which the poem is supposedly connected.²⁹⁰

My opinion is that the weaving motif in *Darraðarljóð* deals with notions of ordering. Anyone who has tried their hand at it will know that weaving requires a very high degree of precision and exactitude and this has, I believe, two implications for our reading of the poem: 1) the battle is described in terms of a highly ordered

²⁸⁹ Russell Poole has, however, changed his mind since 1991. At the 13th International Saga Conference in Durham 2006 he told me that he now believes *Darraðarljóð* does portray an image of fate.

²⁹⁰ *Njáls saga* contains an account of the battle of Clontarf and connects the poem to this battle, but some scholars (Genzmer 1956; Goedheer 1938:74-87; Poole 1991:120-125) have pointed out that there are significant discrepancies between what the poem describes and what is known about the battle of Clontarf. It may be that the poem was originally attached to a battle fought almost a hundred years earlier (see V.3.2.).

and meticulous activity, and 2) this appears to create a distance between the poet and his subject matter, seemingly implying that the battle is seen from a supernatural rather than a human perspective. If this is the case here, then we seem to have a group of beings able at least to foresee, if not to manipulate, what will happen to the human men fighting the battle.

One might doubt whether being in the midst of a battle would seem like that steady, persistent, even slow and very ordered kind of work which weaving is, and the mathematical precision required for this does not transfer easily to the visual impression of the battlefield, at least not as seen from a human perspective. If this is indeed what the poet is doing then he is not involved in the battle himself; he is most likely watching it from a nearby hilltop from where he can see the battle unfold before him. In other words, he is adopting that higher perspective which allows him to perceive a sort of order on the field of battle. But there is more than order to the image. Although much of *Darraðarljóð* can be seen only as description of the kind the poet might produce from his adopted higher perspective, some phrases in the poem convey a different notion. In stanza 6 the *valkyrjur* say: *látum eigi líf hans farask*, 'let us not permit his life to be lost', which apparently indicates that they have the power to prevent his death. Later, in stanza 10, they say: *Vel kváðum vér um konung ungan*, 'we spoke well of the young king', which suggests that their words have an influence on how the young king fares in the battle.²⁹¹ The phrase: *ok síklingi síðan fylgjum*, 'and later follow the princes' in stanza 5 seems to be a prediction of something which is going to happen later; the words: *nú er fyrir oddum jarlmaðr hniginn*, 'now the earl has fallen before the spears' in stanza 7 sound as if they are describing something happening in close association with the weaving (cf. Warmind 1997:212). These passages of the poem do not square entirely with Poole's view of the imagery as simply description without any magic; on the contrary, they reveal that the women do have the power to influence the battle.

The notion of ordering, of putting threads together in a certain, regulated sequence and of tying all the different threads together is that process of creating something out of nothing which takes place in the *dyngja* and which I have associated with *nornir* and fate above (IV.3.). The prose passage introducing the poem also imagines the setting to be that of the *dyngja* but, even without the

²⁹¹ Eligius (c.588-660 AD) objected to women who sought to exercise supernatural power through their textile work: "No woman should presume to ... call upon Minerva or other ill-starred beings in their weaving or dyeing" (McNamara, Book 2:16). "The power may have been exercised by weaving a curse into a garment to be worn" (Flint 1991:226).

specific mention of this, the image of female weavers would itself be enough to conjure up this exact setting.²⁹²

As noted above, this is the only clear-cut description of supernatural weavers in Old Norse literature²⁹³ and it refers specifically to *valkyrjur*, not *nornir*. Yet, Holtsmark immediately makes the association to *nornir* when weaving is mentioned; she says about the motif:

De vevende i *Darraðarljóð* kaller seg selv valkyrjer, og navnene er valkyrjenavn. Som så ofte er begrepene *norn* og *valkyrja* løpet sammen. ... Vevende valkyrjer er ikke et hjemlig motiv; det synes også valkyrjenavnene å vise, ikke ett eneste av alle de 40-50 heiti skjaldene kjente, har noe med vevning å gjøre.
(1939:95)

'The weavers in *Darraðarljóð* call themselves *valkyrjur*, and the names are *valkyrja*-names. As often happens, the concepts of *norn* and *valkyrja* have merged. Weaving *valkyrjur* is not a familiar motif; the names of *valkyrjur* also seem to reveal this, not one single example of all the 40-50 *heiti* the skalds knew for *valkyrjur* has anything to do with weaving.'
(My translation)

The poem itself does not make any connection to *nornir* at all and, although *valkyrjur* and *nornir* must obviously be considered beings related to each other (see III), there is nothing to suggest that the terms were actually interchangeable with one another. We cannot simply take random mentions of either and claim that they really refer to the other merely because this fits our preconceptions. The scene is very closely linked to the actual events of the battlefield and this is, I believe, the reason why the women are specifically said to be *valkyrjur* – they are particularly closely associated with active battle. Holtsmark (1939:95) nonetheless points out the lack of connection between *valkyrjur* and weaving in other Old Norse sources, mentioning that Anglo-Saxon tradition employs the weaving motif more often and, in agreement with Weber (1969:121), explains this as derived from Classical tradition.²⁹⁴ Placing the poem within a mixed Norse and Anglo-Saxon context would

²⁹² The introduction is strikingly reminiscent of the Icelandic folktale about Gilitrutt (ATU 500-501) in which a man overhears a supernatural woman speaking words of a magical character whilst busy at her weaving in a house that is half underground (Jón Árnason I 1954:172-173 [181-2]; Simpson 1972:73-75; cf. Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir 2003:451).

²⁹³ Gunn (1932:243) mentions that around 1768, when Gray's re-working of *Darraðarljóð*, *The Fatal Sisters* (Gray 1966:29-31), was published, a version of the poem was still found in the oral tradition of North Ronaldsay, Orkney. It was never written down and is now long since lost.

²⁹⁴ Lönnroth (1970:23) explains *Darraðarljóð* as Classically influenced imagery, more precisely as owing something to the three *Parcae* in Gautier's Latin poem *Alexandreis* of which *Alexanders saga* is an Icelandic translation.

therefore seem reasonable as this would explain the fate-as-weaving metaphor, which is common in Anglo-Saxon but not in Norse tradition. I believe *Darraðarljóð* does represent an image of fate but I do not think it represents a purely Norse image.

V.3.1. English and Irish Weaving

Looking at the weaving motif as this is employed in sources from the British Isles would help to explain why it seems reasonable to think that the poetic mind behind *Darraðarljóð* was rooted in Irish and Anglo-Saxon as well as in Norse traditions.

Poole (1991:138-139) suggests a connection between the war-related *Darraðarljóð* and *Riddle 56* of the *Exeter Book*.²⁹⁵ *Riddle 56* reads as follows:

Ic wæs þær inne þær ic ane geseah
winnende with wido bennegean,
holt hweorfende; heaþoglemma feng,
deopra dolga. Daroþas wæron
weo þære wihte, ond se wudu searwum
fæste gebunden. Hyre fota wæs
biidfæst oþer, oþer bisgo dreag,
leolc on lyfte, hwilum londe neah.
Treow wæs getenge þam þær torhtan stod
leafum bihongen. Ic lafe geseah
minum hlaforde, þær hæleð druncon,
þara flana geweorc, on flet beran.
(*Exeter Book* 1936:208)

'I was inside where I saw a piece of wood that was moving to and fro wounding a struggling creature; it received battle-wounds, deep gashes; darts caused it woe, as did the wood skilfully bound fast. One of its feet stood still, the other moved vigorously, sometimes dancing in the air, sometimes near the ground. A tree was close by, clothed with bright leaves. I saw what was left by the spears carried into the hall to my lord, where the men were drinking.'

(Whitman 1982:204)

It is thought that the solution to the riddle is 'weaver's loom' or 'web and loom' (*Exeter Book* 1936:350) and the notion of weaving as an act of violence involving the use of weapons is what has prompted Poole's comparison.²⁹⁶ I find it particularly interesting that both *Darraðarljóð* and *Riddle 56* combine this creative principle with

²⁹⁵ The *Exeter Book* is probably from the latter half of the 10th century (*Exeter Book* 1936:xiii).

²⁹⁶ Hyer 2005 discusses a number of textile analogies in the *Exeter Book*.

a destructive principle in one and the same act: weaving. This accords well with the double nature of the female figures: they are both givers and takers of life.

Further parallels can be drawn from the Old English poem *Beowulf* which contains references to weaving. Famously the phrase in line 697: *wigspeda gewiofu*, 'web of fate' has been used by scholars to draw on the weaving motif as a portrayal of fate (Enright 1990:66).²⁹⁷ This translation certainly conveys what is meant by the words. *Beowulf* also throws up the word *freoðuwebbe* (line 1942)²⁹⁸ which means 'peace-weaver' and is used to describe a woman in some mediating role, either marital (creating an alliance between two families) or diplomatic (creating communal bonds within society; Hyer 2005:35-38). The context in which she is mentioned in *Beowulf* is, however, a grim one. Lines 1931–1943 tell the story of the evil queen Mōdprȳðo whom no one dared look at for fear she would have them tied up and fettered (line 1936-7). The comment on Mōdprȳðo's behaviour is (line 1940): *Ne bið swylc cwenlic þeaw*, 'such is not queenly conduct' and it is not what one expects from a 'peace-weaver' whose role symbolises amicable ties between different groups. Yet she becomes a virtuous queen after her marriage to Offa (lines 1942-1962), revealing a more peaceful side of her personality. Bringing up the word *freoðuwebbe* in connection with Mōdprȳðo seems at first ironic but it might in fact hint at a duality similar to that expressed in *Riddle 56*; her role is to weave people together in a peaceful manner but she is also capable of spreading fear among men, embodying both a creative and a destructive principle.²⁹⁹

An interesting point is the double context of *Beowulf* which is Old English in language but purports to be Scandinavian in content. If the British context is really the home-environment of *Darraðarljóð* then this would provide almost a mirror image of *Beowulf*, being Old Norse in language but using imagery that seems more Anglo-Saxon than Scandinavian: war-like weaving. The weaving-fate metaphor also turns up in other Old English texts: in the *Riming Poem*, verse 70, this phrase is found: *Me þæt wyrd gewæf*, 'Fate wove that for me' (Muir 1994:266) and also in *Guthlac* 1351 (52v) [B text]: *wefen wyrdstafun*, 'woven decrees of fate' (Muir 1994:158).

²⁹⁷ A much later parallel can be found in Shakespeare's *Othello*, c.1600, which uses the 'web of fate' portrayed as Othello's handkerchief. In Act III, scene 4, Othello says about the handkerchief: "Tis true: there's magic in the web of it. / A sibyl, that had numbered in the world / two hundred compasses, / in her prophetic fury sewed the work." Throughout the play, this piece of material is very closely linked to Othello's fate.

²⁹⁸ The word occurs also in *Widsith* line 6 (Muir 1994:241).

²⁹⁹ Damico (1984:46-51) discusses Mōdprȳðo with a similar duality in mind.

If the geographical home of the poem is the British Isles where the native tradition, probably in itself inspired by Classical sources (Weber 1969:121), drew parallels between fate and weaving, then it is by no means unnatural to imagine that people in that place at that time would have read fate metaphors into the imagery used, neither is it inconceivable that the poet who composed *Darraðarljóð* was from the British Isles. Were it even the case that the poem was not intended to represent fate, it could still be understood to do so, at least in the eyes of an Anglo-Saxon audience.

With regard to *Darraðarljóð*, Poole (1991) and Holtsmark (1939) both suggest a Celtic origin for the weaving motif and Enright (1990; 1996) generally sees Germanic and Celtic cultures as so closely related that he follows a mention of *Darraðarljóð* with some references to Celtic texts, seemingly as a matter of course (1990:66-67). However, the Celtic traditions are not exactly forthcoming with regard to weaving metaphors either; indeed, the supernatural female textile workers in charge of fate hardly seem to have been known at all in Celtic sources. But a weaving metaphor does exist; I have found it employed in four sources.

*The Song of the Sword of Cerball*³⁰⁰ is a poem addressing the sword of a dead king; the first line of it reads: *Mochen, a chlaidib Cherbaill! bát menic i mórenglaim*, 'Hail, sword of cerball! Oft hast thou been in the great woof (of war)' (Meyer 1899:9).³⁰¹ The same image is repeated in *In Cath Catharda* 'The Civil War of the Romans'³⁰² 5438-9: *Atconnairc na dairedha dluithi digainni dergruada do slegaibh os a ceannaibh 7 a n-englumma aigh 7 a[n-]innec[h] ur badha*, 'Then he beheld the dense, copious, red forests of long, edged spears above their heads, and at the butts of those spears their woofs of battle and their weft of bane' (Stokes 1909:399).³⁰³ These two references seem to be straightforward battle *kenningar*,

³⁰⁰ The poem is found in the *Book of Leinster* (47a 50), 11th or 12th century, but the language forms show the poem to be Old Irish, probably 10th century. King Cerball is said to have died in 909 (Meyer 1899:7).

³⁰¹ Kershaw (1922:117) refers to this but does not discuss it in any detail.

³⁰² An Irish adaptation of Lucan's *Pharsalia* (the Latin text does not contain this image). The part of the MS quoted here was written in 1616 (Stokes 1909:v), but the language forms show that it was copied from a text written down prior to the spelling reforms of the 13th century. The language borders between Late Middle Irish and Early Modern Irish and is probably from the early 13th century.

³⁰³ The 'woof of battle and weft of bane' is somehow connected to the butts of the spears, that is, the lower ends of the spear-shafts, with the spears perhaps seen as shuttles carrying the weft as they fly through the air. The image of spears, incidentally, is preceded by that of banners fluttering in the wind.

extraordinarily similar to *Darraðarljóð* in their imagery: swords and spears being likened to the weft threads in a woven textile.

Three references from the *Metrical Dindshenchas*³⁰⁴ support the same *kenning*, describing warriors as men who weave strife: firstly the phrase: *fer find, figed gail*, 'a valiant man who used to wage battle' (*Sliab Bladma* line 17; Gwynn 1906:54-55); secondly: *fer figed feirg*, 'one that knit strife' (*Belach Durgein* line 4; Gwynn 1913:84-85); and thirdly: *fri ferga fige*, '[one] good at weaving strife' (*Luimnech* line 27; Gwynn 1913:272-273).³⁰⁵ Although Gwynn lets the English translations vary in the verbs used (wage, knit, weave), the Irish text is consistent in using forms of the verb *figid*, 'to weave'. It seems, then, that the idea of connecting weaving to warfare was, or at least became, a well-established figure of speech in Irish tradition. There is, however, nothing supernatural about the situations in which the Irish image is used and there are no women of any sort involved; the 'weavers' are the men fighting on the battlefield.

Looking at *Darraðarljóð* through this Old English and Irish material, it seems that our poem is truly a hybrid, the weaponry-weaving idea displaying Irish influence with the weaving-fate idea showing Anglo-Saxon influence. Not only is he familiar with these, the poet is also firmly grounded in Norse tradition where the male warrior-as-weaver metaphor may have been just a bit too exotic. This is where the Norse *valkyrjur* come in.

One last but somewhat problematic reference to warlike weaving in Irish is found in the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* where the seeress Feidelm makes a prophecy before the battle at the very beginning of the tale. Feidelm arrives, holding in her hand an item referred to as *claideb corthaire* or *claideb findruini*. Two versions of this text describe the scene. In the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (Recension I)³⁰⁶ it says:

Claideb corthaire do findruine inna láim, esnaid óir and

'In her hand she carried a weaver's beam of white bronze, with golden inlay' (O'Rahilly 1976:2, 126).

In the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (Recension II)³⁰⁷ Feidelm's arrival is described as follows:

³⁰⁴ A poetic version of the *Dinnshenchas Éirenn*, 'The Lore of Placenames of Ireland.' It exists in a 12th century MS but is based on earlier prose material.

³⁰⁵ The triple-f alliteration makes the phrase sound formulaic.

³⁰⁶ The oldest surviving MS is *Lebor na hUidre*, c.1100; other MSS are from the 14th and 16th centuries.

³⁰⁷ From the 12th century *Book of Leinster*.

Is amlaid boí ind ingen ic figi chorrthairi 7 claideb findruini ina láim deiss cona secht n-aslib do dergór ina déssaib.

'The girl was weaving a fringe, holding a weaver's beam of white bronze in her right hand with seven strips of red gold on its points (?)'
(O'Rahilly 1967:5, 143).

The translation provided by O'Rahilly 1967:143, 1976:126 and Kinsella 1969:60, a 'weaver's beam', is unquestioningly accepted by Enright (1990:67; cf. Goedheer 1938:81), but it is not incontestable and O'Rahilly's question mark in brackets at the end of the sentence hints at some uncertainty with regard to its exact meaning. The word *claideb* in itself means 'sword'³⁰⁸ but in both texts it is clearly an unusual sword.³⁰⁹ Recension II gives *claideb findruini*, 'a sword of white bronze' (DIL:306-7) and states that Feidelm uses this to *figi chorrthairi*. O'Rahilly footnotes the phrase *ic figi chorrthairi* thus: "i.e. weaving threads together in a magical manner, to enable her to prophesy the coming battles" (1967:279), for which Davidson (1998:101; 117) suggests tablet weaving, *spjaldvefnaður*.

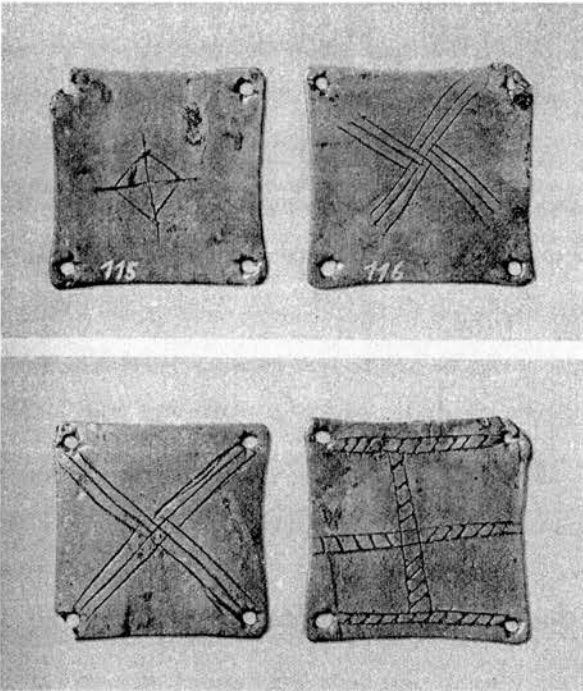


Figure 9.
Weaving tablets made of bone from Norse Greenland. The picture shows them roughly half their actual size.

However, a kind of sword is by no means an obvious choice of reference to a stack of small square weaving tablets with a hole in each corner.

³⁰⁸ One immediately thinks of the *skeið* or *vefjarskeið*, 'weaving sword, sword beater' with which the weft is beaten into place on an upright loom (see also V.4).

³⁰⁹ A *cloidem corthaire* turns up in the *Ancient Laws of Ireland* (1865:150-151) amongst tools for spinning and weaving and is apparently a rod used for making fringes. The combination *claideb corthaire* occurs only here and in *The Táin. Garman* or *claideb garmne* are the common phrases for 'weaver's beam' (DIL:356).

But in the light of the *Metrical Dindshenchas*, is it not possible that she is wielding a sword in the manner of a warrior who weaves strife and that this is how the weaving image fits in? The *corrthar*, 'fringe or border', often of a garment (DIL:152-153), could be a metaphorical reference to the coming battle based on the image of weaving war rather than weaving textile, perhaps understood as indicating that by weaving the edge of it Feidelm initiates the battle or lays down the basic outline of it. Sayers mentions that: "No other instances of prophesying through the interpretation of intertwined threads are adduced from early Irish literature" (1984:178); he further points out that the item in the text is described with the adjective *findruini*, 'of white bronze', a term "far more applicable to a decorative sword than to any piece of weaving equipment, although one must allow for epic exaggeration" (1984:178), and adds that the phrase *secht n-aslib do dergór ina déssaib*, 'seven strips of red gold on its points' is not seven threads woven together but: "a stock descriptive phrase used of weapons" (Sayers 1984:178). 'Stock phrase' seems an exaggeration but the term *aisil* does turn up in connection with weaponry (DIL:31).³¹⁰ It seems that the contestable weaver's beam can be neither proven nor disproven. However, this whole discussion recalls so strongly the engraved Greenlandic *skeið* discussed below (see V.4) that, although Feidelm does seem to be carrying an actual sword, the notion of some involvement of weaving cannot be dismissed altogether. Yet if it does refer to weaving, it would seem to be a unique image in Irish tradition.

As the motif of weaving in relation to death, battle and destructive forces is clearly evident in Old English and Irish sources whilst occurring but once in Old Norse sources, it looks increasingly uncertain whether *Darraðarljóð* can be taken as representative of native Norse imagery, especially because it has such strong connections to the British Isles.

V.3.2. The Raven Banner

In *Njáls saga*, *Darraðarljóð* is linked to the battle of Clontarf which was fought in 1014. However, as several scholars have discussed (Poole 1991:120-125; Goedheer 1938:74-87), the poem does not give the same details with regard to the battle as does the surrounding saga prose. Four problematic details present themselves here: 1) the poem explicitly refers to a glorious victory on the part of the young Norse king and it is difficult to reconcile this with the conduct of Sigtryggr silkiskegg in 1014 –

³¹⁰ I am grateful to William Sayers, Cornell University, for this reference.

according to *Njáls saga* he ran away. 2) Although the Irish king, Brian Boru, was killed at Clontarf he also won the battle – the poem has the Irish king lose. 3) Clontarf was not a clear-cut encounter between Norse and Irish the way the poem has it. 4) The information in the poem does not match the account of the battle given in the prose of *Njáls saga*. All of these things cannot have escaped the attention of the person who put the saga down in writing and included the poem with it.

It is possible that the poem actually describes a different battle altogether, namely one fought almost a hundred years earlier, the battle of Confey in 919 (916 according to Genzmer 1956 and von See 1959), and has been incorrectly attached to the Clontarf encounter (Poole 1991; von See 1959; Genzmer 1956). In 919, Sigtryggr Caech fought a battle near Dublin, killing the Irish king Niall, son of Aed, and won the battle; in 1014, Sigtryggr silkiskegg fought a battle near Dublin, killing the Irish king, Brian Boru, but was defeated in spite of this. The many correspondences between these two battles provide very good reasons why confusion should arise and, in actual fact, some of the details of the poem fit better with 919 (for example the prediction made in stanza 8 that the Norse will rule Ireland from now on), others with 1014 (for example the fall of an earl in stanza 7; we know of no earl falling in 919). It is unlikely that we will ever be able to tell for sure which battle *Darraðarljóð* concerns; in fact, one might imagine a situation wherein the poem was perhaps initially composed after the first battle but was then remembered differently after the second one.³¹¹

If it is not the outcome of the battle or even the visual appearance of it (not too different from many other battles one might suspect), then what has inspired the placement of *Darraðarljóð* in its current saga context?

One detail presents a possible answer: Sigurðr jarl's raven banner and its significance in the battle of Clontarf (Holtsmark 1939). Even if *Darraðarljóð* has been wrongly attached to this battle, the weaving scene certainly recalls the magical banner created by Eðna, Sigurðr's mother, and it is possible that the raven banner has played a part when it comes to the placement of *Darraðarljóð* in the context of

³¹¹ The battle of 919 is close enough to the death of Cerball in 909 to suggest that a direct borrowing from *Claidib Cherbail* could potentially be at the root of *Darraðarljóð*. This is pure speculation.

the Clontarf battle. The first we hear of the raven banner in *Orkneyinga saga* 11³¹² is this:

en Sigurðr gekk til fréttar við móður sína; hon var margkunnig. Jarl sagði henni, at eigi myndi minni liðsmunr en sjau menn um einn. Hon svarar: "Ek mynda þik hafa lengi upp fætt í ulllaupi mínum, ef ek vissa, at þú myndir einart lifa, ok ræðr auðna lífi, en eigi, hvar maðr er kominn; betra er at deyja með sæmð en lifa með skömm. Tak þú hér við merki því, er ek hefi gørt þér af allri minni kunnáttu, ok vænti ek, at sigsælt myni verða þeim, er fyrir er borit, en banvænt þeim, er berr." Merkit var gørt af miklum hannyrðum ok ágætligum hagleik; þat var gørt í hrafns mynd, ok þá er vindr blæss í merkit, þá var sem hrafn beindi fluginn. Sigurðr jarl varð reiðr mjök við orð móður sinnar.

(ÍF 34:24-25)

'Sigurðr went to consult his mother, who was skilled in magic. He told her that the odds against him were heavy, at least seven to one. She answered: 'I would have kept you for a long time in my wool basket if I knew that you would live forever, but it is fate which rules, and not where a man is from; better to die with dignity than to live with shame. Now, take this banner that I have made for you with all my skill, and my belief is that it will bring victory to the man it is carried before, but death to the one who carries it.' It was a finely made banner, very cleverly embroidered with the figure of a raven, and when the banner fluttered in the breeze, the raven seemed to be flying ahead. Sigurðr jarl lost his temper at his mother's words.'

(My translation)

This is all we hear of it and of Sigurðr's mother. She seems an enigmatic woman, daughter of an Irish king and described as *margkunnig*, 'skilled in magic'. Her brief role is a mixed blessing, as is the banner she has made for her son, and to some extent she recalls those double-sided supernatural women discussed above (IV.2.1. and IV.2.2.): she brings victory and death at the same time. Clearly, Sigurðr jarl is not exactly happy with the banner. He first uses it in an Orcadian battle where its magical power is proven (*Orkneyinga saga* 11, ÍF 34:25); afterwards, in the battle of Clontarf, when no one else will carry it for him, he does so himself and is killed. Despite the magical promise of victory, Sigurðr does not win the battle.

The Orcadian raven banner is not unique. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (1953:77) (Laud Chronicle) mentions a banner called 'Raven' captured by the local population from a band of vikings after a battle in Devon in 878. This is described in more detail in the *Annals of St. Neots*, from c.1120-1140 (Dumville and Lapidge 1985:xvi), as well as in *Asser's Life of King Alfred*. The following quotation is from the *Annals of St. Neots*:

³¹² *Flateyjarbók* c.1387-1395.

In quo etiam acceperunt illud uexillum quod Reafan nominant. Dicunt enim quod tres sorores Hynguari et Hubbe, filię uidelicet Lodebrochi, illud uexillum tex`u`erunt et totum parauerunt illud uno meridiano tempore. Dicunt etiam quod, in omni bello ubi praecederet idem signum, si uictoriam adepturi essent, appareret in medio signi quasi coruus uiuus uolitans; si uero uincendi in futuro fuissent, penderet directe nichil mouens – et hoc sepe probatum est.

(Dumville and Lapidge 1985:78)

'In that battle they took also the standard which they call The Raven. Now it is told that the three sisters of Ingwar and Hubba, the daughters of Lodbrok, weaved that banner and completed it entirely between dawn and dusk on a single day. Moreover they say that in every battle in which that banner goes before them, the raven in the midst of the design seems to flutter as though it were alive, if they were destined to gain the day; but if they were about to be conquered in the coming fight, it would drop down without moving: and this has often been proved to be true.'

(*Asser's Life of King Alfred* 1908:41)

What has relevance here is not any historical accuracy of the events described but rather the existence of the motif of fate-as-textile. There is clearly some magical aspect to this – three sisters who together weave the banner in one day, which sounds like an impossibly short time.³¹³ This type of battle magic does seem rather closely related to the Orcadian banner; but although we are to understand that these three weaving sisters are Danish, which could imply that the tradition involving them is also Danish, the source which tells us this is Anglo-Saxon and written in Latin. This complicates the issue of whether the imagery described was native to Scandinavia.

A similar banner is mentioned in connection with a battle between Canute and Edmund Ironside taking place in Essex in 1016 and described in *Encomium Emmae*:

Erat namque eis [the Danes] uexillum miri portenti, quod licet credam posse esse incredible lectori, tamen, quia uerum est, uerae inseram lectioni. Enim uero dum esset simpli[ci]ssimo candidissimoque intextum serico, nulliusque figure in eo inserta esset [i]mago, tempore belli semper in eo videbatur coruus ac se intextus, in uictoria suorum quasi hians ore excutiensque alas, instabilisque pedibus; et suis deuictis quietissimus totoque corpore demissus.

(Wright 1939:266)

'For the Danes had a banner possessed of a wonderful property, which although I believe it will seem incredible to the reader, nevertheless, because it is true, I will insert it for him for truth's sake. For although it was woven of a very plain and bright silk and had no figure embroidered on it yet always in time of war a raven seemed as if it were to appear on it, in victory opening its beak and beating its wings, restless on its feet, but very quiet and drooping in its whole body in defeat.'

³¹³ In *Laxdæla saga* 49, Guðrún likewise spins so much in such short time (V.7.).

(Wright 1939:126)

In this example, the colour magic with the black and white seems to turn up again (see III.2.2.), a black raven appearing on a white cloth as a battle omen. This gives us three versions of the raven banner, all of which have been woven in some special way, one by a mother, one by three sisters, and these banners are closely and magically connected to the outcome of the battles at which they are present.³¹⁴ The banners might provide another way of linking the weaving motif with battle and warfare. The raven banner is central to Holtsmark's interpretation of *Darraðarljóð* and it is by no means impossible that the ominous banner, its terrifying presence at Clontarf as well as the way in which it was created – magic and fate obviously woven or embroidered into it – has recalled what may originally have been a 919 vision of the grisly weavers. The focus on Sigurðr jarl may also provide the Caithness setting of the poem. Warmind (1997:212-213) and Goedheer (1938:80-87) both suggest that the blood and gore in *Darraðarljóð* points towards Irish war-goddesses³¹⁵ whereas the women weaving a banner are Norse, maintaining that the poem is a cross-over point of Norse and Celtic traditions. That the poem should be a Norse/Celtic/Anglo-Saxon hybrid seems to me the most plausible way of explaining the imagery employed in it.



Figure 10.
From the
Bayeux
tapestry. The
banner in the
middle shows
the image of a
bird.

³¹⁴ The Bayeux tapestry, at the passage which reads: *et venerunt ad prelium contra Haroldum rege*, shows a man on a brown horse, holding a pole with a banner depicting a bird (Rud 2000:75).

³¹⁵ For Irish war-goddesses, see ÓhÓgáin (1990:283-285, 307-309); MacKillop (2004:30, 318-319, 335-337); Warmind (1997:86-111).

V.3.3. 'and ripped it apart'

Darraðarljóð is followed by a short prose passage (quoted in V.3.) describing how the departing *valkyrjur* tear the newly woven web to pieces before riding off. The significance of this action is not explained, but Holtsmark (1939) suggests that this relates to the role of the *valkyrjur* as 'body-snatchers' of the battlefield, each taking her individual share of the dead. The tearing of the web thus symbolises their sharing of the fallen warriors.³¹⁶ The scene in Caithness recalls the description in *Völsungasaga* 31 where Brynhildr, on discovering that she has been deceived and will never marry Sigurðr, tears up the tapestry she has made, depicting his heroic deeds:

kvað hun ser þat mestann harm at hun atte eigi sigurð. hun settizt vpp ok flo sinn borda sva at svnr geck.

'she said that her greatest sorrow was not being married to Sigurd. She sat up and went at her weaving so furiously that the tapestry tore apart.'
(Grimstad 2000:182-183)

Whereas *Darraðarljóð* can be seen as an act of sympathetic magic that happens in direct connection with the event it purports to influence, Brynhildr's actions are free of such supernatural connotations and appear simply to be guided by strong, human emotions. She is not doing anything magical; yet, shortly after tearing the tapestry she begins to plot the murder of Sigurðr. In this way, destroying the tapestry depicting his heroic deeds may still be regarded as symbolic of the destruction of the man himself. In *Völsungasaga*, Brynhildr emphasises time and again that she is bound by the oaths and promises she made when she vowed to marry Sigurðr and no one else. When she tears the tapestry, she also goes on to break the oath (but she has no choice because other people have gone behind her back to create the situation she now finds herself in). Once the oath is broken, the tapestry, it seems, no longer has a valid function.

One might add to this that, while the women in *Darraðarljóð* are undoubtedly weaving, their words and speech also affect the battle. In stanza 10 they say: *vel kvaðum vér um konung ungan* – not 'we wove well' but 'we spoke well' and yet, the difference between these two actions is less than minimal; text and textile appear as

³¹⁶ From archaeology, we know that objects sacrificed to the gods were often broken up (Glob 1969:107, 124), whereas grave goods were deposited intact with the dead. The tearing apart could indicate some sacrificial context or perhaps a way of dedicating the dead to a specific deity, possibly Óðinn or Freyia, both of whom are connected to the war dead (cf. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 2006).

complementary manifestations of the same thing (see V.5.). The weaving and the speaking belong closely together and in a sense what is woven is a physical manifestation of the spoken words. Raudvere says about *Sigrdrífumál* that: *Orden följs hela tiden av handling: det som uttrycks verbalt följs av en kropps rörelse*, 'The words are constantly followed by action: what is expressed verbally is followed by a bodily movement' (2003:112). The tearing of the material in *Darraðarljóð* can also mean that it is the process of making it rather than the finished product that is of significance, as is a common feature in magic.³¹⁷ It probably relates to the notion that items that were sacrificed to the gods were broken to pieces (Ilkjær 2002) as people who were sacrificed were killed.

V.4. Weaving Swords and Rolling Heads

With regard to the combination of weaving and warfare, so unusual in Norse poetic tradition, it is of some interest that a Norse *skeið* or weaving sword found in Greenland has engraved on it pictures of two sword-wielding characters (Roussel 1941:276; Østergård 2004:57).³¹⁸

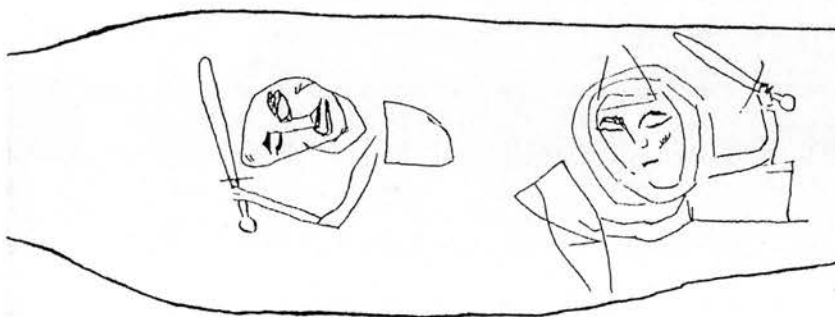


Figure 11. The *skeið* with the two figures holding swords.

The *skeið* can be dated to the medieval period, probably 1200-1300,³¹⁹ and carries a worn runic inscription, now illegible, on its handle (Roussel 1941:276).³²⁰ The picture

³¹⁷ Focus on process rather than product is clearly evident in Navajo sand paintings: "It was made to the accompaniment of the ceremonial chants and wiped away when the chant ended" (Burland 1965:101). A similar thought lurks behind the construction of sun lodges among the Canadian Cree; these are also taken down after the ceremony has ended (personal communication from Willie Ermine, First Nations University of Canada, 4.9.2004).

³¹⁸ This was found at a farm far inland (Austmannadal 5, no.53d) in the Norse Western Settlement in Greenland. It is unlikely that the farm belongs to the early period of Norse presence in the area as it is the farm furthest inland and so probably the last to be established there.

³¹⁹ Personal communication from Guðmundur Ólafsson, Þjóðminnjasafn Íslands, 9.6.2005.

³²⁰ Another weaving sword, probably from the 8th century, was found at Westeremden in Friesland. This also carries a runic inscription that seems to consist of two personal names.

on this weaving tool proves nothing but at the same time it is hard to believe that it is entirely coincidental – of all the things one might engrave on such a tool, why figures wielding swords? Is it possible that this reflects *Darraðarljóð* or some similar tradition?³²¹

Similarly, it is of some interest that *Jómsvíkinga saga* 8³²² contains a passage wherein the woman Ingibjörg dreams about weaving:

Sva er sagt at hon sofnar brátt er hon kómr j reickio. þá dreymir hana oc er hon vacnar segir hon palne drömin. þat dreymþi mik segir hon. at ec þottomz her stodd vera á þesom bõ sem nú em ec. En ec þottvmz vppe æga vef en þat var lín vefr. han var grár at lit mer þotti kliapr vera vefin oc var ec at oc vafk oc var litþ a ofit at þvi er mer þotti oc þa er ec sló vefin þa feill af einn kléin af miþiym vefnom á bac oc toc ec vp. En þa sa ec at kliár þeir varo ecki nema manna hõfõþ ein oc er ec hafþa vpp tekitt þetta hõfõþit er af hafþe slitnaþ. þa hellt ec á oc hvgþa ec at oc kennda ec hõfvþit. Nv spyr palnir eptir hvert hõfõþit væri. En hon svarar oc qvaf vera hõfvþ haralldz konvngs Gorms sonar.
(*Jómsvíkinga saga* 1882:41)

'It is said that she sleeps as soon as she goes to bed. She dreams, and when she wakes up she relates the dream to Pálnir: 'I dreamed,' she says, 'that I thought I was staying here on this estate where I am now. And I thought that I had a loom set up for weaving and the cloth was linen. It was grey of colour. I thought that the loom was set up, and I was there and weaving, and there was little woven as it seemed to me. And when I beat the weft, one of the loom weights in the middle fell down behind the loom, and I picked it up. Then I saw that the weights were nothing other than men's heads, and when I had picked up this head which had come off, I looked at it and I thought that I recognized the head.'

Now Pálnir asks whose head it was. And she answers and said that it was the head of King Haraldr Gormsson.'

(My translation)

The passage strongly recalls *Darraðarljóð*, the loom with men's heads for weights and the grey colour. In *Jómsvíkinga saga*, the dream is taken as an omen of the king's death, reassuring Pálnir that he will kill the king and avenge his brother. Whether *Darraðarljóð* has borrowed the image from *Jómsvíkinga saga* or whether it

The runic sequence: *adugislu:mepgisuhildu* is interpreted as: 'For Adugisl and Gisuhild' (Arntz and Zeiss 1939:387).

³²¹ This brings to mind the weaving tablet from Lund on which runes are inscribed. It: "bears (if it has been correctly interpreted) the curious inscription 'Sigvor's Ingemar shall have my weeping – aallatti!' This sounds like a curse on the errant Ingemar, who is now with another woman, Sigvor. Ingemar's rejected love took the nearest object to hand, one of her weaving tablets, and inscribed it with a curse, triggered by the final magic word" (Jesch 1991:46). Perhaps the weaving tablet may not have been as arbitrary an object as Jesch suggests because Flint mentions that: "Love charms seem to have called especially often upon magical knots and upon binding-and-loosing spells" (1991:231), which seems to fit well with the interpretation given by Jesch.

³²² Various renditions exist; the following is from AM 291 4º c.1275-1300.

is a reflection of a common root-tradition is difficult to say.³²³ The weaving motif apart, both appear as visions or dreams signifying the death of one or several men, but there are significant differences as well. Notably, Ingibjörg's dream does not involve a supernatural element, there are no enigmatic words spoken and the scene appears quite normal until she stands with the head in her hand; *Darraðarljóð* is supernatural, mysterious and, not least, grisly, right from the very beginning of the poem. Whether direct borrowing is involved or not, the image of deadly weaving seems to have been powerful and striking enough for it to imprint itself on people's minds and crop up at suitably ominous times.³²⁴

V.5. Text and Textile

The relationship between 'text' and 'textile', mentioned briefly above (V.3.3.), is of specific interest here as it goes far beyond the etymological connection between these two words. There is a whole set of notions surrounding ideas of speaking, reciting and determining which relates to textile work, as Giannakis notes:

"weaving" a plan or a speech and weaving of man's fate by the [Classical] gods are seen as parallel activities, and in both cases the metaphor is achieved by semantic extension of the basic meaning of words taken from the concrete world of manufacture, the world of weaving or sewing.
(1998:9)

Nagy (1996:59-64) provides a very clear example of exactly this semantic extension in his discussion of the archaic Greek metaphor 'sewing or weaving songs together', meaning 'performing songs'. He focuses on the compound noun *rhapsōidós* 'he who sows together [*rháptō*] the songs [*aoidé*]', which describes a poet, singer or performer, finding that the speech-as-weaving metaphor is particularly old.³²⁵

Both 'text' and 'textile' derive from the Latin *texere*, 'to weave', and it is in some ways rather telling that 'text', etymologically speaking, is secondary to 'textile'. It indicates that both are, or at least can be, forms of narrative. That textile work and in particular weaving is used as a metaphor for composition is amply evident in the ways in which we speak about narratives and story-telling: words can be strung together, an epic might be interlaced with a series of shorter stories, an unfortunate

³²³ MSS of *Jómsvíkinga saga* are older than those of *Njáls saga*, although this does not in itself determine the age of their contents.

³²⁴ Speculatively, Orkney may provide the connection between *Darraðarljóð* and *Jómsvíkinga saga* because we know that the early 13th century *Jómsvíkingadrápa* was composed by the Orcadian bishop Bjarni Kolbeinsson, only *Jómsvíkingadrápa* says nothing of ominous weaving.

³²⁵ I am grateful to Dorothy Noyes, Ohio State University, for this reference.

poet might lose his thread – in which case he may have to fabricate something; spinning a yarn means to make up an unbelievable story and (just as a word can be spelled) a spell might be woven as well as cast. Textile metaphors seem to be particularly readily available in the context of speech and words.³²⁶ A very clear example of this connection is found among the Dogon people of Mali in West Africa who say the following about one of their mythical spirit ancestors:

As the threads crossed and uncrossed, the two tips of the Spirit's forked tongue pushed the thread of the weft to and fro, and the web took shape from his mouth in the breath of the second revealed Word... The words that the Spirit uttered filled all the interstices of the stuff: they were woven in the threads, and formed part and parcel of the cloth. They were the cloth, and the cloth was the Word. That is why woven material is called *soy*, which means 'It is the spoken word'.
(Griaule 1965:28)

Old Norse tradition shows similar trends. A passage from *Laxdæla saga* 35 (cf. notes 85 and 257) contains an interesting phrase:

Síðan lét Kotkell gera seiðhjall mikinn; þau færðusk þar á upp ǫll; þau kváðu þar harðsnúin fræði; þat vǫru galdrar. Því næst laust á hríð mikilli.
(ÍF 5:99)

'Then Kotkell had a great *seiðr*-platform made, they all went up onto it, there they spoke hard-twisted knowledge, that was magic. Next a great storm broke loose.'
(CSI V:50)

The phrase is *harðsnúin fræði*, it literally means 'hard-twisted knowledge', using the verb *snúa* also encountered in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* (see V.2.). The context in the saga is the magical ritual of *seiðr* which Kotkell performs in order to call down bad weather on his enemy, capsizing a boat. The phrase gives the impression of the special knowledge that Kotkell and his family possess as somehow having the form of threads; moreover, this knowledge is spoken – *þau kváðu þar harðsnúin fræði*. It is noteworthy that in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, fate is connected to threads in the word *ǫrlögþátto* though these would appear to be thought of as actual threads. In *Fjölsvinnsmál* 47, the phrase *Urðar orð*, 'words of Urðr', appears as a term also describing fate; these two poems present us with differing metaphors for fate, one of them describing fate in terms of threads and the other one in terms of speech. The passage from *Laxdæla saga* quoted above seems to combine these two images – the

³²⁶ The same is evident in Indian tradition (Gonda 1963:114, 157); I am grateful to Noémie Beck, University College Dublin, and Daithi Óhógáin, University College Dublin, for this reference.

magical words are spoken but they are also hard-twisted as though they were threads.³²⁷

A different image occurs in *Guðrúnarkviða II* 14-16 where Guðrún weaves the story about Sigurðr:

sat ek með Þóra
siau misseri,
dætr Hákonar,
í Danmörko.
Hon mér at gamni
gullbókaði,
sali suðræna
ok svani danska;

I sat with Þóra
seven half-years
Hákon's daughter
in Denmark.
She embroidered in gold
for my pleasure
southern halls
and Danish swans;

höfðu vit á skriptom
þat er skatar léko,
ok á hannyrðom
hilmis þegna,
randir rauðar,
rekka Húna,
hiqdrótt, hiálmdrótt,
hilmis fylgio;

we two also made pictures
of what the generous men played at
and on our handiwork
the followers of the prince,
red shields,
Hunnish fighters,
sword-warriors, helmet-warriors,
the retinue of the prince;

skip Sigmundar
skriðu frá landi,
gyltar grímor,
grafnir stafnar;
byrðu vit á borða
þat er þeir þqðoz,
Sigarr ok Siggeir,
suðr á Fíoni.³²⁸

the ships of Sigmundur
glided from the land,
gilded figure-heads,
carved prows;
we depicted in our tapestry
how they fought,
Sigarr and Siggeir,
south in Fyn.

What Guðrún is doing is essentially creating a visual form of poetry (Norrman 2006:133). The description brings to mind ancient textiles such as the Oseberg (Hougen 1940), Överhogdal (Horneij 1991) and Bayeux (Rud 2000) tapestries from, respectively, 9th century Norway, 11th century Sweden and late 11th century France, all of which are clearly telling a story and can therefore be 'read'.³²⁹ The vocabulary in the poem is interesting because we find *bóka* used for 'embroider' and *skript* for 'picture.' In *Guðrúnarkviða II*, the intention with the embroidered *skript* is exactly to

³²⁷ The Greek word σειρήν, 'siren', a female being luring sailors to their death with her beautiful singing, is derived from σείρα meaning 'cord, plait, rope' (Lampe 1961:1227). This combination of speech, binding and magical allurements recalls the English word 'spellbound'.

³²⁸ *Konungsbók* has Fívi (Fife in Scotland); Nks 1824 b 4^o has Fíon (Fyn in Denmark).

³²⁹ They recall the poems *Ragnarsdrápa* and *Húsdrápa* about, respectively, a shield and wall carvings depicting legendary and mythological scenes. The poems, then, are images turned into stories whereas the textiles are stories turned into images. Both poems are reconstructed from verses scattered throughout *Skáldskaparmál* (Faulkes 1998).

relate stories, to depict and describe on the textiles the heroic deeds of men, as one might also do by composing a poem or telling a story about them. Dronke (1969:228) says about the word *bækr* (plural of *bók*)³³⁰ used in *Hamðismál* 7:

bækr: coverlets embroidered with scenes or patterns (...) The etymology of 'book' remains unsolved (...), and it is possible that the two senses 'book' and 'embroidery' are independent developments of an older radical sense ... The use of *bók* = 'embroidery' may also have been influenced by the fact that an embroidery could be 'read', its scenes interpreted, like a book; so the verb *lesa* [to read] is used occasionally in Norse for 'embroider' ([e.g.]... *Frostapingslög* IX. 9: *klæði lesin* [embroidered cloth]).

In this way, *bók* can be understood as something along the lines of 'that which contains storytelling material' so that both a book and a tapestry could be referred to as *bók*, as for example the Bayeux tapestry: a textile which contains text. Also one of the strips (weave Ia) of the Överhogdal tapestry from Härjedalen in Sweden features a short runic passage (Horneij 1991:43-44). These runes are mirrored, indicating that they, as well as the whole tapestry, should be read from right to left and thus clearly incorporating the notion of 'reading' a textile as one would read a book.³³¹ The 'text' and 'textile' intertwine again.

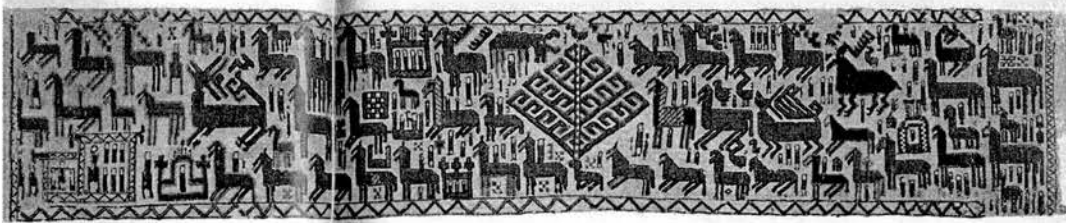


Figure 12. Weave II from the Överhogdal tapestry. The textile depicts an eight-legged horse and possibly also Yggdrasil, the World Tree. The square building-like images with crosses on top may be Christian churches.

Pictorial textile representation is probably a specifically feminine mode of narrative expression, as verbal poetry appears to be a male-dominated form of expression: "The use of the pronouns *we* (*við*[vit]) and *they* (*þeir*) in the poem [*Guðrúnarkviða II*] indicates the gender division of the labour at hand; we (women) weave and they (men) fight" (Norrman 2006:139). Men did not do embroidery as women did not become poets. Yet, female poets, although rare, are not unheard

³³⁰ The noun *bók* (f) is used both about 'book' and about 'beech' and these two words appear to be etymologically very closely related (Green 1998:259-262; AeW:47-48; IeW:597-598, 955; Frtz I:163; ÁBM:69).

³³¹ Runes are normally represented from left to right "but in early times texts could be written from right to left equally well. They could even be *boustrophedon*, that is, with alternate lines in opposite directions. Even in left-to-right texts an individual letter could be reversed, apparently at whim, and occasionally a letter might be inverted" (Page 1987:9).

of³³² and, indeed, *Guðrúnarkviða II* itself seems to be what Gísli Sigurðsson refers to as a 'female-orientated poem'; in it "we meet with detailed descriptions of various kinds of embroidery, different techniques used for weaving and so forth, descriptions which reflect an insider's knowledge and point to women as the most likely reciters of the poem." (Gísli Sigurðsson 1988:253). The gender division appears in effect to be as much a division into the private and public spheres, dominated by, respectively, women and men; and we should not imagine that women did not tell stories or recite poetry just because women's lives were lived predominantly in the private sphere of the household while men were active in the public sphere (cf. Ney 2004). Furthermore, Old Norse society operated with a rather strict gender division regarding what was male and female work. Meulengracht Sørensen comments: "Society was to a great extent based on an aggressive masculine ethic. So dominant was it, that for women to conform to it could be regarded as a virtue." (Meulengracht Sørensen 1983:21). It should, however, be understood that the masculine-dominated mode of thought current in early medieval Scandinavia was not as such a suppression of women in a political sense but a suppression of what was regarded as effeminate, or rather, it was a preference for masculine over feminine behaviour.³³³

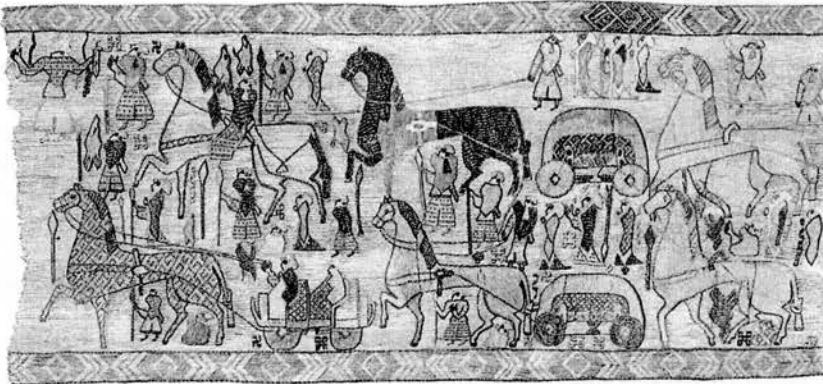


Figure 13. From the Oseberg tapestry, a textile clearly telling a story which can be 'read'.

As the *skript* made by the women in *Guðrúnarkviða II* is a way of capturing and telling a story, giving it shape using cloth, needle and thread, so the poet who composed the poem itself did the same thing, using speech and words. The poet,

³³² Straubhaar 2002 and Jesch 1991 discuss Old Norse female poets.

³³³ It was expected of a man that he act in ways defined as masculine; for a man to act in ways defined as feminine was unacceptable and carried connotations of morally undesirable qualities. Yet, while it was expected of a woman that she act in ways defined as feminine, it was also, at times, acceptable for her to act in ways defined as masculine; in fact, it seems to have been considered a bonus if she were able to do that: "The female role was ignominious only when it was assigned to a man" (Meulengracht Sørensen 1983:24).

stringing words together, conjures up pictures and so the story is told; Guðrún, threading her needle, embroiders pictures in a speechless, wordless type of storytelling.³³⁴ Although we never see *nornir* engaged in textile manufacture, it is relevant to mention that the suggested etymology of the word *norn* relates to the Swedish dialect verb *norna*, 'to communicate in secret' (Ström 1985:202; see VI.4.2.). They may not actually weave but weaving is an obvious metaphor for what they do.



Figure 14.
This Western European icon of the Annunciation clearly shows the baby Jesus inside of Mary just where the thread from her spinning crosses her abdomen.

It is also relevant here to return to the Eastern European iconographic tradition of the Virgin Mary who is described as well as depicted as spinning at the Annunciation (see IV.3.). Western European church tradition eventually discontinued the image of the spinning Mary (Badalanova 2006:217) but that it was in use at one time is evident in a 12th century fresco from the church of Sorpe, Spain; a 12th century stone relief from St Anne's portal of Notre Dame de Paris, France; a 5th century sarcophagus (known as Sepolcro di Braccioforte) from Ravenna, Italy, and in other places (Badalanova 2006). Instead, the Western tradition focused on an image which was considered to be equivalent, namely that Mary was reading when she received the message from the angel. This is worthy of attention: that spinning ('textile') and

³³⁴ Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 6:412-674 tells the story of Philomela who was raped and had her tongue cut out but wove her story in order to exact her revenge. I am grateful to Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, for this reference. See also chapter VI.

reading ('text') should be taken as synonyms for one another in the context of (divine) conception, a connection that actually appears to be quite common, certainly in European traditions:

[T]he act of spinning (as an element of the process of making fabrics = texture, i.e. text) appears to be identified with the act of reading (i.e. coming into existence of the text, its verbal manifestation). Hence, it becomes quite obvious why the Virgin Mary conceives her Son the Logos by spinning or reading: in terms of mythopoeic imagery both actions are considered synonymous.

(Badalanova 2006:239)

and further:

It is evident that, according to the traditional vocabulary of Slavia Orthodoxa, the cloth-creating female activities, such as spinning and weaving, knitting and sowing, as well as embroidering – which are often defined by lexemes denoting "writing" and/or "icon-painting" – are considered to be the classical female hypostases of labour, signifying birth/rebirth mysteries. On the other hand, spinning/weaving/producing cloth and reading/writing (i.e. "producing text") seem to go together in a universal system of symbols, standing jointly as synonyms for Divine Incarnation.

(Badalanova 2006:244)



Figure 15.
This Bulgarian icon of the Annunciation shows Mary reading when the angel comes to her.

We now understand that 'textile' is not just etymologically related to 'text' but can, indeed, be seen as another kind of 'text' and a specifically feminine one at that. 'Textile', then, should not be seen simply as a piece of cloth but also as an item conveying a meaning: it can record historical events, mythical and legendary tales, it can convey aspects of social status or hierarchy, it can even carry magical purposes

such as protection, divination or cursing (Normann 2006:125), and such messages can be 'read' in the cloth. This, however, is hardly the first association made to textiles in the modern western world:

We rarely think about the work behind the production of textiles. In post-industrial societies, cloth is mostly factory-made, and, therefore, we do not need to think about how long its production takes, let alone how long it took to produce in the ancient world. Weaving was time-consuming and labour intensive. Therefore, cloth was extremely valuable.
(Normann 2006:127)

This would have been the case particularly in early medieval Iceland where the natural resources of the land did not make for an economy based on wood or on metal; instead, it became based on homespun cloth: *vaðmál* (*Íslenskur Söguatlas* 1989:76).

Perhaps this relationship between 'text' and 'textile' can help to explain the metaphor of fate-as-textile. Textile work is, in European traditions, a woman's occupation, but it is also a means of conveying powerful although silent meanings and messages. In this way, textile is not fate, yet it is the equivalent of a specifically feminine voice which does not speak in ordinary words and therefore cannot be heard, but which is nevertheless as effective and significant as the masculine voices of poets and other male figures who speak openly and in actual words. The parallels between the ideas of speaking and of weaving make it easier to understand why fate may be seen as closely related to textile.

V.6. First Merseburg Charm

In this discussion of fate and threads, it is relevant also to mention the *First Merseburg Charm*. The Merseburg charms, recorded in an Old High German manuscript from the 10th century (Lindquist 1923:1), stem from the German area south of Scandinavia and so do not really belong to the Old Norse sphere; still, they may be considered in some ways to supplement the Norse traditions concerned here. The *Second Merseburg Charm* is a healing charm and does not touch on the present topic, but the *First Merseburg Charm* uses a binding image which appears relevant. The charm says:

Eiris sazun idisi, sazun hera duoder.
Suma hapt heptidun, suma heri lezidun,
suma clubodun umbi cuonio uuidi.
Insprinc haptbandun! Inuar uigandun!
(Lindquist 1923:14)

Translations of the Old High German vary somewhat, particularly with regard to the word *idisi*; some scholars suggest a translation of the word, as does Lindquist (1923:15):

'At first there sat noble ladies, then there sat (...)
Some tied fetters, some hampered the army,
but some loosened the fetters around bold men.
Spring out of the fetters! Escape the (...)!'

Others find it preferable to leave the word untranslated, as does Simek (1993:171):

'Once the *idisi* sat, sat here and there.
Some bound fetters, some hampered the army,
some untied fetters:
Escape from the fetters, flee from the enemies.'

These *idisi* have often been seen in relation to the *dísir* of Old Norse tradition (see III.1.2.) as well as to the Old English word *ides* which is used in *Beowulf*, seemingly just in the meaning of 'woman', as is sometimes the case in Old Norse *kenningar* employing the term *dís* (Simek 1993:61, 171). While there would appear to be a genuine etymological relationship between these separate words: *dísir*, *ides* and *idisi*, etymology alone is a fragile foundation on which to build interpretations (Weber 1969:11) and sharing a common root is not sufficient evidence that the beings hiding behind these labels are necessarily similar to each other. The *idisi* are also often seen in relation to *valkyrjur*: *Dessa idisi framstå som stridens, slagfältets segergivande och magiskt betvingande makter, som valkyrjor*, 'These *idisi* appear as the victory-bringing and magically controlling powers of battle, of the battlefield, as *valkyrjur*' (Ström 1954:71). This correspondence draws on what the *idisi* are said to do in the charm compared with what *valkyrjur* are said to do in Old Norse literature, or rather, what *valkyrjur* should be doing according to their etymological background. As was discussed above (III.1.3.), it is not all *valkyrjur* who choose the slain, although they always seem to relate in some way or other to the battlefield or to the war-dead.

The Old High German *idisi* seem to have the power both to bind and release warriors in a military context³³⁵ and there are apparently several of them, divided into three groups, as the charm tells us that some tie fetters whilst others untie fetters and yet others hinder the army. A parallel often drawn is to the *valkyrja*-name

³³⁵ Bede refers to something similar in his ecclesiastical history (Book IV:22), where it proves impossible for people to bind Imma as the fetters are loosed everytime they try. They suspect him of having access to loosing spells, but it turns out that the fetters loosen because Imma's brother is having mass said on his behalf (1969:403-405).

Herfjotur (*Grímnismál* 36; *pulur*)³³⁶ meaning 'fetterer of the army', but the parallel in itself does little to enhance our understanding of the charm or of *valkyrjur*. The name occurs only twice, describes an action which we never seem actually to see, and no other *valkyrja*-names appear to have similar connotations; it is difficult to argue that the charm recalls *valkyrjur* in general. Rather than *valkyrjur*, the name brings to mind Óðinn's abilities described in *Hávamál* 149:

Þat kan ek it fiórða:
 ef mér fyrðar bera
 bõnd at boglimom,
 svá ek gel,
 at ek ganga má;
 sprettr mér af fótom fiqturr,
 en af hõndom hapt.

I know a fourth spell:
 if men put
 chains upon my arms and legs,
 I can chant
 so that I can walk away;
 fetters spring from my feet,
 and bonds from my hands.

This image is really rather similar to that given in the charm. It may be that something like this was at an earlier stage an aspect of *valkyrjur* that later became attached to Óðinn so that the name Herfjotur is a relic of some earlier *valkyrja* function. This seems probable but remains speculative.³³⁷

Idisi appear to amalgamate certain aspects of *dísir* and *valkyrjur*, having the power to assist or to ensnare warriors in battle. The charm shows them as beings to be called upon for help, seemingly to free one or more prisoners (*dísir* were called upon to assist with childbirth; see III.1.2.). It also conveys the feeling of some ritual setting; the phrasing 'first some sat, then others sat' or 'they sat here and there'³³⁸ seems to imply some sort of physical action accompanying the words of the charm, and not really the sort of movements that a bound prisoner would be capable of making, so that one imagines the charm being spoken from afar by someone other than the prisoner himself. Indeed, the image may not be that far from the one conjured up in *Darraðarljóð*, where the weaving can be seen as a binding action affecting the warriors on the distant battlefield (V.3.), although weaving on an upright loom is done standing up, not sitting down, so whatever kind of binding is described in the charm is unlikely to be weaving on a loom.

³³⁶ It is only found in the *pulur* of AM 748 I 4° c.1300-1325 (*Edda Snorra Sturlusonar* 1852:490).

³³⁷ The idea of binding and loosing rather recalls the practice of referring to the gods as *bõnd* (n.pl.). The singular *band* (n.) means 'band, thread, chain', but also 'obligation' (LP:34; Frtz I:110). Fritzner suggests that this refers to the gods as powers controlling human activity (I:110); de Vries connects it to an Old Indic word for 'kinship' (AeW:25).

³³⁸ The act of sitting recalls the *norna stóll* in *Sólarljóð* 51 (see IV.2.2.); cf. also Price's discussion of the *seiðhjallr* and chair-shaped amulets or pendant from archeological finds (2002:162-167) and Kiil's discussion of *seiðhjallr* and Óðinn's seat *Hliðskjalf* (1960).

It is appropriate in this context to draw attention also to Tacitus' description of the rituals of the Semnoni in *Germania* 39:

Vetustissimos nobilissimosque Sueborum Semnones memorant; fides antiquitatis religione firmatur. stato tempore in silvam auguriis patrum et prisca formidine sacram (eiusdem) nominis eiusdemque sanguinis populi legationibus coeunt caesoque publice homine celebrant barbari ritus horrenda primordia. est et alia luco reverentia : nemo nisi vinculo ligatus ingreditur, ut minor et potestatem numinis prae se ferens. si forte prolapsus est, attolli et insugere haud licitum : per humum evolvuntur. eoque omnis superstitio respicit, tamquam inde initia gentis, ibi regnator omnium deus, cetera subiecta atque parentia.
(*Tacitus* 1938)

'At a set time, deputations from all the tribes of the same stock gather in a grove hallowed by the auguries of their ancestors and by immemorial awe. The sacrifice of a human victim in the name of all marks the grisly opening of their savage ritual. Another observance shows their reverence for this grove. No one may enter it unless he is bound with a cord, by which he acknowledges his own inferiority and the power of the deity. Should he chance to fall, he may not raise himself or get up again, but must roll out over the ground. The grove is the centre of their whole religion. It is regarded as the cradle of the race and the dwelling-place of the supreme god to whom all things are subject and obedient.'
(*Tacitus* 1970:134)

Again, this description belongs to a much earlier period and probably bears no direct relationship to the Old Norse material of the late Viking Age; however, it may tell us something about the distribution and persistence of certain ideas. The combination of sacrifice, fetters and a sacred grove has given rise to comparisons between Tacitus' description and the worship of Óðinn in the Old Norse period, recalling again Óðinn's paralysing powers.³³⁹

Furthermore, it is interesting to note the striking similarity between the charm and the description of *nornir* in *Fáfnismál* 13 (quoted in IV.1.). The *suma, suma, suma* of the charm and the *sumar, sumar, sumar* of the eddic poem must represent some sort of formula, and it is a cause for some wonder to find exactly the same phrase turning up in quite separate sources.³⁴⁰ Evident in both passages is the division of the same kind of beings into three separate groups; in the charm they are

³³⁹ It may likewise relate to Óðinn's self-sacrifice by a spear, hanging on a tree (*Hávamál* 138-140); possibly also to the passage concerning Fjöturlundr ('Fetter-grove') in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* 30 where Dagr kills Helgi, his sister's husband, with a spear under circumstances that could be interpreted as sacrificial. Also the mock sacrifice that turns into a real sacrifice of Víkarr in *Gautreks saga* 7 (FSN IV:31), c.1600-1700, springs to mind.

³⁴⁰ As Lindquist notes (1923:17-18), it also turns up in the fragmented eddic poem known as *Brot*, stanza 4: *Sumir úlf sviðo, sumir orm sniðo, sumir Gothormi af gera deildo*, 'some roasted wolf, some sliced snake, some gave Gothormr wolf meat'.

said to do different things, whereas in the poem they are said to be of different origins. Such triple divisions are known from ancient Greece (see III.3.) and from the Germanic votive altars, and are also attached to *nornir* in both *Völuspá* and *Snorra-Edda*, though seemingly not to *dísir*, *fylgjur* or *valkyrjur* in Old Norse sources. In this way, it seems the charm is presenting us with a group of beings spanning the grey areas between *dísir*, *valkyrjur* and *nornir*; to find an exact parallel to the *idisi* amongst the Norse counterparts is not easy.

The binding-and-loosing magic of the *First Merseburg Charm* probably represents a practice that was known throughout pre-Christian Europe and persisted long into the Christian period (Flint 1991:226-231), and there is no particular reason why it should not have been as prevalent in the Scandinavian area as it was elsewhere. However, it does not seem to bring us any closer to an understanding of the *nornir* as these are presented to us in the source material because, *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* apart, ideas about binding-and-loosing magic are not directly attached to *nornir* in the available sources.

V.7. Katla, Gríma and Guðrún

Although the mythological material does not present much in the way of magical textile work, Norse tradition is not totally devoid of such things and in the discussion of fate and threads a few of the most prominent examples should be considered. Some *Íslendingasögur* refer on occasion to the magical qualities attributed to spinning. The two clearest examples are found in *Eyrbyggja saga* 20 where Katla uses spinning-induced magic in order to hide her son from his pursuers, and in *Fostbræðra saga* 23 where Gríma uses spinning, also with the purpose of hiding a man from his pursuers.

The passage from *Fostbræðra saga* 23,³⁴¹ somewhat abbreviated here, reads as follows:

En Gríma, kona Gamla, átti stól einn mikinn, en á brúðum stólsins var skorinn þórr, ok var þat mikit líkneski. Gríma mælti um myrgininn: "Nú vil ek skipa til verka í dag. Stól minn mun ek setja á stufugólf mitt; þar vil ek, þormóðr, at þú sitir á, þá er menn koma; vil ek ekki, at þú rísir upp af stólnum, meðan Þórdís er á bænum. Nú þó at þér þykki nokkurar nýlundur í gerask, eða þér sýnisk ófriðr at þér borinn, þá rís þú ekki upp af stólinum, því at ekki mun stoða at hrökkva í hyrningar undan, ef þér verðr bana auðit. Gamli skal festa upp ketil ok sjóða sel; þú skalt bera sorp á eldinn ok lát verða mikinn reykt í húsunum. Ek mun sitja í durum ok spinna garn ok

³⁴¹ *Möðruvallabók* c.1330-1370 and other MSS.

taka við komþundum." Nú er svá gort sem Gríma sagði fyrir. Ok er skip þeira Þorkels ok Þórdísar sjásk at landi fara, sez þormóðr á stólinn. Gamli hafði uppi ketilinn ok bar á sorpit á eldinn; varð mjök reykfast í húsunum. Þar fylgði ok myrkr mikit, svá at ekki mátti sjá. Gríma sat á þreskeldi ok spann garn ok kvað nokkut fyrir sér, þat er aðrir skilðu ekki. ... Nú fara þau Þoðvarr ok Þórdís á stofuna upp ok taka af skjána; leggr þá út reykinn. Má þá sjá um alla stofuna, geta þá at líta stól Grímu, þar er hann stóð á miðju gólfi. Þau sá Þór med hamri sínum skorinn á stólsbrúðunum, en þau sá ekki Þormód.

(ÍF 6:245-247)

'Gamli's wife, Gríma, had a large chair with a figure of Thor carved into the arms – a sizeable effigy – and the following morning, she said, "Now, this is what I want done today. I will place my chair in the main room, and I want you, Thormod, to sit in it when they arrive. On no account must you stand up while Thordis is here. No matter what strange events you think you see, nor whether you think you are being attacked, you must not rise up from this chair. If it is time for you to die, there will be no escape wherever you run. Gamli will set up a pot and boil some seal meat, and he will put [you are to put] sweepings from the floor on the fire so that the house fills with smoke. I shall sit in the doorway and spin yarn, and receive them when they arrive."

Gríma's instructions were followed, and when Thorkel and Thordis' ships were seen putting ashore Thormod went and sat in the chair. Gamli hung up a pot and threw sweepings onto the fire, and the house filled with smoke so dark and dense that it obscured everything. Gríma sat on the threshold, span som yarn and hummed something that the others did not understand. ... So Bodvar and Thordis went up onto the roof and removed the screens, and the smoke poured out. That made everything in the room visible. They saw Gríma's chair in the middle of the floor with the figure of Thor and his hammer carved into the arms, but they did not see Thormod.' (CSI II:384-385)

Several things interact here to create the mysterious disappearance of Þormóðr: boiling seal meat, smoke, a chair with a depiction of Þórr and the spinning that Gríma does whilst saying something unintelligible. It is clearly Gríma who is in control, but only to the extent that she says to Þormóðr that, if he is fated to die on this day, all of this will not help him. Initially, the search party is distracted by the smoke but even when they clear the room, they still cannot see Þormóðr.

In *Eyrbyggja saga* 20,³⁴² the following story is told:

Þar var eigi karla fyrir fleira en Oddr. Katla sat á palli ok spann garn; hon bað Odd sitja hjá sér, - "ok ver hljóð ok kyrr." Hon bað konur sitja í rúmum sínum, - "ok verið hljóðar," kvað hon, "en ek mun hafa orð fyrir oss." ... Þeir sá, at Katla spann garn af rokki. Nú leita þeir um húsin ok finna eigi Odd ok fóru brott eptir þat. Ok er þeir kómu skammt frá garðinum, nam Arnkell staðar ok mælti: "Hvárt mun Katla eigi hafa heðni veift um hofuð oss? ok hefir þar verit Oddr, sonr hennar, er oss sýndisk rokkrinn." ... Þeir

³⁴² AM 448 4° c.1686 (copy of the lost *Vatnshyrna*).

Arnkell gengu í stofu ok sá hvergi Odd; lá þar rokkr Kǫtlu í bekknum; þóttusk þeir þá vita, at Oddr myndi eigi þar hafa verit; gengu síðan út ok fóru í brott ... En er þeir Arnkell kómu á bæinn, hljópu þeir inn ok til stofu, ok sat Katla á palli ok spann. Hon heilsar þeim ok kvað þá þykkfarit gera; Arnkell kvað þat satt. Fǫrunautar hans tóku rokkinn ok hjuggu í sundr. Þá mælti Katla: "Eigi er nú þat heim at segja í kveld, at þér hafið eigi ørendi haft hingat í Holt, er þér hjugguð rokkinn." Síðan gengu þeir Arnkell ok leituðu Odds úti ok inni ok sá ekki kvikt, útan túnglǫt einn, er Katla átti, er lá undir haugnum, ok fóru brott eptir þat.
(ÍF 4:51-53)

'There was not a man on the farm except Odd. Katla sat on the cross-bench spinning yarn. She told Odd to sit beside her, "and be quiet and still." She told the women to stay in their places, "and be quiet. I will speak for us all." ... They noticed that Katla was spinning yarn on her distaff. They searched the buildings but could not find Odd and after that they left. When they had ridden a little distance from the farm buildings, Arnkel stopped and said: "Is it possible that Katla could have pulled the wool over our eyes? Could that have been her son Odd who appeared to us to be her distaff?" ... Arnkel and his men went into the main room but could not see Odd. Katla's distaff was lying there on the bench. They were now convinced that Odd had not been there, and so they went out and rode away ... When Arnkel and his men arrived, they ran into the main room where Katla was sitting spinning. She greeted them and said they were becoming regular visitors. Arnkel said that was quite true. His companions took Katla's distaff and broke it in two. "Tonight at home," said Katla, "you won't be able to say you had no purpose here at Holt since you have broken the distaff." Then Arnkel and his men searched for Odd inside and out but saw no living creature except a domestic boar that Katla owned, which was lying under the rubbish-pile. They went away after that.'
(CSI V:152-153)

Here, Katla also uses spinning in her magic and it is clear that Arnkell and his men find that the distaff is heavily involved with the goings-on at Holt; at first they think Oddr is the distaff, then that he is the goat and the third time that he is the boar. The two situations are rather alike in their use of spinning as a magical activity and in the purpose of the magic, but these are clearly descriptions of illusions, not fate. Equally clearly, *nornir* are notably absent from both texts.

A third interesting mention of spinning is the scene in *Laxdæla saga* 49 (ÍF 5:154)³⁴³ where Bolli, on his return from the murder of Kjartan, is met with Guðrún's cryptic words: *Misjofn verða morginverkin; ek hefí spunnit tólf álna garn, en þú hefíir vegit Kjartan*, 'A poor match they make, our morning work – I have spun twelve ells

³⁴³ *Möðruvallabók* c.1330-1370.

of yarn while you have slain Kjartan' (CSI V:79).³⁴⁴ Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson (1997:134-158) discusses this passage extensively, arguing that Guðrún's spinning is a type of sacrifice relating directly to Kjartan's death. In this respect, the passage is similar to *Völsungasaga* 31-32 and *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* 10-11 where Brynhildr decides that if she cannot have Sigurðr for herself she would rather see him dead; Guðrún apparently makes a similar decision with regard to Kjartan.³⁴⁵ Her spinning is then a ritual act that somehow symbolises Kjartan's death in a way similar to the relationship between the weaving and the faraway battle in *Darraðarljóð* (Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1997:154-155); while Guðrún sits at home spinning, her husband Bolli, at her instigation, kills the man whom she loves, Kjartan. In her cryptic greeting of Bolli on his return, she herself seems to equate her spinning with the killing; although she states that the two pieces of work are *misjǫfn*, 'a poor match', they appear nevertheless to be a match. And if we read the older MSS, both pieces of work are *hermdarverk*, 'foul deeds, sabotage' (ÍEO:322)



Figure 16.
Spinning with a distaff.
The distaff holds the
prepared but unspun wool;
the spun thread is then
wound up onto the
spindle.

³⁴⁴ ÍF 5:154 takes this phrase from the very late MS ÍB 226 4° c.1680-1700; *Möðruvallabók* and other earlier MSS have *mikil verða hermdarverk / hernaðarverk / hefndarverk*. The phrase has been much discussed (Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1997:134-137; Louis-Jensen 1993; Ólafur Halldórson 1973) with varying results. Louis-Jensen (1993:267) notes that the phrase "has been badly bungled in the manuscript tradition of *Laxdæla saga*, and critics have disagreed as to how it should be emended" and goes on to suggest that it should read: "Mikil verða hér nú dagsverkin" (1993:270) 'a great day's work indeed' (my translation) (see Jónas Kristjánsson 1984:208-211 for various suggested translations). Certainty is as hard to come by as agreement in this discussion but the authenticity of the phrase in ÍB 226 4° is seriously compromised by the lateness of that MS (Ólafur Halldórson 1973:126). However, scholars do appear to agree on the fact that Guðrún's statement refers to some kind of symbolic relationship between her spinning and Bolli's killing of Kjartan.

³⁴⁵ Cf. Louis-Jensen (1993:276-278) on resemblances to *Þiðriks saga*.

However, these examples of magical spinning in the sagas seem to be quite far removed from the *nornir* themselves. Concerning the identity of the women in these three sagas, they are all very human, but hints at folktale stereotypes can also be glimpsed: the witch. Katla is a widow living on her own, in charge of herself and she is said to be beautiful but capable of ill deeds; Gríma is an old woman living far from other people with her husband. She is said to be *fornfróð*, 'knowledgeable about ancient matters' and, although she is portrayed in a more positive way, she shares with Katla a marginal societal position not unlike that of witches in folktales. Guðrún is different from them; a person of high social status, she is central to the saga plot and to society.

In terms of behaving like *nornir*, Guðrún appears to come a lot closer than the other two – *nornir* do not engage in magical illusions but in fate (a distinction also made by Gríma herself; see above), and it looks as if that is exactly what Guðrún does. Yet, it must be said that there is absolutely nothing in the saga texts which alludes in any way to *nornir*; this link hinges entirely on the idea of *nornir* as spinners and the single occurrence of *nornir* working with threads carries quite positive and optimistic connotations rather than the notions of doom and death displayed in *Laxdæla saga*.

V.8. Gender and Power

In the context of gender-guided modes of expression (V.5.), another text should be included which does not concern textile work but which is nevertheless relevant to much of the material discussed in this chapter. The question of why fate is feminine now raises its head again as this notion seems to be clearly demonstrated also in *Grottasöngur*.³⁴⁶

Otherworldly female figures exist in abundance in many European traditions and it is by no means exclusive to *nornir* that they should be ambiguous and double-sided, and should incorporate benign as well as malignant aspects. In Old Norse tradition, it is often evident that such supernatural females are connected to the *jǫtnar*, to the realm of the dead, or in some other way are defined as 'other'. The two women Fenia and Menia in *Grottasöngur* belong to this ambivalent class of beings. They are referred to simply as *meyjar*, 'maidens', but also as *mær bergrisa* (stanza 10) and *bergrisa brúður* (stanza 24), and in describing their lineage (stanza

³⁴⁶ From *Skáldskaparmál* 43 which also gives a long prose introduction to the poem (Faulkes 1998:51-52). Further on *Grottasöngur*, see Vésteinn Ólason 2005.

9) they themselves mention the names of four *jǫtnar*: Hrungrnir, Þiazi, Iði and Aurnir, making it absolutely clear that they are connected to *jǫtnar*. Furthermore, in stanza 11 they say: *Vér vetr níu vorum leikur, ǫflgar alnar fyrir jǫrð neðan*, 'Nine winters we were playmates, mighty girls, nourished under the earth', thereby connecting themselves to an underground realm. It is also clear that they are very strong, *máttkar meylar*, that they are *framvísar*, 'knowledgeable about the future' (stanza 1), and that only they can turn the grinding stones of the magical mill.³⁴⁷ This makes it possible to group them with the otherworldly women who live below the ground and/or in water and who possess supernatural knowledge and with it power (IV.2.1.; IV.2.2.).³⁴⁸

Fenia and Menia's ability to grind out good as well as evil things lends them a double-sided nature similar to that of the supernatural women who give as well as take life. At the same time, they seem particularly interested in warfare, complaining in stanza 16 that life at Fróði's place is dull and recalling in stanzas 13-15 their past as warriors in Sweden, seemingly as a time when they felt in their element (cf. Vésteinn Ólason 2005:124-126). They point out in stanza 14 that: *Steyppom stilli, studdom annan*, 'we overthrew one king, we supported another', which is reminiscent of the role of *valkyrjur*, certainly the ones in *Darraðarljóð*.

Indeed, both poems potentially have a work-song feel to them,³⁴⁹ portraying women engaged in physical work and speech at the same time, and in both poems, what is said and what is simultaneously done are not separate issues but two sides of the very same action. Yet, in *Grottasöngur* we see that an interesting shift from benign to malignant expression takes place in the course of the poem. The action remains the same, the turning of the grinding stones does not change, it appears to be Fenia and Menia's attitude to King Fróði that changes and they express this in their words which turn from blessings to curses. As long as their attitude remains positive (stanzas 5-6) they speak as follows:

Auð mǫlom Fróða,
mǫlom alsælan,
mǫlom fiqlǫ féar
á feginslúðri!
siti hann á auði,

Let us grind wealth for Fróði,
let us grind him great happiness,
let us grind many possessions
on the quern stone of joy!
let him sit on his wealth,

³⁴⁷ The mill recalls the magical corn-, salt- and coin-mill Sampo in *Kalevala* (Kuusi 1995:37-50; Kirby and Branch 1985:104-118), cf. ATU 565. See Tolley 1995 for a comparison of Grotti and Sampo.

³⁴⁸ The image of the mill recalls Snæbjörn's stanza about *Amlöða kvern*, 'Hamlets mill' in *Skáldskaparmál* 25 (Faulkes 1998:38), also referred to by Saxo, Book 3 (6,10) (1979:85).

³⁴⁹ Holtsmark 1956 describes work songs related to weaving, grinding, smithing and rowing.

sofi hann á dúni,
vaki hann at vilia:³⁵⁰
þá er vel malit!

let him sleep on down,
let him wake to happiness:
that is well ground!

Hér skyli engi
qðrom granda,
til bqls búa
né til bana orka,
né hqggvagi
hvqssso sverði,
þóat bana bróður
bundinn finni!

Here no one should bring
harm to another,
not plot evil
nor conspire against someone's life,
nor strike
with a sharp sword,
though he finds his brother's slayer
all tied up!

When their attitude changes, they speak quite differently, stanzas 21-22:

Mól míns fqður
mæer ramliga,
þvíat hon feigð fira
fiqlmargra sá:
stukko stórar
støðr frá lúðri,
iárni varðar –
mqlom enn framarr!

My father's daughter
ground fiercely,
for she saw death approaching
for many men:
the great support posts
snapped away from the mill frame,
iron clad –
let us grind even more!

Mqlom enn framarr:
mun Yrso sonr,³⁵¹
niðr Hálfðanar,
hefna Fróða;
sá mun hennar
heitinn verða
burr ok bróðir;
vitom báðar þat.

Let us grind even more:
the son of Yrsa
and of Hálfðan
will avenge Fróði;
he will be known
as her son
and her brother;
we both know that.

It is not that the women stop grinding; what changes things is the words they speak. The reason given for this change in attitude is that Fróði will not allow the women to rest but makes them work incessantly.

It is clear that the mill, and with it Fenia and Menia who work the mill, embodies the potential for good as well as for evil, and it may be that the build-up of all good and peaceful things eventually counteracted by a hoard of evil, warlike things should somehow be seen as balancing one another out. More probably, it is a warning against greed – Fróði wants more and more gold, perhaps thinking that the upward spiral is endless but, by pursuing it overly hard, he stumbles over the summit after

³⁵⁰ *At vilia* may be translated either as 'to happiness' or 'at will'. It makes little difference here, in either case he wakes to pleasant circumstances (KLE 3:887).

³⁵¹ The son of Yrsa is the legendary hero Hrólfr kraki. Yrsa was deceived into marrying her own father Helgi and so her son by Helgi, Hrólfr, was also her brother; see *Hrólfs saga kraka* (FSN I:19-26).

which the decline is rapid and fierce. As such it is a lesson in the abuse of power. But perhaps there is also a sense that the turnaround is inevitable.

Or perhaps the sense is that the mill simply grinds out whatever fate has already been laid down, so that the mill does not actually change anything. In the same way, grain is ground into flour but the flour is not essentially different, it is simply a different format of the grain. This might also explain why Fenia and Menia are happy to grind out peace and wealth for Fróði although he has enslaved them (KLE 3:884).³⁵²

It is hard to call these women anything other than what they call themselves: 'jǫtunn maidens'. Their strength is not only supernatural but also physical and it can be harnessed and made to work for the king and, although it is the mill which is magically able to produce whatever one wishes for, Fenia and Menia are the only ones who have the power to make it work and it is apparently their words which control what the mill produces. In this way they are very closely linked to one another, the mill only works in their hands but at the same time they are tied to the mill, seemingly unable to free themselves from the king's command. There appears to be a power game going on: Fróði against Fenia and Menia; who is stronger than who? The human king or the otherworldly women? The division of strength discernible here is an interesting one because, although Fróði is able to harness the physical powers of the two women, he cannot control their speech and through this their power over his fate. His power is physical and human, theirs is conceptual and otherworldly; he uses force, they use words. This might even reveal a more general notion about which types of powers are considered to belong to which gender (cf. Price 2002:390).

V.9. Summary: Tangled Threads

The fate-as-textile metaphor does exist in the Old Norse material but not to an extent where we can allow ourselves to refer to it carelessly, and it remains unproven that its connection to *nornir*, on the rare occasions where we come across it, is at all native. The unique imagery employed in *Darraðarljóð* in all likelihood finds

³⁵² Similarly, the weft on a loom does not create the pattern but merely actualises what is already laid down in the warp; the grinding of the mill does not in itself produce the peace and the war, it only makes apparent the nature of what was put into it. You start out with grain and end up with flour but these are just two different forms of the same substance. In this way, the words that Fenia and Menia speak are, like the words in *Darraðarljóð*, part of the actualisation process.

its roots in traditions from the British Isles, and the scene from *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* 2-4 has suspiciously close parallels in Classical tradition; fate-as-textile does not turn up anywhere else in the *Edda*, nor in skaldic poetry; nor does Snorri know it. This leaves us with the allusive name Herfjötur and the binding and loosing of the *First Merseburg Charm* and with these, combined with the evidence from *Laxdæla saga* 49, it cannot be denied altogether that the fate-as-textile metaphor was present in some form or other in native tradition from ancient times. We might say that the fact that this metaphor was apparently so widespread elsewhere in Europe supports the notion that it was probably not entirely unknown in Scandinavia. Yet, it seems that spinning *nornir* are conspicuously absent from our sources, certainly in comparison with how often they figure in scholarship.

What I have tried to do is to show that the sources separate the fate-as-textile metaphor into two layers. The dominant layer, clearly evident in the sources discussed above, connects fate to textile – but does not refer to *nornir* – and the less dominant sub-layer consists of a symbolic correspondence between textile work and the dealings of *nornir*. This division into two layers of the fate-as-textile image does seem to exist in the surviving evidence; whether the evidence is representative of the ancient heathen world view is a different matter.

In descriptions of what *nornir* do, the vocabulary most often points towards decision-making and it seems that the most prominent metaphor employed is fate-as-law (as will be discussed below). An image of law-as-textile works quite well when applied to the act of cloth weaving (tapestry weaving is different; Horneij 1991:26-28) because the warp can symbolise the law whilst the weft is the different ways in which the law can be realised or applied. The pattern of a piece of cloth is laid down in the warp and so it exists, albeit invisibly so, even before weaving actually commences. There are different possibilities for how the weft may interpret the warp, though some are more logical and appropriate than others, but the warp itself cannot be changed once weaving has begun. If a mistake is made in setting up the warp, it will be present throughout the entire piece of cloth, whereas the weft can to a certain extent be unravelled to correct a mistake. In this way, the warp may be likened to the law or to fate and the weft to the chosen ways of realising the basic structure of the whole. If fate is law and law is textile, then *nornir* engage with textile by extension. But whatever way we turn the pieces, they hardly engage with textile directly. It seems to be the text, not the textile, which describes what *nornir* actually do.

Considering the extant descriptions of the Old Norse *nornir*, it seems that when we so readily accept the notion that they spin and weave, especially when we consider it a dominant feature of theirs, then we are forcing the *nornir* to comply with our preconceived ideas before we even read the sources. The sources themselves would never give us spinning or weaving as their dominant aspect; rather, it seems we already know that this is what *nornir* do and so we do not realise how rarely it is clearly stated. Were we to read the texts with an open mind, I doubt that we would identify the textile analogy as dominant. The idea is there, as *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, *Reginismál* 14 and *Darraðarljóð* imply – although these passages do not show it directly, and although they may be borrowings from elsewhere – but are we not blinding ourselves by letting this image dominate our understanding of *nornir* when the vast majority of their appearances show them to be engaged in very different spheres of life?

VI. Fate, Prophecy and Law

Davidson (1998:120) writes that: "We do not know much about the Norns, since in the literature we have mainly references to their decrees concerning the fates of kingdoms and individuals." This is true, but I suppose we then have to say that these references to decrees are what we know about *nornir*. When looking at the words often used in situations mentioning *nornir* (*skipta*, *dómr*, *kviðr*), it would seem evident that there is some sort of perceived link between 'fate' and 'law' – *ørlög* and *lög*. The aim of this chapter is to explore that link, both in terms of etymology and semantics, and also in terms of any legal or quasi-legal role represented by *nornir*.

The exploration begins with the words themselves – *ørlög* and *lög* – leading into a limited discussion of the relationships between issues of law, speech and prophecy; there truly is much to say about this, and the scope of the present study only allows for inclusion of the aspects most central to descriptions of *nornir* and *vǫlur*. Of some importance here is the relationship between orality and literacy and the developments that took place in early medieval Scandinavia, shifting the authority from the law-speaker to the law-book (Gísli Sigurðsson 2004:53-92). What we are left with today are literary sources telling us about the oral tradition that preceded them – often by several centuries – and there are many complex issues concerning the use of such source material. This comprises rather a substantial field of study in itself and it is not the intention to enter that discussion at present;³⁵³ so little is said (or rather written) about *nornir* that we can hardly hope to pick out potential distinctions between ideas about *nornir* pre-dating the extant sources and those that are described in our sources. Here, the focus will remain on the *nornir* presented in the sources and what they represent there: *skǫp* and *ørlög*.

In the sources that we have, it appears characteristic of the *nornir* that their presence is felt mentally and emotionally rather than physically. In this respect, they are different from *vǫlur*, and an exploration of the relationship between *nornir* and *vǫlur* forms a central part of this chapter. This necessitates a stronger focus on prose texts that do not mention *nornir* directly but are relevant to an exploration of *vǫlur* and of issues closely connected to the quasi-legal metaphor surrounding *nornir*.

As will become evident, the following discussions of words, speech and prophecy intertwine with the textile analogies and the gender issues discussed in the two previous chapters.

³⁵³ See Miller (1991:43-76); Mitchell 1991; Gísli Sigurðsson 2004; Meulengracht Sørensen 1977 and 1993.

VI.1. Words for Fate

Before discussing those Old Norse words that cover the concept of fate, I want to look at some English words: 'fate' and 'destiny', both of which come from Latin, and the native Old English *wyrd*.

VI.1.1. English Words

The common dictionary definitions make hardly any distinction between 'fate' and 'destiny', at times even defining them in terms of one another.³⁵⁴ Both are explained as a supernatural power shaping the lives of human beings or as the events and experiences encountered by a person during his or her lifetime; they generally seem to have very similar semantic content (though see Wierzbicka 1992:92-95, 103-106), but they obviously have different roots: 'fate' is derived from the Latin *fātum*, past participle of *fāri*, 'to speak, say' and points towards a close semantic connection to speech and words; 'fate' is seen, at least etymologically, as something spoken. 'Destiny' is derived from Latin *dēstinātus*, past participle of the verb *dēstināre*, 'to determine, to make firm', revealing what must have been a close semantic relationship to the notion of something akin to a law governing the course of events or a decision.³⁵⁵

There is also 'weird', Old English *wyrd*, 'fate', cognate with Old Norse *urðr* (see IV.1. and below). The relationship between these two words has been debated many times and discussions of the concept of fate in Old Germanic religious beliefs constitute an almost entirely separate branch of scholarship: "One cannot even translate *wyrd* without committing oneself to a certain interpretation" (Lieberman 1994:117).³⁵⁶ Suffice it here to point out that although *wyrd* and *urðr* are etymological cognates and have at times been considered to have exactly the same semantic content, this should perhaps not be assumed to be the case when the Old English term occurs some 200 times or more, the Old Norse term a mere fifteen times or so and the corresponding Old High German *wurt* only once (Weber

³⁵⁴ For example *Johnson's English Dictionary*: "Fate; 1. Destiny; an external series of successive causes. 2. Event predetermined. 3. Death; destruction. 4. Cause of death" (1809:308); "Destiny; 1. The power that spins life and determines the fate. 2. Fate; invincible necessity. 3. Doom; condition in future time" (1809:220).

³⁵⁵ Wierzbicka (1992:92-95) discusses the semantic content attached to these two words in recent decades.

³⁵⁶ Lieberman 1994; Mittner 1955; Neumann 1955; Simek 2004; Weber 1969.

1969:14-19). This would seem to indicate that the semantic content of the words played a somewhat different role or simply referred in Old Norse to something other than it did in Old English tradition. Weber says this:

Wo immer ‚wyrð‘ in der altenglischen Dichtung mit dem Bedeutungsgehalt ‚Schicksalsmacht‘, ‚Verhängnis‘, ‚Tod‘ und ‚Verfall‘ auftritt, besteht nie ein Anlaß, diesen Sinngehalt als Relikt eines heidnisch-germanischen Glaubens an eine allbeherrschende Schicksalsmacht ‚Wyrð‘ begreifen zu müssen. Vielmehr ist diese Rolle des Begriffs ‚wyrð‘ auf das spezifisch christliche Vergänglichkeitsbewußtsein zurückzuführen und im Einklang mit dem christlichen Weltverständnis, das die irdische Existenz als der Gesetzmäßigkeit des Wandels, Verfalls und Todes unterworfen begreift.
(Weber 1969:125-126)

‘Although ‘wyrð’ in Old English poetry always occurs with the meaning-content of ‘power of fate’, ‘doom’, ‘death’ and ‘decay’, in no instance does this allow us to consider this meaning to be a relict of a heathen Germanic belief in an all-powerful conception of fate called ‘wyrð’. This role of the concept of ‘wyrð’ rather stems from the specifically Christian awareness of transitoriness and chimes with the Christian world view, namely that the earthly existence is understood as subject to the rules of change, decay and death.’³⁵⁷

This means that while *wyrð* undoubtedly has a heathen past, its occurrences in Old English literature may reflect a non-heathen understanding of the concept. Green (1998:374-391) discusses it alongside other Old English words pertaining to ethics and fate that took on new, Christian meanings after the conversion. But the word has continued to develop; the modern use of English ‘weird’ tends to be as an adjective on par with ‘strange, peculiar, odd, curious’, all of which can be seen to incorporate some of the meaning ‘fate’ as in something uncanny or perhaps not entirely coincidental.

It is evident that language is not static, meanings of words are not solid and unchanging; they are, in fact, the very opposite. Although a word can remain the same in terms of spelling and pronunciation through an extended period of time, what is meant by that word is not necessarily the same throughout that period. We need words in order to communicate but we also need to keep in mind that words are provisional and revisable.³⁵⁸ Although their semantic content can be traced back to a certain root meaning, this does not guarantee that they continue to convey that same root meaning through long periods of time (Weber 1969:11). The case of ‘weird’ proves the point; the word obviously had a meaning in pre-Christian England,

³⁵⁷ Translation kindly provided by Marieluise Bek-Pedersen.

³⁵⁸ Richard Holloway at the Edinburgh Book Festival, August 30, 2004.

we just do not know exactly what it was, and the frequent employment of *wyrd* in Old English literature suggests that it underwent an adaptation process allowing it to continue to be used so extensively in Christian texts. As noted above, in modern English language 'weird' does not refer to a supernatural being, instead it has an almost entirely secular meaning; it has even shifted word class, from noun to adjective. Thus, the root meanings of words, however interesting, can tell us only about the origins of the word, not how far removed from such origins the semantic content of the same word might be at any given time. It can be difficult to find that exact balance between etymological and contemporary meanings in the Old Norse vocabulary, as we cannot be sure that the words encountered in the manuscript sources are used in their original etymological sense; at times we can, in fact, be sure that they are not. Nevertheless, an exploration of the etymologies of the Old Norse words used to describe what is in English called 'fate' or 'destiny' would be useful.

VI.1.2. Old Norse Words

Old Norse has many words that translate into English as 'fate': *ørlög*, *sköp*, *miqtuðr*, *forlög* and *auðna*.³⁵⁹ The mere fact that there are so many words seems to suggest two things: firstly, that the concept was well known; secondly, that these words must have had semantic contents somewhat different from one another – why else would there be five separate words with unrelated etymologies? Apart from *ørlög* and *forlög* they are not particularly closely related etymologically.

The etymological explanations offered for *ørlög* (n. pl.) suggest that it means 'that which was laid down in ancient times' or 'primal law', a sort of 'ur-law' going back to the dawn of time (LP:667; AeW:683; C/V:767), giving an impression of something which constitutes a basic foundation for everything else. It can also mean 'end' (Frtz II:911; ÁBM:1228) or refer to a person's 'exploits, experiences in life' (LP:667; C/V:767).

The meaning of *forlög* (n. pl.) is the life allotted to man by the powers of fate (Frtz I:456) and with the etymological meaning 'fore-law' (C/V:164), a law laid down beforehand; its root meaning comes very close to that of *ørlög*.

³⁵⁹ Of necessity, I can only discuss a few examples. These words occur with such frequency in the corpus of Old Norse literature that a complete analysis of their usage would necessitate a shift of focus away from the *nornir*.

Both these words appear to indicate something akin to a set of given rules, a fundamental structure that cannot be altered; they may refer to a supernatural power or simply to the given conditions, the rules of the game or the power that sets the rules. It seems at times that these two words are used completely interchangeably.³⁶⁰ This makes it interesting that *forlǫg* does not occur in connection with *nornir*, whereas *ǫrlǫg* does, apparently pointing toward some level of semantic distinction between the two words, though both continue to be used in Christian contexts.

The term *skǫp* (n. pl.), plural of *skap* (n.), has several nuances of meaning from the 'state, condition' of something to 'state of mind, temper, mood' (C/V:537; AeW:483); it is further related to the verb *skapa*, 'to create, organise, put in order' (AeW:483; ÁBM:829). The word is ultimately cognate with English 'shape' and with Danish *skæbne*, 'fate.' It seems to indicate something done with a purpose and so *skǫp* appears to describe a supernatural power not completely random but purposefully giving shape to things and arranging them in some coherent way, although the coherence may not always be detectable from the human perspective. There may even be a hint of some degree of fickleness present through the connection to 'state of mind, mood', as if *skǫp* were an unpredictable or moody sort of power – a matter of the mind rather than of the physical dimension.

Skǫp can also be used to convey that something happens in a 'natural' way, as seems to be the case in *Ynglingatal* 9: *ef Agna her Skjalifar rǫð at skǫpum þóttu*, 'if Agni's army has found Skjalf's deed natural' (*Ynglingasaga* 19, ÍF 26:38; cf. Strömbäck 1970:201-208). Furthermore, it is adapted to describe the rule of the Christian God, for example in Þórarinn stuttfeldr's 12th century *Stuttfeldardrápa* 2: *við skǫp goðs*, 'by the rule of God' (*Magnússona saga* 3, ÍF 28:239). This also indicates that *skǫp* is not conceived of in an entirely negative way but can refer to events which are simply natural and occur the way they should.³⁶¹ This aspect of *skǫp* may come close to a quasi-legal meaning.

Furthermore, *skǫp* is the word most commonly used to describe 'fate' as represented by the *nornir*. The combination of *nornir/norn* and *skǫp*, or forms of the verb *skapa*, occur at least five times in eddic and skaldic poetry, whereas the combination of *nornir* and *ǫrlǫg* occurs only twice, and *forlǫg*, *miqtuðr* and *auðna* do

³⁶⁰ For example *Vatnsdæla saga* 10 (ÍF 8:29-30).

³⁶¹ This recalls the term *óskǫp* in *Hávamál* 98, meaning 'something that goes against fate, an unnatural thing' (LP:448).

not seem to occur in connection with *nornir* at all (although *Krákumál* 24 employs *forlög* and *sköp* apparently synonymously; see III.1.1.1.).

It is generally difficult to discover the exact nuances of semantic content between these three words, *ørlög*, *forlög* and *sköp*. Fritzner (I:456; II:911; III:417) hardly distinguishes one from the other, though some of these translation difficulties relate to the limited vocabulary covering the concept in other languages; for example:

ørlög: '1) what has been decided from the beginning, **fate**; 2) **fate**, i.e. what has been experienced, exploits' (LP:667)

forlög: '**fate**' (LP:147)

sköp: 'what has been (pre-) determined, **fate**' (LP:517)
(My emphases)

The result is a sort of 'funnel-translation' in the sense that the wider spectrum present in the one language is translated into one monochrome meaning in the other language: all words translate into the same word. Any slight difference in meaning between the Old Norse words is lost in the translations due to the scarcity of words covering the concept in English and in modern Scandinavian languages. The fact that Danish uses only one word for fate: *skæbne*, Swedish uses only *öde*, Norwegian has *skjebne* with the more archaic *lagnad* in nynorsk, whilst English uses 'fate' and 'destiny', which appear to be rather tangled up in one another, makes it hard to translate and even to discover the nuances of meaning contained in the Old Norse vocabulary. English and the Scandinavian languages simply do not have enough equivalent terms.

For the sake of completeness, the words *miqtuðr* and *auðna* will be discussed briefly, although they seem unconnected to the *nornir*. *Miqtuðr* (m.) is translated in various different ways: 'what has been measured out, measure (of fate), fate, death' (LP:410), referring, as it were, to the (passive) product rather than the (active) producer; or: 'leader, ruler who possesses the power, particularly has the power to determine the fate of people' (Frtz II:725-6; cf. ÁBM:628; C/V:433-4; AeW:390). The latter explanation gives the impression of a personified form: *miqtuðr* is 'the measurer, the one who rules.' The word can also refer to 'death' (AeW:390). *Miqtuðr* is cognate with Old English *metod* which occurs with some frequency in *Beowulf* where it is understood to refer to God (Green 1998:386-387; C/V:434). It is related to 'metre' and indicates some supernatural power that allots a certain amount – of time, of good, of bad – to humans. Although this comes close to what is sometimes

said about the *nornir* (for example the Borgund inscription, see IV.1.3.), *miqtuðr*, as mentioned above, is never used in connection with them.

Finally *auðna* (f.) 'fate', with the additional sense of 'happiness, fortune, good luck, blessing' (LP:21; C/V:32; Frtz I:94; AeW:18), is probably related to *auðr*, 'wealth, abundance', which may explain the many positive associations of the noun listed in the dictionaries. However, the use of the related adjective *auðinn*, 'fated', is not always positive and may be used in the context of death or impending trouble or hardship: in *Gísla saga* 9, Gísli says to Auðr: *at mæla verðr einhverr skapanna málum, ok þat mun fram koma, sem auðit verðr* (ÍF 6:34), 'Fate must find someone to speak through. Whatever is meant to happen will happen' (CSI II:10). Arnórr jarlaskáld, in *Hrynhenda Magnúsdrápa* 12, supposedly c.1046, says: *auðit vas þá flotnum dauða*, 'the men were destined to die' (*Magnúss saga ins góða* 24; ÍF 28:39). Perhaps *auðna*, like the *nornir* themselves, has a double-sidedness of something definitely positive and something quite sinister, although no instances of concurrence of *nornir* and *auðna* are documented.

The last word to be discussed here is *urðr*, 'fate' (see also IV.1. and VI.1.1.). Some dictionaries give two versions (LP:589; AeW:635-6): a masculine form referring to 'misfortune, death', and a feminine form (also C/V:657) which means 'fate' or refers to a *norn* named *Urðr*. Initially, these two meanings would seem to emphasise that *nornir* are strongly associated with death and that the fate which *nornir* normally represent is also closely related to death. The word *urðr* is therefore often considered to have a strongly negative semantic content but it is probably a misunderstanding to think that it always consisted of entirely gloomy associations, as has been pointed out by Liberman (1994). *Urðr* has its origins in the verb *verða*:

The 'positive' meaning of *verða/weorðan*, *wyrd*, etc. also comes to the surface in formations with the prefix *ga-/ge-/gi-*. ... The noun *gewyrd* meant 'condition' and 'pleasure.' ... Relations between Germanic words without a prefix and their counterparts with *ga-/ge-/gi-* are sometimes hard to define, but this prefix tended to emphasize the perfective force of the derivative, its belonging to the class of collective nouns, etc., rather than to produce entirely new meanings. Since both OHG *giwerdan* and OE *geweorðan* refer to pleasurable emotions, this reference must be old, at least in West Germanic. In Icelandic, prefixes were lost, and it is not improbable that *verða* 'bring good luck' goes back to a cognate of *gawairþan*, just as some isolated meanings of *verða* ('lose, forfeit' and so forth) correspond to those of *frawairþan* and *frawardjan*. But *fra-* was endowed with destructive semantics, and *frawairþan* would have meant 'perish,' regardless of whether *wairþan* was neutral ('happen') or suggestive of success ('come to a good turn'), while *ga-* (*ge-/gi-*) was too weak to cover the distance between 'happen' and 'please, be pleased.'

(Lieberman 1994:123-124)

If Lieberman is right, then the notion of fate contained in the word *urðr* might not have been inherently gloomy, harsh and negative; things did not always turn out to be bad; sometimes they turned out to be good. Similarly, *nornir* probably had a benign aspect (good fate), even if they came to be associated predominantly with their corresponding sinister side (evil fate), as seems to have been the case.³⁶² We hear about *grímmar urðir*, *liótar nornir*, *aumlígr norn* but it is less easy to find instances of positive adjectives describing these beings.

There is little reason to doubt that *urðr* is etymologically related to the Latin *vertere*, 'to turn' (AeW:636; ÁBM:1090). The further suggestion that it therefore refers to fate as something wound, twisted or spun (AeW:636) is, however, a parallel which I reserve the right to be wary of assuming quite so readily (cf. ÁBM:1090). The parallels 'winding' and 'turning' are well founded but I have found no evidence that *vertere*, *verða* or for that matter *wyrd* were at any time used in the sense of 'spinning'; this connection appears to be based entirely on etymology hypothetically combined with the idea of the motion of a turning spindle, not on actual linguistic evidence. Old Norse language never makes a direct connection between *urðr* and 'spinning.' Linking 'turning' with 'spinning' is problematic insofar as the two verbs are by no means interchangeable, either in English or in Old Norse. The etymology of 'spinning' is 'drawing out in order to twist together', focusing on the creation of a thread, not on the motion of the tool. The meaning of 'revolving, turning around rapidly' is a later development which now constitutes the dominant semantic content of 'spinning' (OED X:602-603), although the earlier meaning is still retained in certain contexts: something 'spindly' is slender and elongated, it is not turning around. The spindle certainly has to turn in order to draw out the thread but that was not the original association of the word; a spider spins by drawing out a thread, not by turning. I fully accept the '*urðr*-turning-creating' complex (see IV.1.1.) but I remain uncertain about linking *urðr* directly with *spinna*.³⁶³ The connection between the two is metaphorical, not etymological.

³⁶² A similar sort of relationship exists in English between the neutral verb 'happen' and the positive adjective 'happy'; this may represent a development akin to that of neutral *verða* into negative *urðr*.

³⁶³ An interesting point is the etymological relationship between 'spin' and 'span'. In English, a 'span' means the 'distance between two objects', that is, a length of distance in physical space, and Old Norse *spǫnn* also refers specifically to the distance between the tip of the thumb and the middle finger on the stretched out hand (LP:531; Frtz III:505; ÁBM:945); it is probably related to a 'span' as in 'a pair of animals driven together where the distance

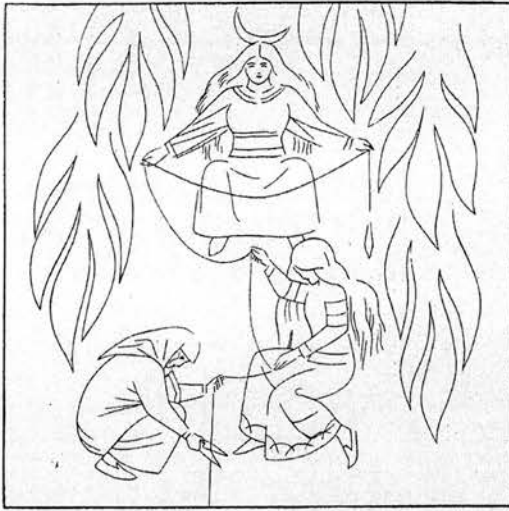


Figure 17.
This illustration of *nornir* (strongly influenced by Classical tradition) accompanies an edition of *Völuspá* – which says nothing at all of spinning.

These lexical considerations show that there are several nuances of meaning incorporated in the Old Norse notion of fate. It is difficult, as mentioned above, to get a clear idea of exactly where lines may be drawn between the separate words and their semantic content, and it is equally hard to see a clear distinction between heathen and Christian ways of thinking with regard to these words (a personified supernatural power of fate seems to have become converted into something like 'the will of God').³⁶⁴ It does appear that some words were more acceptable to the church than others, but whether this was because they were considered somehow less heathen, less damaging, whether they were easier to manipulate and adapt, or whether they were simply so deeply ingrained that they were impossible to weed out is hard to tell. As far as *nornir* are concerned, the nouns *skop* and *ørlög* are the dominant ones for describing what they represent, though both words continued to be in use after the end of the heathen period and remain in use even today.

VI.2. Lög and Ørlög

The concept of law was very important in Old Norse society,³⁶⁵ as is amply testified by the multitude of legal issues that occur with some frequency and are described in

between the animals is constant.' There could be a connection (at least etymologically) between spinning and measuring off physical space, which seems to exist in *Helgakvída Hundingsbana I*. Interesting also is the Old Norse verb *spenna*, which can mean 'to span', as in covering a certain area, but also 'to clasp' (C/V:582; LP:529), 'to surround, encircle' or 'to grip with one's hand' (Frtz III:490-1). What is established by the *nornir* in this poem is perhaps Helgi's lifespan, both in terms of covering a length of distance or a geographical area and also in terms of binding Helgi to this (or binding it to him).

³⁶⁴ Winterbourne 2004 discusses this.

³⁶⁵ Further on law, see Sandvik and Sigurðsson 2005; Miller 1990.

detail in many *Íslendingasögur*.³⁶⁶ Also the surviving law codices serve as witnesses to a preoccupation with law in Old Norse tradition and it is clear that the early medieval Scandinavians had a keen interest in the concept of law and hence in the power of binding decisions. Due to this and to the close etymological relationship between *lög*, *forlög* and *ørlog*, it is relevant to consider what this relationship actually consists of. As mentioned, the following sections draw on much material that does not connect directly to the *normir*, but which is nonetheless relevant to an understanding of issues relating to speech and legal matters and to an understanding of how *normir* fit into the overall picture.

A close connection between the spoken word and law is not unexpected in an oral society and in Old Norse society this is clearly exemplified in the idea of the *lögsgumaðr*, the 'law-speaker.' Until around 1100 there was no such thing as a written law³⁶⁷ or anything written for that matter, information was stored 'orally,' committed to memory and could be produced in spoken form when it was required so that legal assemblies, court cases, judgements and sentences were all conveyed in spoken formats (Foote and Wilson 1980:90-92).

VI.2.1. Secular and Religious Law

In Old Norse culture, law was not just a tool brought into action for defining and processing disputes but was inseparably intertwined with definitions of what constituted human society.³⁶⁸ In this way, it was more a way of life in the same sense as when we speak of customs, practices and traditions than a separate institution which could be taken up or left behind:

Law was part of life in Iceland and was perceived as such. *Vár lög* ("our law") was our community as opposed to others (...). But *lög* was not just undifferentiated custom either. Law was in a narrower sense the positive law, the formal legal process and the rules applied and enforced in the courts. (Miller 1990:221)

³⁶⁶ One of the best examples is *Njáls saga* where most of the plot is closely related to complex court cases.

³⁶⁷ The earliest surviving Icelandic laws, *Grágás*, are found in the MSS *Konungsbók* and *Staðarhólsbók* c.1300; the Norwegian MS of *Gulapingslög* is from the same period (*Norges gamle Love* I:ix). In *Íslendingabók* 10 (ÍF 1.I:23-24), we hear about laws being written down in 1117 in Iceland but all surviving MSS are of later dates.

³⁶⁸ This connection is clearly spelt out in some early medieval Scandinavian landscape laws, such as the Danish *Jydske Lov* from 1241, which opens with this line: *Mæth logh skal land bygiæe* [modern Danish: *Med lov skal land bygges*], 'Through law the country will be founded' (Petersen 1929:65); also in *Njáls saga* 70: *með lögum skal land várt byggja, en með ólögum eyða* (ÍF 12:172), 'Through law will our land be founded, but through its lacking destroyed' (my translations).

It seems that people regarded 'law' as the foundation of human society wherein the individual followed and protected the norms dictated by kinship and by the wider culture: "Norms of good kinship provided the basis for imposing legal obligation, which in turn buttressed the norms and so on in continual feedback of mutual influence" (Miller 1990:221). To be 'legal' or 'inside the law', then, was to be part of society, and to be 'outlawed' was to lose all protection from the wider society – almost as if losing one's humanity. Law was not a set of arbitrary rules and: "Saga characters seldom speak about law as law, but they do, in subtle ways, indicate the law's synonymy with legitimacy" (Miller 1990:230), and while there were laws as well as courts and legal experts, there was no separate institution to enforce the law; that responsibility lay with the individual person (see also VI.2.2.). The distinction between laws and norms in early medieval Scandinavia is a very fine one:

In those instances in which the law codified well-established patterns of behavior, adherence to the rule would tell us less about respect for the law than about the law's respect for customary behavior. ... But in those cases where the law tried to alter and restrict established patterns of behavior, and even in those cases where the law was lending its force to well-established behavioral patterns, it would seem that people thought sanction was more likely to induce compliance or prevent deviance than an abstract respect for laws as Law.

(Miller 1990:229-230)

In short, law is a kind of shorthand for 'the way things should be' not unlike the term *forn siðr*, 'ancient ways, customs', which is as close as Old Norse comes to a description of 'religion'.³⁶⁹ Our modern distinction between secular and religious prescriptions is difficult to perceive in Old Norse because here, both are closely tied to notions of 'customary practice'. This is summed up in the figure of the *goði* who holds an office consisting of both secular and religious responsibilities, making him a chieftain and priest in one. Also rituals often include both secular and religious aspects. Meulengracht Sørensen points out that:

En mulig forklaring på gudens oprindelige værdighed er den funktion som kultleder, som goderne efter al sandsynlighed har haft i det overvejende hedenske samfund før kristendommens indførelse. Det er givet, at selve ordet

³⁶⁹ *Hákonar saga goða* 14 (ÍF 26:167-168) portrays *siðr* in a heathen, *Vatnsdæla saga* 46 (ÍF 8:125) a Christian context. Raudvere explains: *Begreppet siðr inkluderade både vad som antogs vara traditionella föreställningar och sättet på vilket saker skulle göras. Denna mångtydighet innebär att ordet användes i vitt skilda sammanhang såväl kognitivt och känslomässigt som juridisk och socialt*, 'The concept of *siðr* included both what were perceived to be traditional notions as well as the way in which things ought to be done. This versatility means that the word could be employed in many different contexts, cognitively and emotionally as well as legally and socially' (2003:89).

goði er afledt af *goð* '(hedensk) gud', og i en beretning, der opgives at være et uddrag af den oprindelige *Úlfjótsslög* ... hedder det, at der på alteret i hvert hovedhov (*hofuðhof*) skulle ligge en ring, som goden skulle bære på sin arm på alle de lovting (*lögþing*), som han skulle indlede. Forinden skulle ringen vædes i blodet fra en okse, som var blevet ofret ... Foreningen af religiøs og verdslig ledelse i førkristen tid har sandsynligvis givet goderne en særlig myndighed, men spørgsmålet er omstridt.

(Meulengracht Sørensen 1993:153)

'A possible explanation of the original dignity of the *goði* is the cult leader function which *goðar* in all probability had in the predominantly heathen society prior to the introduction of Christianity. It is evident that the word *goði* is derived from *goð* '(heathen) god', and in a narrative which is said to be part of the original *Úlfjótsslög* ... it is stated that there should be a ring on the altar of every central hof (*hofuðhof*) and that the *goði* should wear this ring on his arm at all the legal assemblies (*lögþing*) which he would open. Prior to this, the ring must be stained with the blood of a sacrificed ox ... The coming together of religious and secular leadership in pre-Christian times probably gave the *goði* a special authority, but the question is disputed.'

(My translation)

*Úlfjótsslög*³⁷⁰ tells us this:

Þat var upphaf hinna heiðnu laga, at menn skyldu eigi hafa hofuðskip í haf, en ef þeir hefði, þá skyldi þeir af taka hofuð, áðr þeir kæmi í landsýn, ok sigla eigi at landi með gapandi hofðum eða gínandi trjónum, svá at landvættir fælisk við.

Baugr tvíeyringr eða meiri skyldi liggja í hverju hofuðhofi á stalla; þann baug skyldi hverr goði hafa á hendi sér til lögþinga allra, þeira er hann skyldi sjálfr heyja, ok rjóða hann þar áðr í roðru nautsblóðs þess, er hann blótaði þar sjálfr. Hverr sá maðr, er þar þurfti lögskil af hendi at leysa at dómi, skyldi áðr eið vinna at þeim baugi ok nefna sér vátta tvá eða fleiri.

(ÍF 1:313-315)

'It was fundamental to heathen law that men should not sail a ship with carved heads, and if they did then they should take the head down when they came in sight of land and not sail to land with gaping heads or threatening snouts, so that the landspirits were frightened.

A ring worth two *aurar* or more should be found at every central hof on the platform; this ring should be carried by every *goði* to all legal assemblies of which he was in charge, and beforehand he should redden it with the blood of a head of cattle when he sacrificed there himself. Every man who had legal matters to resolve at the court should first take the oath on that ring and name two witnesses or more.'

(My translation)

³⁷⁰ Quoted here from *Landnámabók* 268 in *Hauksbók*. Regarding the authenticity of this law, see Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson (1999:34-37).

I quote both parts of it here because, together, they demonstrate the inseparability of religion from everyday life, the latter part in particular the blending of religion with law.

With these ideas about law in mind, it becomes significant that the gods are said to hold their court in the place that, simultaneously, the *nornir* are said to originate from in *Gylfaginning* 15:

Þriðja rót asksins stendr á himni, ok undir þeiri rót er brunnr sá er mjök er heilagur er heitir Urðar brunnr. Þar eigu guðin dómstað sinn.
(Faulkes 1982:17)

'The third root of the ash extends to heaven, and beneath that root is a well which is very holy, called Weirð's well. There the gods have their court.'
(Faulkes 1987:17)

The idea of merging the well of the *nornir* with a divine court seems to be echoed in *Hávamál* 111 (quoted in IV.2.2.). One gets the impression that the divine world is not only conceived of as something higher than the human world but is also very like it – as human society has central places which represent the higher powers of the gods and the law simultaneously, so the gods have an assembly place that is connected to the well of fate, a place that seems to be otherworldly even in the otherworld.

In human society, a *þingstaðr* or 'court place' was an area marked off as special³⁷¹ and law involved gods and humans alike:

The divine powers were also involved with the conduct of the public assemblies for discussion, legislation and justice. An assembly was hallowed in some way at the outset, presumably by sacrifice and invocation, and its sanctity prevailed over the defined area within which it took place and for the length of time it lasted.³⁷²
(Foote and Wilson 1980:402)

Thus, temporal and divine law are close to being one and the same thing. In our sources, the very highest of powers is represented by something greater than the

³⁷¹ A *þingstaðr* is described in *Egils saga* 56: *En þar er dómrinn var settr, var vøllr sléttur ok settar niðr heslistengr í vøllinn í hring, en lögð um útan snæri umhverfis; váru þat kølluð vébønd; en fyrir innan í hringinum sátu dómendr, tólf ór Firðafylki ok tólf ór Sygnafylki, tólf ór Hørdafylki; þær þrennar tylftir manna skyldu þar dæma um mál manna* (ÍF 2:154), 'The court was held on a flat plain, marked out by hazel poles with a rope around them. This was known as staking out a sanctuary. Inside the circle sat the court, twelve men from the Fjordane province, twelve from Sognefjord province and twelve from Hordaland province. These three dozen men were to rule on all the cases' (CSI I:105)

³⁷² This recalls the practice of swearing on the Bible in connection even with modern day court cases.

gods – law (*lǫg*) and fate (*ǫrlǫg*); the gods are subject to the rulings of fate as humans are subject to the rulings of the gods.

VI.2.2. Law and the Female

An interesting aspect of this situation is that *ǫrlǫg* is represented by feminine beings – *nornir* – while in human society, women did not interact directly with *lǫg* (see III.1.1.1.).³⁷³ They had legal rights but no legal power; a woman always needed a man who could speak for her if she became involved in any legal affairs. Yet it seems that the definitely feminine *nornir* represent a notion of a given (super)-natural law.³⁷⁴

One important difference between the semantically overlapping *lǫg* and *ǫrlǫg* seems to be that the human *lǫg* can be violated and disregarded, whereas it is utterly impossible to go against the supernaturally given *ǫrlǫg*. Fate rears its legal head in phrases such as *kviðr norna* (*Hamdismál* 30), *norna dómr* (*Fáfnismál* 11) and also *skǫp norna* (*Hallfreðr*) (see III.1.1.1. and III.1.1.2.). There is a similar sense in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* 26:

Erat þér at ǫllo,
alvítr, gefit
- þó kveð ek nøkkvi
nornir valda -:
fello í morgon
at Frekasteini
Bragi ok Hǫgni
- varð ek bani þeira.

Things are not, strange creature,
as you would have them
- though I say the nornir
decided some of it - :
they fell this morning
at Frekasteinn
Bragi and Hǫgni
- I was their slayer.

Here, Helgi says to Sigrún that he has killed Bragi and Hǫgni, her brother and father, but he also says that the *nornir* decided his actions, as though it were not in his power to do otherwise. The conflict is deeply emotional on the part of both Sigrún and Helgi; the complex divided loyalties to their kin and to their love for each other bring them into a situation where all potential ways out will bring them tragedy of

³⁷³ Certainly not during the Old Norse period (c.800-1100), but from earlier periods both Strabo (c.64 BC-23 AD) in *Geography* 7:II:3 and Tacitus (c.56-117 AD) in *Histories* 4:61 and 4:65 mention Germanic women who hold very powerful positions in society.

³⁷⁴ The *dísir*, apart from their affinities with violent death, seem to be connected to human legal affairs through the *dísaping* which we hear of in the early 14th century Swedish *Upplandslagen*, and the combination of battle with law further seems applicable to *nornir*. Some scholars have suggested that warfare had legal connections of sorts, indicated by the attachment of the god Týr to both battle and the *ping* (de Vries 1957:18-25; Dumézil 1988:126-127). Cf. also the concept of *holmgǫgullǫg*, 'combat law' described in *Egils saga* 64 (ÍF 2:205) and in *Kormáks saga* 10 (ÍF 8:236-239). See further Bø 1969.

one sort or another.³⁷⁵ This is what Helgi feels that the *nornir* carry responsibility for. The phrase looks similar to the one in *Hamðismál* 28 where Hamðir regrets killing Erpr, saying: *hvottumk at dísir*, 'the *dísir* made me do it.' In both situations, feminine supernatural beings are lurking behind some of the most dreadful aspects of human interaction, situations in which men feel that they are not acting according to their own humanity but nonetheless feel that they must do what they do – as though they were obeying a law.

One gets the impression that whereas this world is ruled by the male, the otherworld turns everything on its head so that it is ruled by the female.³⁷⁶

VI.2.3. Laying down the Law

The last four lines of *Völuspá* 20 (see IV.1.1.) say this about *nornir*:

þær lög lögðo, þær líf kuro alda börnum, ørlög seggia.	They laid down laws, they chose life for the children of men, the fate of men.
---	---

Only the first two lines use any verbs: *leggja* and *kiósa*, attached to, respectively, the nouns *lög* and *líf*. We might therefore read the last two lines either: *þær lögðo ørlög seggia*, 'they laid down the fate of men' or: *þær kuro ørlög seggia*, 'they chose the fate of men.'³⁷⁷ 'To choose the fate of men' seems to indicate that a range of hypothetical choices are available, rather like the notion of an unshaped mass of potential; before a beginning is made there is an endless number of things that it might turn into. But a choice has to be made – which one will it be? This seems the more logical option as reference back to the immediately preceding verb is more likely than anything else.

'To lay down the fate of men' has an almost physical feel to it, perhaps recalling *skop* (see VI.1.2.); there it is, being shaped and laid down in front of you like an outline emerging as you go along and you have no way of diverging from it. The notion of something receiving shape and becoming usable is present in both readings, both carry the gloss of decision-making and creation, albeit in slightly different ways.

³⁷⁵ This is typical saga material: conflict arises due to opposing loyalties on the part of an individual; *Íslendingasögur* often focus exactly on how the individual reacts in such situations. The reason for a conflict frequently fades into the background and a person is measured according to how they behave when put on the spot (see Meulengracht Sørensen 1993).

³⁷⁶ I owe this observation to Terry Gunnell; see also Quinn 2006.

³⁷⁷ For the variant wording *ørlög at seggia*, see IV.1.4.

The etymology of the noun *lög* suggests 'layers'³⁷⁸ and 'laying down'; the *lög* is essentially 'that which has been laid down, decided, determined,' like a set of rules that one cannot break away from. *Leggia* is used in many different contexts, some of which are relevant here. In the last lines of *Skírnismál* 13, Skírnir says:

eino dægri	on one day
mér var aldr um skapaðr	all my life was shaped
ok allt líf um lagit	and my whole life laid down.

The same phrase turns up in *Lokasenna* 48:

Þegi þú, Heimdallr	Be quiet, Heimdallr,
þér var í árdaga	for you at the dawn of time
it líóta líf um lagit	a detestable life was laid down.

Here, whole lives are laid down and fixed, seemingly at one specific time, most likely the time of a person's birth. This gives the impression that a person's fate has been settled even before they properly begin living their lives, and it makes clear that fate is really a supratemporal concept (see note 137). A whole life has been laid down, and time is only the force that actualises the events that take place during that life. The phrase would appear to be formulaic.

Also the choice of words in stanza 4 of Sigvatr Þórðarson's *drápa* about King Óláfr, in *Ólafs saga Helga* 58, supposedly c.1025, is interesting:

Loptbyggvir, mátt leggja	You, sea-king [Óláfr],
landsrétt, þannsk skal standask,	can lay down the law of the land,
unnar, allra manna,	one that shall stand
eykja, liðs í miðli.	amongst all people.
(ÍF 27:73-4)	

In these stanzas, lives and laws are laid down and the expressions recall the *lögsgumaðr* who speaks the law, thereby actualising it or even laying it down. This seems to emphasise the shaping powers of words; once they have been spoken they are a reality and cannot be changed. However we envisage the making of fate, whether it be laid down, allotted or pronounced, or a combination of all of these, once it is done there is no going back. The same goes for legal speeches as described in the sagas, they must be word perfect (at least in theory, although in practice one could get away with some mistakes), because once something has been

³⁷⁸ It is interesting to consider the phrase 'fate unfolds' in relation to the notion of 'law' as consisting of layers.

said one cannot stop to do a 'take 2' if a mistake has been made. What is said is what stands, even if one intended to say something else.³⁷⁹

In terms of human society, *nornir* are not connected to the *þing*,³⁸⁰ their law is laid down elsewhere, perhaps only in some conceptual sphere; the connection between *lǫg* and *ǫrlǫg* is not direct. But on the divine level, *nornir* are lurking about in the well under the tree beneath which the gods have their assembly. While the gods, presumably, talk and discuss matters, as is done at the *þing*, underneath their feet the *nornir* provide the 'ur-law', the warp, the basis for it all. Whilst gods (and humans) concern themselves with *lǫg*, *nornir* concern themselves with the deeper levels, with *ǫrlǫg*, establishing the very foundation for human life. As *lǫg* forms the basis of organised human society, so *ǫrlǫg* forms the basis of human life in the first place, recalling *Vǫluspá* 17 where the first humans, Ask and Embla, are *ǫrlǫglausa* 'without *ǫrlǫg*' and therefore, it seems, not quite proper humans yet.

It is important to note that there does not seem to be any direct linkage between *nornir* and the law as this operated in human society. Apart from the (probably unacceptable) peculiarity of having feminine figures representing the law in the male-dominated Old Norse society, it appears that the 'law' which the *nornir* deal with is simply of such a nature that it does not belong in the context of the *þing* at all. It is an otherworldly law; like the 'laws' of nature and of time it cannot be disputed, there is nothing to argue or negotiate about, no sides to take or minds to make up – it operates on the basic level of life and death, issues that are not up for discussion. The 'law' or, rather, quasi-law of the *nornir* is on the one hand very personal and concerns the individual on a deep and close level, whilst on the other hand it is beyond reach and completely unfathomable.

The key to the legal metaphor characterizing *nornir* may be the same as was found to be the case for the fate-as-textile metaphor, namely that 'law' (court cases and legal disputes) is not what *nornir* actually do, but what they do is similar to laying down 'laws'; choice and decision are core concepts. This might be the reason why the metaphor is so common: the decisions of the *nornir* have the same sort of effect on human lives as does the law, only on a much more profound and

³⁷⁹ *Bandamanna saga* 5-6 (ÍF 7:316-325); *Víga-Glúms saga* 9 (ÍF 9:33-34), both in *Möðruvallabók* c.1330-1370; cf. Miller (1990:250-256).

³⁸⁰ However, *dísir* are connected to the *þing* in East Norse tradition; the 14th century Swedish *Upplandslagen* refers to *disæþinx friþær*, 'truce of the *disæþing*' and *disæþinx dagh*, 'day of the *disæþing*' which seems to have fallen some time in the early spring and was connected to a market (*Upplandslagen* 1916:169). This *disæþing* appears to have been a legal meeting; exactly why it was dedicated to the *dísir* is not clear (cf. *Ynglingasaga* 29, ÍF 26:57-58).

indisputable level. That is the 'ør' in the *ørlog* – the layers of which this 'ur-law' consists are found on deeper levels and the correspondence is metaphorical rather than actual.

VI.3. Law-speaking and Málrúnar

Íslendingasögur provide numerous examples of fighting and violence, not only leading up to but also resulting from legal court cases; sometimes people attempt to end a feud via settlement in court, but often attempted settlements result in new feuds. When people in the sagas prepare for court cases, the outcome often appears to depend on which side has the more, or the more powerful, supporters rather than on any objective notion of impartial justice.³⁸¹ The impression of many court cases described in *Íslendingasögur* is more of a kind of choreographed battle than of 'the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth'. Muffled by the *gríð* 'peacefulness, sacredness' (Frtz I:642-644) of the *þing*, such a court case is fought with words rather than with weapons, although the dividing line between words and weapons is blurred at times, as both can be used with similar intent: to cause injury. A passage from the *Víglóði* section (ch.114)³⁸² of the early Icelandic law collection *Grágás* states that:

Þau eru orð þrjú, ef svo mjög versna málsendar manna, er skóggang varða öll, ef maður kallar mann ragan eða stroðinn eða sorðinn, og skal svo sækja sem önnur fullréttisorð, enda á maður vígt í gegn þeim orðum þrimur.
(*Grágás* 1992:273)

'There are three expressions, if words between men ever get so bad, for which the penalty is full outlawry: if a man calls another man womanish or says that he has been bugged or fucked. And they are to be prosecuted like other words requiring full personal compensation, and in retaliation for those three words a man also has the right to kill.'
(*Grágás II* 2000:354)

Meulengracht Sørensen further points out that: "The most serious verbal offences are thus equated with killing, rape and adultery, and are regarded as more flagrant

³⁸¹ For example *Íslendinga saga* 235 [85, 90] (*Sturlunga saga I*:338) where Sturla openly declares: *Þess mun eg njóta nú að eg hefí vald meira en þér*, 'I will make full use of the fact that I have greater forces than you' (Miller 1990:196); *Vatnsdæla saga* 35 (ÍF 8:94) where a fight is averted when Finnbogi realizes the size of Þorsteinn's force.

³⁸² *Víglóði* is the only section of *Grágás* known with certainty to have been written down at Breiðabólstaðr during the winter 1117-1118 when Icelandic laws were first taken down in writing, indicating a high age on the part of this law.

than, for instance, bodily injury" (1983:17).³⁸³ These seem to be cases of very strong powers attached to spoken words. Taylor, in his discussion of the use of language in *Njáls saga*, also states that: "Edge of sword and sharp words together are remedies of slander. Poetic redress is the discourse of heroes" (1986:293), as is amply evident in the Norse flying tradition.³⁸⁴ The idea that certain words are of a violent and injuring disposition and that speaking them corresponds to using weapons clearly reveals the powers of certain forms of speech. Speaking certain words can be equated with weapon fighting; the use of words as well as weapons can have legal consequences, at times far-reaching ones.

Something like this is seen in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* 10 where a legal case is presented against Hrafnkell, but because he cannot get within hearing distance of what is being said at the *þing* he is unable to mount a defence for himself. The importance of the words spoken at that time and in that place is not to be underestimated; if he does not contest the case, he loses it (Wax 1969:109), and how can he contest it if he does not know what was said?

In *Hamðismál* 30 and in *Fjǫlsvinnsmál* 47 we hear of words spoken by *nornir*: *kveld lifir maðr ekki eptir kvið norna*, 'no man lives out the evening after the *nornir* give their verdict' and: *Urðar orði viðr engi maðr*, 'the words of Urðr no man can overcome', respectively. In both cases the words have gone unheard by those whom they concerned but they cannot be circumvented nor invalidated and their influence is sorely felt through what they have effected.

These stories, *Hrafnkels saga*, *Hamðismál* and *Fjǫlsvinnsmál*, are rather different in type and it is not the historical reality of the events which is relevant here, but the conceptual parallels that can be drawn between the situations: that speaking out loud makes a thought or an intention definite, turning it into unchangeable reality, and also that one can only act on words which one actually hears. Normally, one is perfectly able to hear what is being said at the *þing* and when this is not possible for Hrafnkell, it is because other people are deliberately keeping him away. Concerning the supernatural *ǫrlög*, however, the norm is that human ears do not hear what is said. People only discover the effects of the *urðar orð* in due course. It may be that legal speech constitutes a special register not unlike a *spá*, a prophecy, making apparent the otherwise hidden truth in concrete words. The *spá* thereby determines

³⁸³ One might expect such injurious words to have counterparts in healing ones (as curses have counterparts in blessings), but the law, like the *nornir*, is negatively slanted in specifying negative words only, not positive ones.

³⁸⁴ See Harris 1979; Bax and Padmos 1983; Meulengracht Sørensen (1983:38).

the future or part of the future of the person for whom it is spoken, just like a judgment does when it has been passed and a sentence when it has been pronounced. One might say that there is a conceptual correspondence between *spá* and *lög*, but the two nevertheless remain separate concepts, at least on the human level.

The idea of legal speech as a special register seems evident in *Sigrdrífumál* 12:

Málrúnar skaltu kunna, ef þú vilt, at manngi þér heiptom gíaldi harm. þær um vindr, þær um vefr, þær um setr allar saman, á því þingi, er þjóðir skolo í fulla dóma fara.	Speech-runes you must know, if you want no one to repay your sorrow with enmity. Wind them about, twist them about, put them all together at that assembly where people must go to fully constituted courts.
---	--

In this stanza, the *málrúnar* mentioned could be understood as 'speech-runes' or 'court-runes', as *mál* may refer to either speech or a court of law and, whatever way we read it, the stanza involves both speech and courts anyway. What is made clear is the importance of the spoken word in a legal context and the importance of paying close attention to exactly what one is saying. It is also understood that there may, in fact, be magic involved in the form of runes. The word *mál* indicates ability to speak, eloquence, proper use of language as well as language as such (Frtz II:621-626), although it does not appear to cover the prophetic nature of a *spá*. But it carries connotations of proper use of the law and can refer to a legal case or agreement, for example in the word *þingmál*, referring to a case treated at the *þing* (Frtz III:1022). In this way, the *málrúnar* may have several layers of meaning to them, it may even be intentional that the word, if not the whole stanza, should be read on more than one level.

The way in which Sigrdrífa describes the use of these *málrúnar* is noteworthy: *þær um vindr, þær um vefr, þær um setr allar saman*, 'wind them around, twist them around, set them all together'. This is interesting advice on how to use words or how to put a court case together, which in Old Norse society would have had to result in an oral presentation of that case so that speech is involved regardless of whether we read *mál* as 'speech' or 'court'.³⁸⁵

³⁸⁵ This description of *málrúnar* even recalls the *harðsnúin fræði* of magical connotations encountered in *Laxdæla saga* 35 (see note 85) – if one imagines putting words together using verbs such as *vinda* and *vefa*, then it would no longer be a surprise that the result might be referred to as *harðsnúin fræði* or perhaps, conjecturally, as *snúin fræði*. The English

That *Sigrdrífumál* 12 refers to eloquence and the use of (potentially legal) speech seems clear enough; what is less evident is whether the advice given is simply that one should put a case together in a verbally skilful and convincing manner or whether it is actually an invitation to conceal the truth in circumlocution. Whichever it is, both versions serve to emphasise the powers of the spoken word and the sagas and, not least, skaldic poetry provide instances of both.³⁸⁶

Furthermore, it is interesting that Sigurðr, the male hero of the poem, receives this advice from a female character, Sigrdrífa, because in the ordinary human world women did not participate in legal matters or public speaking at the assemblies, except by proxy (see VI.2.2.) – even at the divine assemblies of the gods, goddesses do not seem to have their own voice. Although Sigrdrífa's situation is similar (she speaks only to Sigurðr, not to a public gathering) it is still an odd situation, but it may simply indicate that she belongs to the otherworld or is at least more than human. Shifting the focus from her role as a woman to her role as an otherworldly woman effects drastic changes with regard to what she should or should not do and Sigurðr's encounter with her clearly constitutes some awakening of supernatural powers. These powers here take the form of speech and they are set in some sort of legal context.

VI.4. Vǫlur and Nornir

The correspondences between *vǫlur* and *nornir* have been briefly mentioned in chapters III and IV. The question of who is who amongst *vǫlur* and *nornir* deserves some attention and it is the aim of the following two sections to explore this relationship in some detail. The fact that *vǫlur* occur in prose sources with much higher frequency than *nornir* do makes it necessary to involve saga material on a greater scale than has hitherto been the case. Even so, a clear-cut division between these two groups of beings is not easy to make but one important distinction

phrase 'spinning a yarn' and German *er spinnt*, 'he talks nonsense' also come to mind, as does the Danish noun *opspind*, which has equivalents in the other Scandinavian languages, referring to stories that are 'made up' or 'fabricated' – textile analogies seemingly abundantly at hand. Also the word 'imply' is interesting because it uses the notion of plying threads, but in a linguistic sense: That one can ply different meanings into one's words and sentences, which brings us back to the relationship between text and textile, speech and fabric, the notion of stringing words together (see V.5.).

³⁸⁶ For example *Gísli saga* 18 (ÍF 6:58-59), where Gísli speaks a verse which, when correctly interpreted, reveals that he killed Þorgrímr.

appears to be that *vǫlur* are somehow or other communicative and accessible whereas *nornir* are neither.

VI.4.1. The Mysterious Staff-Carriers

The word *vǫlva* supposedly relates closely to the noun *vǫlr* (m.), 'staff', and means a 'female staff-carrier' (AeW:674 and 673; Price 2002:112; Hermann Pálsson 1996:15), hinting at some ritual item that such a woman carries with her.³⁸⁷ Staffs are often symbols indicating high status in society (Steinsland 1991:163-168), and some very wealthy female graves containing staffs have been found; it is thought by some that these women may have been *vǫlur*.³⁸⁸ *Nornir* do not seem to be connected to staffs in any of our sources nor, indeed, to be involved in rituals, and this looks like a significant difference between them and *vǫlur*. The staff has been likened to spindles and distaffs where people have seen a connection between fate and textile (Heide 2006:250-253).³⁸⁹ However, the term *vǫlva* may also bear some relation to the Indo-European root *uel-* which has eight different meanings (Pokorny 1959:1140), amongst them 'seeing' (Old Irish *filí*, 'poet, seer') and 'tearing, wounding, bleeding' (Old Norse *valr*, 'the slain', Old Irish *fuil*, 'blood'). The name of the Germanic prophetess Veleda in Tacitus' *Histories* 4,61; 4,65 and 5,22 (1997:213-214, 216 and 246) supposedly links back to *uel-* 'seeing'.

The word *nornir* turns up primarily in battle poetry, heroic legends and mythological settings, whereas the word *vǫlur* occurs predominantly in *fornaldarsögur*, *Íslendingasögur* and mythological poems and it seems that *vǫlur* are mainly conceived of as human women carrying out certain rituals; *nornir* are never human (this only occurs in relatively late sources such as *fornaldarsögur*). *Nornir*

³⁸⁷ From this, Pokorny (1959:1140) derives the name Waluburg, a Germanic seeress of the Semnoni mentioned in a 2nd century Classical source (Simek 1993:370-371). The name of another seeress, Ganna (Simek 1993:99), is usually interpreted as connected to Old Norse *gandr*, '(magical) staff', as is Gambara mentioned in *History of the Langobards* I:VIII. Gambara is supposed to be **gand-bera*, 'staff-bearer' (Simek 1993:98-99); cf. note 93.

³⁸⁸ Cf. Price 2002. There are varying interpretations of such graves; Price regards Birka no.660, dated to c.900, as the grave of a *vǫlva* (Andrén and Carelli 2006:118-119), whereas Staecker favours an interpretation emphasising a cross also found in the grave, taking the woman to be Christian, the staff a status symbol and the grave a traditional heathen burial (Andrén and Carelli 2006:204-205 [319]).

³⁸⁹ Enright 1990 sees the staff as a weaver's beam, arguing primarily from the Irish *Táin Bó Cúailnge* and from bracteates depicting staff-carrying figures; his arguments, however, seem highly selective. I agree that the textile metaphor carries some weight, but the bracteates appear rather contestable evidence for this.

rarely appear in person³⁹⁰ but it is not unusual for *vǫlur* to do so, and it seems fair to say that *nornir* are generally conceived of as distant, intangible beings who go about their tasks somewhere beyond human reach whilst *vǫlur*, where these are described as physically present in human society, represent a more comprehensible version of similar otherworldly knowledge. *Vǫlur* nevertheless always retain a sense of something otherworldly about them. In this way, *vǫlur* and *nornir* might actually represent rather similar notions, perhaps the very same notion, only in different formats or on different levels. Particularly in rather late sources, such as *Norna-Gests þáttr*, the words tend to be used with apparently interchangeable meanings but, although this makes it less than easy to draw any exact dividing line between the two groups of beings, they should probably be regarded as similar rather than identical.

Vǫlur fulfil similar roles on the divine and human levels of perception (Steinsland 2005:258); they are consulted by humans in the sagas and they are also consulted by the gods – or at least by Óðinn – in some mythological poems, notably *Baldrs draumar* and *Vǫluspá*. In *Íslendingasögur* they are typically portrayed as human women with special abilities so that they do not constitute a wholly supernatural entity; the *vǫlva*, however, is always described as an outsider of some kind, not one of the group of people for whom she prophesies, which lends her strong connotations of otherness (cf. McKinnell 2005:95-100).³⁹¹ It is of interest that *vǫlur* do not turn up in contemporary sagas at all, as though they have no place in a Christian society. McKinnell says: "In Icelandic prose texts, *vǫlur* seem to be a feature of the legendary or mythic past, not a social phenomenon in the present" (McKinnell 2005:99), and further: "This impression of lack of familiarity is reinforced by several *fornaldarsögur* which begin stories about *vǫlur* by explaining what a *vǫlva* was" (McKinnell 2005:98). Moreover, there is a high degree of agreement between different accounts of prophesying *vǫlur*, perhaps indicating that there was some sort of a standard proto-story of 'the prophesying *vǫlva*'; and it seems reasonable to assume that *vǫlur* were not as frequent in reality as the accounts would have us believe.

³⁹⁰ They do in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, *Vǫluspá* and *Gylfaginning*.

³⁹¹ She can be called a Finn or Saami woman, for example *Vatnsdæla saga* 10 (cf. *Laxdæla saga* 35 where it is specified that Kotkell and his family are not local but incomers from the Hebrides). The Norse *seiðr*-rituals carried out by *vǫlur* seem to correspond closely to magical rituals among the Saami (Strömbäck 1935:121-124; Heide 2006; Price 2002:233-278; DuBois 1999:121-138).

Probably the best-known description of a *vǫlva* is found in *Eiríks saga rauða* 4:³⁹²

Sú kona var þar í byggð, er Þorbjörg hét; hon var spákona ok var kǫlluð lítil-vǫlva. Hon hafði átt sér níu systr, ok váru allar spákonur, en hon ein var þá á lífi. Þat var háttr Þorbjargar um vetrum, at hon fór at veizlum, ok buðu þeir menn henni mest heim, er forvitni var á at vita forlög sín eða árferð ... En er hon kom inn, þótti ǫllum mǫnnum skylt at velja henni sæmiligar kveðjur. Hon tók því sem henni váru menn geðjaðir til. Tók Þorkell bóndi í hǫnd henni ok leiddi hana til þess sætis, sem henni var búit. Þorkell bað hana þá renna þar augum yfir hjú ok hjǫrð, ok svá hýbýli. Hon var fámálug um allt. ... Síðan gengu menn at vísendakonunni, ok frétti þá hvern þess, er mest forvitni var á at vita. Hon var ok góð af frásǫgnum; gekk þat ok lítt í tauma, er hon sagði. (ÍF 4:206-209)

'In the district there lived a woman named Thorbjorg, a seeress who was called the 'Little Prophetess'. She was one of ten sisters, all of whom had the gift of prophecy, and was the only one of them still alive. It was Thorbjorg's custom to spend the winter visiting, one after another, farms to which she had been invited, mostly by people curious to learn of their own future or what was in store for the coming year. ... When she entered, everyone was supposed to offer her respectful greetings, and she responded according to how the person appealed to her. Farmer Thorkell took the wise woman by the hand and led her to the seat which had been prepared for her. He then asked her to survey his flocks, servants and buildings. She had little to say about all of it. ... After that people approached the wise woman to learn what each of them was curious to know. She made them good answer, and little that she predicted did not occur.'

(CSI I:5-7)

In this account, which, it must be kept in mind, is quite late, the *vǫlva* is clearly not one of the community but a visitor.³⁹³ The fact that she is both a stranger and someone to whom the community turns in order to know more about themselves highlights that we are dealing with a figure who is both very powerful and important but at the same time extremely dangerous. What she represents is an otherworldly kind of knowledge that must be treated with respect and, as a consequence, so must she.

There are clear overlaps between the figures of *vǫlur* and *nornir*. Both are associated with special knowledge concerning the past as well as the future, and both seem to possess the ability not only to look into the future but apparently also to determine its course. One significant difference seems to be that whereas *vǫlur* are mostly invited, asked or in some other way made to give their predictions, *nornir*

³⁹² AM 557 4° c.1420-1450.

³⁹³ The distance between her and the community might even be further enhanced by setting the scene in faraway Greenland, which must have been an unfamiliar place to most people, not unlike Lapland.

are not consulted but make their pronouncements uninvited.³⁹⁴ In *Hávamál* 111, Óðinn comes to Urðarbrunnr but he states clearly that he remained silent and the scene does not take the question-and-answer format that is common with prophesying *vǫlur*. The stanza just says that he listened to what was said. *Vǫlur* appear at times very reluctant to speak about the events which they are able to see, although this description does not hold for all situations; the scene in *Vatnsdæla saga* 10 shows us not a reluctant speaker, the *vǫlva*, but a reluctant listener, Ingimundr (see VI.5.2.). There is little that indicates reluctance to make pronouncements on the part of *nornir*, but they do seem also to make these on another level or at least without people hearing them. Furthermore, it is typical of *nornir* (and *dísir*) to act in groups, as collective wholes (though singular ones are not unheard of: *Reginismál* 2; *Kveldúlfur*; *Kormákr*), whereas *vǫlur* almost always turn up in the singular form. There is usually only one *vǫlva* at work at any given time, although she needs helpers to perform her rituals (de Vries 1956:330).

VI.4.2. Vǫluspá and Urðar orð

Vǫlur are closely connected to prophecy in Old Norse literature and de Vries has suggested that, when making a prophecy, putting it into words and speaking it out loud was of great significance:

Die *spá* gab also nicht nur an, wie sich die Zukunft voraussichtlich gestalten würde, sondern sie bestimmte auch, wie sie werden sollte. Damit war also die *spá* gleichsam ein Zauber, der zur Durchführung gelangen mußte.
(de Vries 1956:323)

'The *spá*, then, did not just give an impression of how the future might turn out, but it determined how it would be. In this way the *spá* was also a kind of magic which must lead to its own completion.'
(My translation)

The notion expressed here is that as a prophecy is spoken, the future of which it tells becomes unavoidable while the words are being said, similar to what was noted above. As though the words describing it do not point towards a mere optional future but in fact bind it to that one specific future path which they describe. Several scholars have noted this, amongst them Lassen:

³⁹⁴ In Saxo's account of Fridleuus (*Gesta Danorum* Book 6; see IV.1.3.), it remains unclear whether the 'Parcae' should be regarded as *vǫlur*, *nornir*, *dísir* or some amalgamated version; of significance is the temple and the fact that Fridleuus gives something in return for the prophecy made to his son.

Man møder flere steder i den norrøne litteratur en tro på, at en udsagt spådom er uafvendelig. Selve udtalen af spådommen synes at have en besværgende karakter: Man tror tilsyneladende, at man ved at forhindre vølven i at udtale sig om ens skæbne kan undslippe den. På den måde befinder vølven sig i en position, hvor tilhørerne tror, at hendes ord besværges fremtiden. Hun råder med andre ord over deres skæbne. Således møder man flere steder unge mænd, der på det kraftigste forsøger at forhindre en volve i at spå, selvom deres anstrengelser viser sig at være forgæves.

(Lassen 2003:29)

'At several points in Old Norse literature we encounter a belief in the inevitability of a spoken prophecy. Speaking the prophecy out loud seems to have had a spell-casting quality: people seem to believe that by preventing the *völva* from speaking they can avoid their fate. In this way the *völva* is in a position where the listeners believe that her words determine the future. In other words she commands their destiny. Thus we encounter several young men who try very hard to prevent a *völva* from prophesying, although their attempts are in vain.'

(My translation)

Vésteinn Ólason, too, mentions this:

it is as if men fear that dreams will come true through the very act of voicing an interpretation of them,³⁹⁵ or that spoken prophecy can help to bring about the event prophesied.

(Vésteinn Ólason 1998:120)

Vatnsdæla saga 10³⁹⁶ provides one such example. Here, an invited *völva* is prophesying for all who approach her, but Ingimundr does not ask her about his own future:

Finnan var sett hátt ok búit um hana vegliga; þangat gengu menn til fréttu, hverr ór sínu rúmi, ok spurðu at ørlögum sínum. Hon spáði hverjum eptir því sem gekk, en þat var nøkkut misjafnt, hversu hverjum líkaði. Þeir fóstbræðr sátu í rúmum sínum ok gengu eigi til fréttu; þeir lögðu ok engan hug á spár hennar. Völvu mælti: "Hví spyrja þeir inir ungu menn eigi at forlögum sínum, því at mér þykkir þeir merkiligastir menn af þeim, sem hér eru saman komnir?" Ingimundr svarar: "Mér er eigi annara at vita mín forlög fyrr en fram komu, ok ætla ek mitt ráð eigi komit undir þínum tungurótum." Hon svarar: "Ek mun þó segja þér ófregit."³⁹⁷

(ÍF 8:29)

'The Lapp woman, splendidly attired, sat on a high seat. Men left their benches and went forward to ask about their destinies. For each of them she predicted that which eventually came to pass, but each of them took the news in different ways. The foster-brothers sat in their places and did not go up to enquire about the future; they placed no trust in her predictions. The

³⁹⁵ Cf. Guðrún's interpretation of Atli's dreams in *Guðrúnarkviða II* 38-43 (see III.1.1.2.).

³⁹⁶ AM 559 4º c.1686 (copy of the lost *Vatnsþýrna*).

³⁹⁷ In this text, *ørlög* and *forlög* appear to be entirely synonymous with one another.

seeress said, "Why do those young men not ask about their futures, because they seem to me to be the most outstanding of the men assembled here?" Ingimund answered, "It is not important to me to know my future life before it happens, and I do not think that my future lies at the root of your tongue." She answered, "I will nevertheless tell you without being asked."

(CSI IV:14)

What the woman then says turns out also to be what actually happens to Ingimundr, almost as if, by saying it out loud, she has made it impossible for anything else to happen to him. The idea of such binding powers of spoken prophecies gives the *vǫlva* not only power over but possibly also responsibility for the predictions she makes; one could certainly imagine that if people held such beliefs about her pronouncements, she might want to choose her words carefully. If people thought that their own lives were at stake and dependent on what the *vǫlva* said, the situation could become difficult to handle, especially if what she had to say was not entirely positive.³⁹⁸ "When *vǫlur* are consulted in mythological and legendary sources, it is assumed that they are truthfully predicting an inevitable future" (McKinnell 2005:98). There is an example of this in the legendary *Hrólfs saga kraka* 3 from late medieval times³⁹⁹ when Fróði invites the *vǫlva* Heiðr to perform *seiðr* because he wants to discover where the sons of Hálfðan are hiding so that he can kill them. The *vǫlva* begins to reveal what she is seeing and where the boys are. Then Signý, the sister of the two boys, throws a gold ring to the *vǫlva* as a bribe to make her keep quiet about where the boys are hiding; the *vǫlva* now wants to stop the *spá* but the king forces her to continue. The passage reads as follows:

Fróði konungr herðir nú at seiðkonu fast ok biðr hana segja it sanna, ef hún skuli ekki pínd verða. Hún gapir þá mjök, ok verðr erfiðr seiðrinn, ok nú kvað hún vísu: "Sé ek, hvar sitja synir Hálfðanar, Hróarr ok Helgi, heilir báðir; þeir munu Fróða fjörvi ræna, - nema þeim sé fljótt fyrirfarit, en þat mun eigi verða," sagði hún. Ok eftir þetta stiklar hún ofan af seiðhjallinum ok kvað: "Ötul eru augu Hams ok Hrana, eru öðlingir undra djarfir."

(FSN 1:9)

King Fróði now presses the sorceress hard and commands her to speak the truth if she is not to be tortured. She opens her mouth wide, and the ritual becomes difficult, and now she spoke a verse: "I see where Hálfðan's sons sit, Hróarr and Helgi, both healthy; they will steal Fróði's life, – unless they

³⁹⁸ Tacitus' descriptions of Velede in *Histories* 4:65 states that there was a mediator between her and the people for whom she prophesied: "They were not, however, allowed to approach and speak to Velede or even to see her, but were kept at a distance to inspire in them the greater awe. She herself lived at the top of a high tower, and one of her relatives was appointed to carry the questions and answers like a mediator between God and man" (1997:216).

³⁹⁹ AM 285 4° c.1600-1700.

are quickly destroyed, but that won't happen", she said. And after this she jumps down from the *seiðr* platform and said: "Fierce are the eyes of Hamr and Hrani, they are princes wonderfully courageous."
(My translation)

What happens here is that the *vǫlva* herself for a moment casts doubt on her own prediction – such and such will happen 'unless they are quickly destroyed' – only to deny it again immediately – 'but that won't happen.' Her problem is that Fróði has threatened her to make her tell only the truth, but the truth which she sees is that the boys will kill Fróði and it will obviously not please him to hear this; the *vǫlva* cannot both tell the truth and please him and she appears to be looking for a way out of this tricky situation.⁴⁰⁰

Whether or not these different accounts describe any kind of social reality – and, given the late dates of most of them, one may rightly doubt so – there are interesting things to say about them, particularly the two ways in which one can approach a *vǫlva*. One can, as Fróði does, threaten her in order to make her comply with one's own wishes (cf. Óðinn and the *vǫlva* in *Baldrs draumar*), or one can, as Signý does, give her gifts in the hope of gaining her friendship.

That predictions made by a *vǫlva* can be influenced is also hinted at elsewhere. In *Víga-Glúms saga* 12 the woman Saldís is dissatisfied with the predictions made for her two sons by the *vǫlva* Oddbjörg, and Saldís says: *Annars þættumk ek makligri fyrir góðan beina, ok muntu vera rekin í brott, ef þú ferr með illspár* (ÍF 9:41), 'I should have thought good hospitality deserved something better, and you'll be driven away if you go round predicting evil' (CSI II:286), indicating that it may be possible to influence a prophecy through the way in which the *vǫlva* is treated. Saldís clearly feels cheated, thinking she gave the *vǫlva* gifts worthy of a *spá* better than the one she got. Apart from hinting at this possible route of influence, the scene also reveals that there is no certain way of actually obtaining a favourable *spá* – the *vǫlva* is not swayed by Saldís' gifts, perhaps because she is ill-disposed towards Saldís or her sons or perhaps simply because gifts do not affect the future which she sees, as is the case in *Hrólfs saga kraka* where it seems as if all the *vǫlva* is able to do for Signý

⁴⁰⁰ Price (2002:115-116) interprets the scene differently, seeing the *vǫlva* as thoroughly selfish, amoral and only concerned with her own welfare.

and her two brothers is to keep quiet; she cannot actually change the future events she sees.⁴⁰¹

The notion of responsibility for making a prediction also recalls the reluctance to speak that is sometimes displayed by *vǫlur*, for example in *Baldur's draumar* where Óðinn forces the dead *vǫlva* to speak, yet she consistently closes all her answers with the phrase: *Nauðug sagðak, nú mun ek þegja*, 'reluctantly I spoke, now I will be silent.' It highlights the importance of the spoken word and poses the question of whether the person making the prediction can be said to be responsible for the effects it has. Some evidence points in this direction. *Laxdæla saga* 39 provides an example of what looks like an attempt to avoid such responsibility when Óláfr pái is talking about Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir and says to his son Kjartan that he thinks she is a fine woman and a suitable match for Kjartan, but then adds: *Nú er þat hugbóð mitt, enn eigi vil ek þess spá, at vér frændr ok Laugarmenn berim eigi allsendis gæfu til um vár skipti* (ÍF 5:112), 'I have a feeling, **although I won't make it a prediction**, that our dealings with the Laugar family will not turn out well' (CSI V:57; my emphases). What Óláfr is doing is, apparently, trying both to have his cake and eat it; he says that he is worried about how the relationship between Kjartan's family and Guðrún's will fare in the long run, but he also says that he will not voice those worries. In fact, he almost says that he will not say what he has just said, only the way in which he phrases the thought makes a very clear distinction to the effect that his use of the word *spá*, 'predict' is something other and more than *segja*, 'say'.⁴⁰² There is little sense that the following events actually stem from Óláfr's words, and the scene seems properly understood as a narrative device for heightening the tension in the plot. Nevertheless, the notion that speaking about something can or even will influence that thing is lurking behind Óláfr's words. There is a good example of this power of speech directly influencing events in *Fostbræðra saga* 7:

Þorgeirr mælti: "Hvat ætlar þú, hvárr okkarr myndi af qðrum bera, ef vit reyndim með okkr?"

Þormóðr svarar: "Þat veit ek eigi, en hitt veit ek, at sjá spurning þín mun skilja okkra samvistu ok fǫruneyti, svá at vit munum eigi lǫngum ásamt vera."

⁴⁰¹ The fact that *Hávamál* 87 regards *vǫlo vilmæli*, 'a *vǫlva* who says what you would like to hear' as highly suspicious apparently confirms that *vǫlur* are surrounded by an ominous air of fear mixed with expectation.

⁴⁰² Óláfr seems to make a distinction between a statement, which describes an action, and a performative utterance, which *is* the action that the words verbalise, in a way similar to what Austin does: "the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action, which again would not *normally* be described as saying something" (Austin 1962:5).

Þorgeirr segir: "Ekki var mér þetta alhugát, at ek vilda, at vit reyndim með okkr harðfengi."

Þormóðr mælti: "Í hug kom þér, meðan þú mæltir, ok munu vit skilja félagit." (ÍF 6:150-151)

‘Thorgeir said, “Which of us do you think would win if we confronted each other?”

Thormod answered, “I don’t know, but I do know that this question of yours will divide us and end our companionship. We cannot stay together.”

Thorgeir said, “I wasn’t really speaking my mind – saying that I wanted us to fight each other.”

Thormod said, “It came into your mind as you spoke it and we shall go our separate ways.”

(CSI II:344)

What happens is that Þorgeirr expresses a thought which he says is entirely hypothetical: ‘What do you think would happen if’, but Þormóðr answers that because Þorgeirr has put the thought into words and spoken it out loud it is no longer a hypothesis but a fact. The thought has left its ethereal guise of being a mere possibility and has become solid and concrete in the words; its expression in speech has given it the quality of a *spá*, and now Þorgeirr and Þormóðr cannot escape it. It seems that fate is something which can be spoken into being.

An example of another kind comes from *Njáls saga* 38:

Bergþóra ræddi við Njál, er hon sá féit: "Efnt þykkisk þú hafa heitin þín, en nú eru eptir mín heit." "Eigi er nauðsyn á, at þú efnir þau," segir Njáll. "Hins hefir þú til getit," sagði hon, "ok skal svá vera."

(ÍF 12:102)

‘Bergþóra said to Njáll as soon as she saw the money, “You think you have kept your promise now, but mine has yet to be kept.” “There’s no need for you to keep it,” said Njáll. “But you’ve guessed⁴⁰³ that I will,” she said, “and so it shall be.”

(CSI III:46)

Here, Bergþóra refuses to let Njáll forget what he himself said earlier on, namely that he would get a freeman’s compensation for the killing of Atli, who is only a slave, and that Bergþóra should have Atli’s death avenged. After Atli has been killed, Njáll receives the money and Bergþóra now wants the revenge:

Bergþóra is here taking great advantage of Njáll’s having made a prediction. Because he has prophesied she purports to be bound to fulfil his prediction as well as her own promise. That is, she (...) wittily denies her free will and with it her accountability for the action she is about to take. She is shifting the responsibility to Njáll.

⁴⁰³ Also Cook (2001:66) translates with ‘guess’ but the verb *geta* has many meanings, including ‘attain, bring about, say’ (Frtz I:590-591).

(Miller 1986:107)

Again, the spoken word is a binding factor. It binds people to what they say and it binds events to the ways in which they have been verbally expressed and described. This relates closely to the connections between text and textile, between words and their concrete manifestations. The notion of the binding power of the spoken word appears to be very strong, as also Vésteinn Ólason has pointed out:

Again and again we see that words once spoken cannot be retracted. This is, of course, particularly the case with poetry. It is not just that poetry can live longer than both poets and poetic subjects, but also that words used in poetry are invested with a special resonance and force.
(Vésteinn Ólason 1998:124)

This recalls the strong association of poetry with knowledge and the inaccessible otherworldly knowledge which the women in the well possess (see IV.2.2.; Bloomfield and Dunn 1989:106-119). Although many of the sources that describe *vǫlur* are relatively late, we can see that some features that are also attached to *nornir* remain current: they are always female, they are otherworldly or at least strangers, and their decisions, the words they speak, are regarded as having a tremendous impact on the lives of the people for whom the words are spoken and the decisions made.

A point of discussion is whether such incidences in *Íslendingasögur* should be taken as realistic in a literal sense – that people actually did such things, that they spoke and thought in this way – or whether the notion is being used as a literary motif or a narrative technique with the aim of creating atmosphere and building up tension in the story. To this one might reply that attributing significantly deterministic powers to the spoken word is by no means unique to Old Norse tradition but is in fact common in many traditional societies, particularly non-literate ones. Raudvere writes:

De uttalade orden tillmättes ett stort inflytande över livets olika angelägenheter. Verkan av en uttalad sats kunde inte ifrågasättas och kunde aldrig tas tillbaka – nästan som om den tagit fysisk gestalt, den fanns där som något absolut. De kunde bara motverkas genom något motsvarande starkt ord. Starka och maktbemängda ord återkommer genom hela sagalitteraturen. Ord skapade verklighet – inte bara tvärtom.
(Raudvere 2003:42)

'Great influence over the various affairs of life was attributed to the spoken word. The effect of a spoken sentence could not be questioned and could never be taken back – almost as if it took on physical form, it was there as something absolute. It could only be counteracted through equally strong

words. Strong and powerful words appear throughout the saga literature. Words created reality – not just the other way round.’
(My translation)

Speech, then, is seen as a creative act as much as, or even more than, an act of manifestation of what is already there. Speech is not just a way of describing the world but is also a way of creating it. This even recalls the Gospel according to John 1;1: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”, as well as the reference to Christ as the ‘word made flesh’ in John 1;14. Also Genesis 1;3: “God said: ‘Let there be light’, and there was light.” The idea here is that things are spoken into being, the power of speech is a creative one and this view is common in traditional societies.⁴⁰⁴ This means that language can also work in the opposite way:

Ett starkt exempel på en form för ett medvetet bruk av det talade ordet i destruktivt syfte är *níð*, ett begrepp som syftar både på den verbala genren och på en bestämd rituell praktik.
(Raudvere 2003:55)

‘A strong example of a type of conscious use of the spoken word with destructive intent is *níð*, a concept which operates both as a verbal genre and as a certain ritual practice.’
(My translation)

And further:

Av de språkliga konstruktionerna *yrkja níð* och *kveða níð* förstår man att *níð* var en utpräglad verbal akt. Det var det talade ordet som gav kränkningen en viss riktning.
(Raudvere 2003:55)

‘From the linguistic constructions *yrkja níð* [compose, recite *níð*; Frtz III:1000] and *kveða níð* [say, recite *níð*; Frtz II:364-365] it is understood that *níð* was a spoken act. It was the spoken word that gave a certain direction to the insult.’
(My translation)

Níð, then, comes close to a curse, serving as a reminder that speech can be destructive as well as creative. The spoken word is of enormous importance. Like the wool in the wool basket, the unshaped mass of potential, we might consider a person’s thoughts or ideas a mass of potential, but as yet unspoken, words. This

⁴⁰⁴ Speaking or singing things into being occurs many times in *Kalevala*, for example in *Lemminkäinen’s journey to Pohjola* 139-40 where Lemminkäinen says: “I’ll create, by songs of magic, both a man and horse of alder”; and in *Marjatta* 483-86 where Väinämöinen: “began his songs of magic, for the last time sang them loudly, sang himself a boat of copper, with a copper deck provided” (Kirby and Branch 1985:351 and 645).

shaping power of speech could explain why some *vǫlur* seem reluctant to speak at all: once spoken, there is no way of taking words back, and the *spá* not spoken is not dangerous because it is not a *spá* at all.

The reason why all of this is relevant to the discussion of *nornir* is that they seem to be closely associated with certain forms speech. In a non-literate society where law, as mentioned, was a spoken matter, phrases like *kviðr norna* and *dómr norna* would appear to indicate verbal actions, whereas *skop norna* may convey more of an impression of a physical act. Furthermore, there seems to be some sort of semantic relationship between 'weird' and 'word', between *urðr* and *orð*, even if they are etymologically removed from one another. The word is that magical command which brings things into being, weird is that power which decides what will be; it is easy to relate these two notions closely to one another.⁴⁰⁵

This focus on words and a connection between fate and speech comes across in *Fjolsvinnsmál* 47:

Svipdagr ek heiti,
Sólbiartr hét minn faðir,
þaðan rákomk vindkalda vego;
Urðar orði
viðr engi maðr,
þótt þat sé við lǫst lagit.

Svipdagr I am called,
Sólbiartr my father was called,
I came hence on wind-cold roads,
the words of Urðr
no man can hinder,
though it was flawed in its creation.

In this instance, fate is clearly something spoken: 'words of Urðr' or 'words of fate', that thing spoken by *nornir* which no one can escape. It recalls two passages from *Ynglingatal*, namely stanza 1 from *Ynglingasaga* 11:

Varð framgengt,
þars Fróði bjó,
feigðarorð,
es at Fjǫlni kom,
ok sikling
svigðis geira⁴⁰⁶
vágr vindlauss⁴⁰⁷
of viðá skyldi.
(ÍF 26:26)

Where Fróði lived
it happened,
the words of death
which came to Fjǫlnir;
it was decided
that the drink from the horn
would cut down
the prince.

and stanza 8 from *Ynglingasaga* 18:

Frák, at Dagr
dauðaorði,
frægðar fúss,

I have heard that Dagr,
hungry for fame,
travelled according

⁴⁰⁵ I am grateful to Terry Gunnell, Háskóli Íslands, for this suggestion. Also the noun-form and verb-form of the English word 'spell' is interesting in this context.

⁴⁰⁶ *Svigðir* is a *kenning* for an ox; *svigðis geir*, 'ox-spear' is a horn, also used for drinking.

⁴⁰⁷ *Vágr vinðlauss*, 'calm sea'; a *kenning* for the beer-vat in which Fjǫlnir drowned.

of fara skyldi,
þás valteins
til Vqrva⁴⁰⁸ kom
spakfrømuðr
spørs at hefna.⁴⁰⁹
(IF 26:36)

to the words of death
when the warrior
came to Vqrvi,
the wise one,
to avenge his sparrow.

The idea of death as something spoken seems quite clearly represented in the phrases *feigðar orð* and *dauðaorð* and these, again, recall *kviðr norna* (*Hamðismál* 30) and *norna dómr* (*Fáfnismál* 11),⁴¹⁰ especially if one considers also the different meanings of the word 'sentence': it can refer to a series of words forming a grammatically coherent whole but it can also mean an authoritative decision pronounced by a tribunal. This latter kind of 'sentence' can, indeed, have severe or even fatal consequences for a person's life – but is it a sentence until it is pronounced? How else do the words in *Ynglingatal* operate? Similarly one might question the validity of the 'verdict of the *normir*', or any verdict for that matter, were it to remain silent; indeed the etymological meaning of 'verdict' is 'to speak truthfully' (OED XII:123). Speaking is a way of activating or making real the semantic content of words, it is a determining action, potentially creative – potentially destructive.

It is possible that ideas about speech are relevant with regard to the etymology of the word *norn* for which very few suggestions have been made. The two most common ones are:

Den ursprungliga betydelsen av ordet *norna* är omstridd. Anknytande till *nornornas* spådomsfunktion har man sammanställt det med det svenska dialektordet *norna* (*nyrna*), ett verb som betyder 'hemligt meddela'. En annan etymologi förknippar ordet med en indoeuropeisk rot *ner* med betydelsen 'vrida', 'sno'. Bakom denna innebörd skulle ligga föreställningen om ödestråden, som *nornorna* *snor* och sammantvinnar.⁴¹¹
(Ström 1985:202)

'The original meaning of the word *norn* is disputed. In connection with the prophesying function of the *normir* it has been seen in relation to the Swedish dialect word *norna* (*nyrna*), a verb which means 'secretly communicate'. Another etymology connects the word to an Indo-European root *ner*, meaning 'twist', 'wind'. This should stem from the notion of a fate-thread, which the *norns* twist and twine.'
(My translation)

⁴⁰⁸ Vqrvi is a placename.

⁴⁰⁹ Dagr understood the language of birds; he had a sparrow that told him many things but it was killed by a farmer in Vqrvi.

⁴¹⁰ The *nás orð*, 'corpse words' in *Baldrs draumar* 4 also spring to mind.

⁴¹¹ See also AeW:412; de Vries 1956:273.

As evidence for spinning *nornir* tends to be somewhat more etymological than factual, the suggested link to spinning should probably be taken with a pinch of salt. The possible connection between *norn* and ‘whispering, carrying messages in secret’ is more interesting, especially considering the power of the spoken word discussed above.⁴¹² The Indo-European root *(s)ner-* has two meanings: ‘murmuring, rumbling’ and ‘turning, winding, drawing together’ (Pokorny 1959:975; AeW:412) and a link between them is by no means impossible (cf. *málrúnar* discussed in VI.3.). Of these two options, ‘murmuring’ seems to fit better with the *nornir* because they speak, making decrees and pronouncing verdicts. ‘Turning, drawing together’ equally fit into the greater picture, only not directly in relation to the *nornir*. However, producing any definitive proof for an etymology of the word *norn* remains beyond our reach.

The binding power of a *spá* is evident in the situations involving *vǫlur* discussed above; a *spá* can contain very strong elements of fate and the *vǫlva* who gives a prophecy can be seen almost to create futures for people with her words. The *Urðar orð* mentioned in *Fjǫlsvinnsmál* strongly recall the same idea, only this time the words appear to be placed in the mouth of (one of) the *nornir*. Thus, the terms *Vǫluspá* and *Urðar orð* come very close to describing what is really the same one thing: both represent very powerful, deterministic forms of speech and the terms *vǫlva* and *norn* almost amalgamate in these expressions.

VI.5. Baldr’s Fate

Of interest to the present discussion are also two passages from *Lokasenna*. In stanza 29 it is said that: *ǫrlǫg Frigg hygg ek at ǫll viti, þótt hon sjalfgi segi*, ‘Frigg, I believe, knows all fate, though she herself does not speak.’ Frigg, although she has the knowledge, does not put the *ǫrlǫg* into words. Taking this one step further, it could even mean that, by not giving it shape in the form of words, she is trying to prevent something from happening, rather like Ingimundr who thinks he can avoid his fate if only the *vǫlva* keeps silent (see VI.4.2.). That this stanza might be taken as a reference to the death of Baldr, Frigg’s son, becomes clear if stanzas 27, 28 and 29 are considered together:

[Frigg]
Veitstu, ef ek inni ættak
Ægis hǫllom í
Baldri líkan bur:

[Frigg]
You know that if I had in here
in Ægir’s hall
a boy like my son Baldr,

⁴¹² Might this etymology recall the verb *þylla*, ‘to recite’ but also ‘to mumble’ (Frtz III:1064) as employed in *Hávamál* 111 (see IV.2.2.)?

út þú ne kvæmir
frá ása sonom,
ok væri þá at þér reiðom vegit.

you, furious, would not get away
from the sons of the Æsir;
there'd be fighting against you.

[Loki]
Enn vill þú, Frigg,
at ek fleiri telia
mína meinstafi:
ek því réð,
er þú ríða sérat
síðan Baldr at solum.

[Loki]
Do you want me, Frigg,
to say still more
about my wicked deeds,
I (will) bring it about
that you will not again see
Baldr riding to the halls.

[Freyia]
Ærr ertu, Loki,
er þú yðra telr
lióta leiðstafi:
ørlög Frigg
hygg ek at ǫll viti,
þótt hon sialfgi segi.

[Freyia]
Mad are you, Loki,
when you talk of
your evil deeds,
Frigg, I believe,
knows all fate,
though she herself does not speak.

The point crucial for connecting stanzas 28 and 29 in a way so that they show a coherent picture of spoken words determining future events rests on the word *ræð*. There are discrepancies with regard to this word in the different manuscripts: *Konungsbók* has the form *reþ* (*réð* or *réþ*), whereas AM 748 I 4^o has the form quoted here: *ræð*. One of the problems with this word is that *ę* in *Konungsbók* is used to denote both *æ* and *é* (KLE 2:443) so that it is rather up to the reader to decide how it should be read. Both are forms of the verb *ráða* which has numerous shades of meaning: 'to interpret, understand, advice, consider, plan' (Frtz III:9-17), but which in this particular instance means something like 'to cause, to bring about'. The difference lies in the tense; *réð* is the past form whereas *ræð* is the present tense that can also be used to denote future, and this matters for how the stanza is read. Loki is either saying that he **brought** about Baldr's death (*réð*), that he is currently in the process of **bringing** it about or that he **will bring** it about (*ræð*; the last two are both rendered possible by AM 748 I 4^o). If we read the form *ræð*, then it becomes possible to interpret the stanzas as saying that Loki speaks these words because he wants to bring about Baldr's death, whereas Frigg attempts to prevent the same event and that this is exactly the reason why she does not speak about the *ørlög*.

If we accept this then *Lokasenna* might contain not simply a reference to the story of Baldr but perhaps even a variant description of how Frigg tries in vain to

keep Baldr from coming to harm.⁴¹³ Frigg's words in stanza 27 are somewhat ambiguous. If her words are to be perceived in any way as a threat to Loki, then it must be because Baldr is alive and just not present. It is not much of a threat to remind Loki that he himself has ensured that Baldr cannot threaten him; that would seem like encouragement rather than a threat. This speaks in favour of the interpretation suggested above. Yet, working against this idea is the subjunctive wording 'if I had' which could well be taken to indicate that Baldr is dead rather than that he is simply not present, in which case *réd* should be the past tense of *ráða*. But it seems that a case could be made for both these readings – that Baldr is alive at the time of *Lokasenna* or that he is dead.

In *Lokasenna* 21 Óðinn says that Gefjun, too, knows about fate:

Ærr ertu nú, Loki	Mad are you, Loki,
ok ørviti,	and out of your wits,
er þú fær þér Gefjun at gremi;	making Gefjun angry with you;
þvíat aldar ørlög	I believe she knows
hygg ek at hon ǫll um viti	all about men's fates
iafngǫrla sem ek.	as well as I know this myself.

All we hear about Gefjun is that she knows, it is not said whether she puts her knowledge into words or not, except that she does not seem to do that here. The context appears to constitute some kind of threat to Loki although it remains unclear exactly what *ørlög* specifically refers to. In *Lokasenna*, it seems that Frigg and Gefjun either replace the *nornir* or perhaps join their ranks as beings who preside over fate; as mentioned above, *nornir* as such never seem to occur in the mythological poems and the exact relationship between them and the gods proper is somewhat unclear.⁴¹⁴

VI.6. Summary: A Law of the Spoken Word

This discussion of issues surrounding fate and *nornir* in relation to ideas about speech, prophecy and matters of law has thrown up a number of interesting insights. The etymological closeness between the Old Norse words *ørlög*, *forlög* and *lög* combined with the apparent involvement of *nornir* (and seemingly *dísir*, see notes 374 and 380) in certain quasi-legal aspects of human life suggests that fate, as

⁴¹³ The story of Baldr is told in *Gylfaginning* 49 and *Gesta Danorum* Book 3; it is furthermore alluded to in *Völuspá* and *Baldrs draumar*.

⁴¹⁴ Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson (1999:51) says: "The old Nordic concept of fate... resembled a blind law, superior to god and man, that could at any time impose on their lives. The main difference in the position of gods and men seems to have been that it was clearer to the gods than to men what fate bore in its lap." Cf. Clunies Ross 1994:246.

represented by *nornir*, was imagined as operating in a way similar to how law operated, namely as spoken words. Being a primarily oral culture, Old Norse tradition knew law only in a spoken format, evident in the role of the *lqgsqgumaðr*, the law-speaker, until he was replaced by written laws in Christian times, and it may be very telling that the etymological root of the word *norn* possibly has to do with verbal communication.

This connection between fate, law and speech may also help to explain why *nornir* are so often seen in a negative light, as might be implied by the case of the *fullréttisorð* described in *Vígslóði* (VI.3.). This law specifies only negative words, not positive ones, yet this does not mean that the law as such was regarded as a negative tool; the very opposite seems, in fact, to have been the case: the law secured the very foundations of human society. It is not unlikely that the *nornir* were pictured in a similar way. Although we often encounter them in negatively or tragically slanted situations (as the law is brought into play when there is trouble) it could well be a mistake to underestimate their role as providers of balance and stability, so clearly portrayed in *Vqluspá* 19. But whereas *lqg* made sense and was intelligible to everyone, the much more profound *ør/lqg* was hidden, inaccessible and incomprehensible, except to those who possessed abilities beyond the ordinary human perceptions, such as *vqlur*.

Further to this, the idea that speech is a way not just of describing things but of actually bringing them into being has found support in several Old Norse texts. This has some influence on how we understand prophecies of various kinds, accidental ones (for example *Fóstbræðra saga* 7) as well as deliberate ones (for example *Eiríks saga rauða* 4), because it touches on the semantic (though seemingly not etymological) association between *orð* and *urðr* 'word' and 'weird' and the notion that fate is something spoken. This metaphor of fate-as-speech is present in the sources in much clearer ways than is the case with fate-as-textile and it is at several times connected directly to *nornir*. Forms of speech are furthermore strongly implied in phrases such as *kviðr norna* (*Hamðismál* 30) and *dómr norna* (*Fáfnismál* 11, *Ynglingatal* 24). However, it is also found that there are strong semantic links between speech and textile as textile metaphors are frequently used to describe acts of speaking, not only in Old Norse but in many different cultures. It may ultimately be impossible to separate speech and fabric completely from one another as the text and the textile continue to tangle up with each other, but it does seem that if we are to judge by the evidence presented to us by our sources, fate-as-speech is a much

more dominant way of describing that which *nornir* represent than is fate-as-textile. To some extent, however, they probably feed off each other.

The seeming anomaly of having female figures so closely related to aspects of law seems best explained in terms of some kind of gender reversal involving the types of power that are dominant in the human world and in the otherworld. The deep relationship between *lǫg* and *ǫrlǫg* appears to indicate that fate was a fundamental aspect of the Old Norse world view and that *nornir*, invisible, impersonal and intangible though they may have been, were conceived of as beings central to the order of the world.

VII. Conclusions

Many conclusions can be drawn from this thesis and, as will be evident, not all of them necessarily align in any neat or coherent way. While this may cause some confusion, it probably reflects the fact that we are not dealing with a completely stable or homogeneous tradition. In all likelihood, the different conclusions reached during the course of this thesis simply reflect the situation surrounding *nornir*, and so many other Old Norse mythological beings: there is no one answer. If all references are taken into account, the answer either becomes muddled or splits into multiple answers, and in all likelihood this has always been so. Snorri seems to have encountered the same problem when compiling *Snorra-Edda*. Old Norse beliefs did not constitute one, single, coherent standard version and neither do the sources that survive for us to study; accepting this situation is really all we can do, we can hardly expect logically coherent answers to come from this body of gloriously inconsistent material (cf. McKinnell 1994; DuBois 1999).

Nonetheless, the answers that I have reached show that there are things to be found beyond the stereotypical three *nornir* who spin and who represent past, present and future. Close analyses of the sources have shown that, indeed, these three 'facts' about *nornir* – that there are three, that they spin, that they represent time – have turned out to be at best an early medieval conception of these beings rather than an ancient one. There is so much more to say about them than this superficial image reveals.

Although we must constantly remind ourselves that the relatively narrow base of evidence touching on *nornir* lends itself more to conjecture than conclusion, it is evident that it is possible to obtain some general answers to the questions which initially gave rise to the research presented in this thesis:

- 1 – Why is fate so strongly feminine?
- 2 – What evidence is there for fate-as-textile in Old Norse tradition?
- 3 – What do *nornir* actually do?

It has been shown that it is possible to make distinctions between *nornir* and closely related beings such as *vǫlur*, *dísir*, *fylgjur* and *valkyrjur* and that it is important to do so, even if we cannot obtain anything near absolute clarity. Overlaps remain and the similarities between the separate categories are in many ways obvious; it is the differences that are interesting. Two things in particular set the *nornir* apart from the rest: 1) early evidence of any cult is absent, we only have very late sources for this, and 2) they are rarely represented in person as physically

present, people do not see or encounter *nornir*. This tells us something about the people for whom these beings were a reality, as does the fact that many of the supposedly earliest references to them (*Hamðismál*, *Atlakviða*, *Ynglingatal* 24, *Torf-Einarr*, *Kveldúlfur*) make a strong connection between *nornir* and battle or violent death. When connected to harsh times and tragic events, this form of inevitability lends *nornir* a particularly stern face.

The fact that *nornir*, and the majority of beings that they compare to, are conceived of as feminine has been explored. The answer to the question why this should be is complex but ultimately seems to be rooted in the biological fact that it is the female who gives birth to new life. This relates *nornir* strongly to mother-figures and ancestress figures, indicating that some form of benign power was part of their nature, although these aspects are rather in the background in Old Norse tradition where *nornir* seem most often to be connected to negative power, even in the earliest sources. Their female nature is probably also what lies behind the notion of fate manifesting itself through specifically female tasks, although such tasks are rarely connected directly to the *nornir* themselves but rather to more concrete beings, often human women. Their intangible nature may be what often prevents these direct links from being made explicit, but it does not prevent their influence on, or even control over, events from being felt in very tangible ways.

As regards the equation of fate with time and *nornir* as representatives of past, present and future, it has been shown that although such a conception appears to be present in the names *Urðr*, *Verðandi* and *Skuld* in *Völuspá* it is specifically related to these three names and is probably exclusive to *Völuspá* and *Snorra-Edda*. It is certainly of some concern that no other texts connect *nornir* to time and it seems unlikely that this connection is much older than *Völuspá*.

Textile work, such as spinning and weaving, fits into the category of specifically female tasks and there are two important points that have been raised regarding this: 1) the fate-as-textile metaphor appears to be valid in Old Norse tradition, and 2) there is only one example of *nornir* actually engaging with this metaphor. This has implications for the widespread stereotype of *nornir* as spinners or weavers of fate and it has been shown that the dominance of this image in scholarship is not supported by the source material. The argument put forward here is that *nornir* and the fate-as-textile metaphor connect to each other predominantly in the following two ways: 1) through the feminine nature of both *nornir* and textile work, and 2) through the powers of speech combined with the obvious relationship between text

and textile. Thus, *nornir* and textile work appear in Old Norse tradition as separate manifestations of the same thing, namely *skop*, *ørlög*, fate, but they rarely combine with one another directly. Therefore it seems unjustified to speak of *nornir* as spinners or weavers of fate, at least not without quite specific referencing; the sources do not give this portrayal as the dominant one but in fact employ rather different ideas in the vast majority of the references made to *nornir*.

The dominant method of portraying the way in which *nornir* were thought to exercise their powers is expressed through legal metaphors, often relating closely to speech. It has been shown that there is a close relationship between the concepts of *lög* and *ørlög* and that not only *nornir* but apparently also *dísir* are somehow engaged in otherworldly issues of law; it seems that they represent something akin to laws of nature against which human struggle is always in vain. This, however, is not a wholly negative image. The equation of law with society (*vár lög* = our community, see VI.2.1.) and Hallfreðr's equation of *skop norna* with Scandinavian non-Christian tradition indicate that the framework provided by law and, by extension of this, by the *nornir*, was considered necessary for, or even as being beneficial to, human society in general. Law is not in itself a negative concept, but it does tend to be brought into action particularly when something goes wrong; the notion that people can choose to disregard the law at will but cannot ultimately escape the consequences that such choices will have for their lives appears to be a valid image of the Old Norse understanding of *lög* and *ørlög*.

The semantic link between *orð* and *urðr* 'word' and 'weird', the utterance and the shaping power attributed to it, fits well with the suggested, though unproven, etymology of the word *norn*, namely that it refers to murmuring or secret communications. A particularly interesting aspect of this is the relationship between text and textile as it is evident that the metaphor speech-as-textile must have been known. This seems to give us a complex of three intertwining metaphors: fate-as-speech; speech-as-textile; fate-as-textile. The effect is that even if *nornir* were primarily or originally associated with fate-as-speech, it was easy to take this one step further to reach fate-as-textile.

Clarity is hard to come by with regard to these creatures. In any one given situation we can make relatively clear observations as to what *nornir* represent in that specific context, but to add all these individual answers up to one all-embracing answer is asking more than is possible with this type of material. Instead of one certain answer we get several related ones – it is not in the nature of mythology to

be single-minded but, rather, to be flexible. Given the fact that the sources concerning *nornir* range from Iron Age Germany to medieval Iceland and Norway, including everything in between, both timewise and geographically, everything that comes down to us about them has already passed through numerous filters before we put it through our own. There is no such thing as unprocessed myth.

The question of fate in the Old Norse conceptual world can be turned in many directions but it cannot be discarded; a concept roughly translatable into the English word 'fate' did exist in most, if not all, areas of Old Norse culture.

Den betydelse ödet spelar får inte förstås som att vi kan tillskriva nordborna en fatalistisk livssyn. Snarare uttrycker föreställningarna om det uttröta ödet en reflektion över den värld inom vilken människan kan agera.
(Raudvere 2003:58)

'The role that fate plays should not be understood in such a way that we come to regard the ancient Scandinavians as fatalists. Rather, the ideas about fate express a considered view of the world in which humans are able to act.'
(My translation)

Nornir played a role within that view. As an intangible group of supernatural beings, their doings provide some sort of structure or skeleton to human life, mostly, it would seem, the individual life. In certain ways, that which *nornir* represent in Old Norse mythology is not entirely unlike our modern perception of DNA in its mode of operation – an impersonal, blind, structuring principle that guides certain aspects of our lives without us even noticing it. For better or for worse, neither *nornir* nor DNA can be influenced nor changed, they can only be accepted in the format in which they are given to the individual.

Yet, fate as we encounter it in Old Norse literature is not something in the face of which people admit defeat or to which they meekly submit. Neither do people believe that they possess the power to escape their fate or overcome it. Rather, it seems that when they encounter what they regard as fate, they see it as a challenge to be confronted, as though the very response to that challenge constitutes its meaning. Thus, belief in fate was not an easy way out, it did not invite resignation – indeed, the heroes of Old Norse poems and sagas seem to conceive of fate as an invitation to action, a potential to live up to, even a chance to show what one is truly made of. That the judgement of the *nornir* will inevitably be realised does not in itself take away the meaning of a person's life – in the sagas it most often seems to have quite the opposite effect.

Bibliography

Icelandic authors are listed under first names (eg. Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir) and alphabetical order follows the tradition in the relevant language (eg. Icelandic á follows a; Danish æ, ø and å follow z).

Aasen, Ivar, *Norsk Ordbog med dansk Forklaring*, Kristiania: Cammermeyers Forlag, 1918.

Adam of Bremen – History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen, tr. Francis J. Tschan, New York: Columbia University Press, 1959.

Adam af Bremens Krønike, tr. Allan A. Lund, Højbjerg: Wormianum, 2000.

Adam, James ed., *The Republic of Plato 2, Books VI-X*, Cambridge: The University Press, 1920.

Adonias saga, ed. Agnete Loth, Late Medieval Icelandic Romances III, Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1963.

Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, 'Gilitrutt, hin Forn Gyðja', *Rannsóknir í Félagsvísindum IV*. Félagsvísindadeild. Erindi flutt á ráðstefnu í febrúar 2003, ed. Friðrik H. Jónsson, Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2003, 451-462.

Aeschylus – The Oresteian Trilogy: Agamemnon, The Choepori, The Eumenides, tr. Philip Vellacott, London: Penguin Books, 1959.

Alexanders saga, tr. Brandr Jónsson [Biskop til Hólar 1263-64], Udgiven af Kommissionen for det Arnamagnæanske Legat, København: Gyldendalske Boghandel / Nordisk Forlag, 1925.

Almqvist, Bo, 'Gaelic/Norse Folklore Contacts. Some reflections on their scope and character', *Ireland and Europe in the early Middle Ages*, eds. Próinséas Ní Chatháin and Michael Richter, [n.pl.]: Klett-Cotta, 1996, 139-172.

Amours, F.J. ed, *The Original Chronicle of Andrew of Wyntoun*, The Scottish Text Society, vol. IV, Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood, 1906.

Ancient Laws of Ireland. Senchus Mor. Introduction to Senchus Mor, and Athgabail; or, Law of Distress. Vol.1. Dublin: Alexander Thom; Hodges, Smith & co. London: Longman, Green and Roberts, 1865.

Andersen, Lise Præstgaard, *Skjoldmøer – en Kvindemyte*, København: Gyldendal, 1982.

Anderson, Sarah M. Ed, *Cold Counsel – Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology*, New York and London: Routledge, 2002.

Andrén, Anders and Peter Carelli eds, *Odens Öga – mellan människor och makter i det förkristna Norden. Odin's eye – between people and powers in the pre-Christian North*, Skrifter nr. 6 / Stadshistoriska avdelingen, Helsingborg: Dunkers Kulturhus, 2006.

- The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. G.N. Garmonsway, London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co, 1953.
- The Apocryphal New Testament, being the Apocryphal Gospels, Acts Epistles, and Apocalypses*, tr. Montague Rhodes James, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1945 (1924).
- Apollonius of Rhodes. Jason and The Golden Fleece (The Argonautica)*, tr. Richard Hunter, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Arngrímur Sigurðsson, *Íslensk-Ensk orðabók*, Reykjavík: Prensmiðjan Leiftur, 1980.
- Arntz, Helmut and Hans Zeiss, *Die einheimischen Runendenkmäler des Festlandes*, Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1939.
- Asser's Life of King Alfred*, tr. L.C. Jane, London: Chatto and Windus Publishers, 1908.
- Auerbach, Loren, 'Female Experience and Authorial Intention in *Laxdæla Saga*', *Saga-Book* 25 (1998-2001): 30-52.
- Austin, J.L., *How to do Things with Words. The William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962.
- Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon, *Íslensk Orðsifjabók*, Reykjavík: Orðabók Háskólans, 1989 (1995).
- Badalanova Geller, Florentina, 'The Spinning Mary: Towards the Iconology of the Annunciation in the Slavonic Tradition', *Cosmos* 20 (2004 [2006]): 211-260.
- Baines, Patricia, *Linen Hand Spinning and Weaving*. London: B.T. Batsford, 1989.
- Barber, Elizabeth Wayland, *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years. Women, Cloth, and Society in Early Times*, New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994.
- Barlaams ok Josaphats saga*, ed. Magnus Rindal, *Norrøne Tekster* 4, Oslo: Norsk historisk kjeldeskrift-institutt, 1981.
- Bauschatz, Paul C., 'Urth's Well', *Journal of Indo-European Studies* 3/1 (1975): 53-86.
- *The Well and the Tree – World and Time in Early Germanic Culture*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982.
- Bawcutt, Priscilla and Felicity Riddy, eds., *Longer Scottish Poems – 1375-1650*, Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1987.
- Bax, Marcel and Tineke Padmos, 'Two Types of Duelling in Old Icelandic: The interactional structure of the *senna* and the *mannjafnaðr* in *Hárbarðsljóð*'

- Scandinavian Studies* 55/2 (1983): 149-174.
- Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, eds. Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969.
- Bede: The Reckoning of Time*, ed. Faith Wallis, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999.
- Bek-Pedersen, Karen (forthcoming), 'Are the Spinning Nornir just a Yarn?', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia*.
- Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburgh*, ed. Fr. Klaeber, Third edition with Supplement, Boston: D.C. Heath, 1950.
- Beowulf. A Verse Translation*, tr. Michael Alexander, London: Penguin Books, 2001 (1973).
- Billington, Sandra and Miranda Green, eds., *The Concept of the Goddess*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Bloomfield, Morton W. and Charles W. Dunn, *The Role of the Poet in Early Societies*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1989.
- Bonsack, Edwin, *Dvalinn. The relationship of the Friedrich von Schwaben, Völundarkviða and Sörla þáttr*, Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1983.
- Boserup, Ivan, 'The Angers Fragment and the Archetype of Gesta Danorum', *Saxo Grammaticus. A medieval author between Norse and Latin Culture*, ed. Karsten Friis-Jensen, Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 1981, 9-26.
- Bosworth, Joseph, *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, Based on the manuscript collections of the late Joseph Bosworth, edited and enlarged by T. Northcote Toller, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1898.
- Boyer, Régis, 'Fate as a *Deus Otiosus* in the *Íslendingasögur*. A Romantic View?', *Sagnaskemmtun*, eds. R. Simek, J. Kristjánsson, H. Bekker-Nielsen, Wien, Köln and Graz: Böhlau, 1986, 61-77.
- Brednich, Rolf Wilhelm, *Volkserzählungen und Volksglaube von den Schicksalsfrauen*, FFC no.193, Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1964.
- Burland, Cottie, *North American Indian Mythology*, London: Paul Hamlyn, 1965.
- Burson, Anne, 'Swan Maidens and Smiths: A structural study of *Völundarkviða*', *Scandinavian Studies* 55 (1983): 1-19.
- Byock, Jesse L. tr., *The Saga of the Volsungs. The Norse Epic of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press, 1990.
- Bæksted, Anders, *Guder og Helte i Norden*, København: Politiken, 1965.

- Bäckman, Louise, 'The Akkas. A study of four goddesses in the religion of the Saamis (Lapps)', *Current Progress in the Methodology of the Science of Religions*, ed. Witold Tyloch, Warsaw: Polish Scientific Publishers, 1984, 31-39.
- Bø, Olav, 'Hólmganga and Einvígi. Scandinavian forms of the duel', *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 2 (1969): 132-148.
- Campbell, John Gregorson, *Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. Collected entirely from oral source*, Glasgow: James MacLehose, 1900.
- Chesnutt, Michael, 'Cath Maige Tuired – A Parable on the Battle of Clontarf', *Northern Lights. Following Folklore in North-Western Europe. Essays in honour of Bo Almqvist*, ed. Séamas Ó Catháin, Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2001, 22-33.
- Cleasby, Richard and Gudbrand Vigfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957 (1874).
- Clover, Carol J., 'Icelandic Family Sagas (Íslendingsögur)', *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature. A critical guide*, eds. Carol J. Clover and John Lindow, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985, 239-315.
- Clunies Ross, Margaret, 'A note on Atlakviða, strophe 16, lines 9-10', *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 3 (1970): 63-65.
- *Skáldskaparmál. Snorri Sturluson's ars poetica and medieval theories of language*, The Viking Collection, vol 4, Odense: Odense University Press, 1987.
- *Prolonged Echoes. Old Norse myths in medieval Northern society. Vol.1: The myths*, The Viking Collection, vol 7, Odense: Odense University Press, 1994.
- *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005.
- Codex Regius of the Elder Edda*, MS No. 2365 4º in the Royal collection in the Royal Library of Copenhagen, Copenhagen: Levin & Munksgaard, 1937.
- Collingwood, Peter, *The Techniques of Tablet Weaving*, Robin and Russ Handweavers, Oregon: McMinnville, 1996.
- The Complete Sagas of Icelanders I-V*, general ed. Viðar Hreinsson, Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997.
- Cook, Robert ed., *Njal's saga*, London: Penguin Books 2001 (1997).
- Coomaraswamy, Ananda K. 'Symplegades: The Other World', <http://livingheritage.org/symplegades.htm> .
- Cornford, F.M., *From Religion to Philosophy*, New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1957 (1912).
- Crossley-Holland, Kevin, *The Norse Myths*, London: André Deutsch Limited, 1980.

- Crozier, Alan, 'Ørlygis Draugr and Ørløg Drýgja', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 102 (1987): 1-12.
- Damico, Helen, *Beowulf's Wealhtheow and the Valkyrie Tradition*, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1984.
- Davidson, Hilda R. Ellis, *Scandinavian Mythology*, New York, Sydney, Toronto: Paul Hamlyn, 1969.
- *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988.
- *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1990 (1964).
- *The Lost Beliefs of Northern Europe*, London and New York: Routledge, 1993.
- *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, London and New York: Routledge, 1998.
- Dictionary of the Irish Language. Based mainly on Old and Middle Irish Materials*, Compact Edition, Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1983.
- Dietrich, B.C., *Death, Fate and the Gods. The development of a religious idea in Greek popular belief and in Homer*, University of London: The Athlone Press, 1965.
- Dillmann, François-Xavier, 'Nornen', *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, ed. Johannes Hoops, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2002, vol 21, 388-394.
- Dronke, Ursula ed., tr. *The Poetic Edda I: Heroic Poems*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969.
- *The Poetic Edda II: Mythological Poems*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.
- DuBois, Thomas, *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.
- Dumézil, Georges, *Mitra-Varuna*, New York: Zone Books, 1988.
- Dumville, David & Michael Lapidge eds., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle Vol. 17. The Annals of St Neots with Vita Prima Sancti Neoti*, Cambridge: D.S.Brewer, 1985.
- Edda Snorra Sturlusonar II*, Hafniæ: Sumptibus legati Arnarnagæani, 1852.
- Edwards, Paul and Hermann Pálsson, *The Words of Odin – Hávamál*, Edinburgh: Lockhart Press, 1998.
- Ehrismann, Gustav, *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur bis zum Ausgang des Mittelalters. Erster Teil. Die hochdeutsche Literatur*, München: C.H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1932.

- Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Íslenskar Bókmenntir í Fornöld*, Reykjavík: Almenna Bókfélagið, 1962.
- Eiríkr Magnússon, 'Dyngja: or, Women's Bower in the North', *The Cambridge Antiquarian Society's Communications* 11 (1886): 480-493.
- ed., *Darraðaljóð*, Published for the Viking Club, Coventry: Curtis & Beamish, 1910a.
- ed., *Gróttasöngur*, Published for the Viking Club, Coventry: Curtis & Beamish, 1910b.
- Eliade, Mircea, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries. The Encounter between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities*, London: Harvill Press, 1960.
- *The Two and the One*, London: Harvill Press, 1965.
- *Rites and Symbols of Initiation. The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth*, New York, San Francisco, London: Harper & Row Publishers, 1975.
- Ellis, Hilda Roderick, *The Road to Hel*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1943.
- Elliott, Ralph W.V., 'Runes, Yews, and Magic', *Speculum. A Journal of Medieval Studies* 32 (1957): 250-261.
- Elsa M. Guðjónsson, 'Járnvarðr Yllir – A Fourth Weapon of the Valkyries in *Darraðarljóð?*', *Textile History* 20, No.2, (1989): 185-197.
- Embla Ýr Bárudóttir and Ingólfur Örn Björgvinsson, *Brennan – Sögur úr Njálu*, Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2004.
- Enright, Michael J., 'The Goddess Who Weaves. Some Iconographic Aspects of Bracteates of the Fürstenberg Type', *Frühmittelalterlichen Studien* 24 (1990): 54-70.
- *Lady with a Mead Cup - Ritual, Prophecy and Lordship in the European Warband from La Tène to the Viking Age*, Dublin and Portland: Four Courts Press, 1996.
- The Exeter Book* eds. Krapp, George Philip and Elliott van Kirk Dobbie, New York: Columbia University Press, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1936.
- Faulkes, Anthony, 'Snorra Edda', *Medieval Scandinavia. An Encyclopedia*, ed. Philip Pulsiano, New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1993, 600-602.
- Fidjestøl, Bjarne, *Sólarljóð. Tyding og tolkningsgrunnlag*, Bergen, Oslo, Tromsø: Universitetsforlaget, 1979.
- *The Dating of Eddic Poetry: A historical survey and methodological investigation*, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel, 1999.

- Finnur Jónsson, 'Um Galdra, Seið, Seiðmenn og Völur', *Þrjár Ritgjörður, sendar og tileinkaðar Herra Páli Melsted*, 5-28, København: Gad, 1892.
- *Den Norsk-Islandske Skjaldedigting*, AI: Tekst efter Håndskrifterne, BI: Rettet Tekst, København og Kristiania: Gyldendalske Boghandel / Nordisk Forlag, 1912.
- *Den Norsk-Islandske Skjaldedigting*, AII: Tekst efter Håndskrifterne, BII: Rettet Tekst, København og Kristiania: Gyldendalske Boghandel / Nordisk Forlag, 1915.
- *Goðafraeði Norðmanna og Íslendinga eftir heimildum*, Reykjavík: Hinu Íslenska Bókmentafjelagi, 1913.
- Fitzhugh, William W. and Elisabeth I. Ward eds., *Vikings. The North Atlantic Saga*, Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000.
- Flint, Valerie J., *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991.
- Foote, Peter and David M. Wilson, *The Viking Achievement. The society and culture of early medieval Scandinavia*, London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1980 (1970).
- Fornaldar Sögur Norðurlanda I-IV*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1981.
- Frank, Roberta, 'Skaldic Poetry', *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, eds. Carol J. Clover and John Lindow, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985, 157-196.
- Friis, J.A., *Lappisk Mythologi, Eventyr og Folkesagn*, Christiania: Cammermeyer, 1871.
- Friis-Jensen, Karsten ed., *Saxo Grammaticus. A medieval author between Norse and Latin culture*, Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum, 1981.
- *Saxo Grammaticus as Latin Poet. Studies in the verse passages of the Gesta Danorum*, Roma: L'erma di Bretschneider, 1987.
- 'Saxo og det 12. Århundredes Renæssance', *Viking og Hvidekrist. Norden og Europa i den sene vikingetid og tidligste middelalder*, ed. Niels Lund, København: C.A. Reitzel, 2000, 93-111.
- Fritzner, Johan, *Ordbog over det gamle norske Sprog. I-III*, Kristiania: Den norske Forlagsforening, 1886-1896.
- Geijer, Agnes, 'Det Textila Arbetet i Norden Under Forntid och Medeltid', *Nordisk Kultur XV*, ed. Sigurd Erixon, Oslo: Aschehoug, København: Schultz, Stockholm: Bonniers, 1953, 66-90.
- 'Bildvävnad', *Kulturhistorisk Leksikon for Nordisk Middelalder 1*, Reykjavík: Bókaverzlun Ísafoldar, 1956, 536-540.

- Gennep, Arnold van, *The Rites of Passage*, tr. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee, London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1960.
- Genzmer, Felix, 'Das Walkürenlied', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 71 (1956): 168-171.
- Giannakis, George, 'The "Fate-as-Spinner" Motif: A Study of the Poetic and Metaphorical Language of Ancient Greek and Indo-European', *Indogermanische Forschungen* 103 (1998): 1-27, *Indogermanische Forschungen* 104 (1999): 95-109.
- Gísli Sigurðsson, 'On the Classification of Eddic Heroic Poetry in View of the Oral Theory', *Poetry in the Scandinavian Middle Ages. The seventh international saga conference*, Spoleto: [no publisher listed], 1988, 245-255.
- ed., *Eddukvæði*, Reykjavík: Mál og Menning, 1998.
- *Gaelic Influence in Iceland*, Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2000.
- "Ein sat hún úti..." Søger Odin viden hos volven i Voluspå – eller fik hun sin viden hos Odin?' *Tradisjon. Tidsskrift for Folkloristik* 30, No.2 / 31, No.1 (2000-2001): 3-13.
- *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition. A Discourse on Method*, Publications of the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature No.2, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2004.
- Gjessing. G.A. tr., *Den Ældre Edda. Norrøne Oldkvad fra Vikingetiden 9-11 Aarh.E.Chr*, Kristiania: Aschehoug, 1899.
- Glob, P.V., *Højfolket*, København: Gyldendals Bogklub, 1971.
- *The Bog People. Iron-Age Man Preserved*, London: Paladin, 1969.
- Goedheer, Albertus Johannes, *Irish and Norse Traditions about the Battle of Clontarf*, Haarlem: H.D.Tjeenk Willink & Zoon, 1938.
- Gonda, Jan, *The Vision of the Vedic Poets*, The Hague: Mouton & Co, 1963.
- Grant, Michael and John Hazel, *Who's Who in Classical Mythology*, London and New York: Routledge, 2004 (1973).
- Gray, Thomas, *The Complete Poems of Thomas Gray. English, Latin and Greek*, eds. H.W. Starr and J.R. Hendrickson, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966.
- Grágás. Lagasafn íslenska þjóðveldisins*, eds. Gunnar Karlsson, Kristján Sveinsson, Mörður Árnason, Reykjavík: Mál og Menning, 1992.
- Grágás I. Laws of Early Iceland. The Codex Regius of Grágás with Material from other Manuscripts. Grágás II. Laws of Early Iceland*, trs. Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, Richard Perkins, Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2000.

- Green, Dennis Howard, *Language and History in the Early Germanic World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998.
- Green, Miranda, *Celtic Goddesses. Warriors, Virgins and Mothers*, London: British Museum Press, 1995.
- Grewing, Farouk, *Martial, Buch VI. Ein Kommentar*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997.
- Griaule, Marcel, *Conversations with Ogotemmêli. An introduction to Dogon religious ideas*, Published for the International African Institute, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965.
- Grimm, Jacob, *Teutonic Mythology Vol.I-IV*, translated from the Fourth Edition with Notes and Appendix by James Steven Stallybrass, Mineola: Dover Publications, originally published 1883 (vols. I-III), 1888 (vol. IV), 2004.
- Grimstad, Kaaren ed., *Völsungasaga – The Saga of the Volsungs. The Icelandic text according to MS Nks 1824 b,4*, Saarbrücken: AQ Verlag, 2000.
- Grundy, Stephan, 'Freyja and Frigg', *The Concept of the Goddess*, eds. Sandra Billington and Miranda Green, London: Routledge, 1996, 56-67.
- Guðrún Nordal, *Tools of Literacy. The role of skaldic verse in Icelandic textual culture of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001.
- Gunn, J., *Orkney. The Magnetic North*, London and Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson, 1932.
- Gunnell, Terry, *The origins of Drama in Scandinavia*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1995.
- 'The Season of the *Dísir*. The Winter Nights, and the *Dísablót* in Early Medieval Scandinavian Belief', *Cosmos* 16, No.2, (2004a [2000]): 117-149.
- 'Hof, Halls, *Goðar* and Dwarves: An examination of the ritual space in the pagan Icelandic hall', *Cosmos* 17, No.1, (2004b [2001]): 3-36.
- 'Eddic Poetry', *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, 82-100.
- Gurevich, Elena A., 'Þulur in *Skáldskaparmál*: An attempt at skaldic lexicology', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 107 (1992): 35-52.
- Gwynn, Edward tr., *The Metrical Dindshenchas Part II and Part III*, Royal Irish Academy, Todd Lecture Series vol.IX. and X, Dublin: Hodges, Figgis & Co, London: Williams & Norgate, 1906-1913.
- Halvorsen, E.F., 'Þulur', *Kulturhistorisk Leksikon for Nordisk Middelalder*, Reykjavík: Bókaverzlun Ísafoldar, 1976, vol 20, 402-405.

- Hamel, A.G. van, 'The Conception of Fate in Early Teutonic and Celtic Religion', *Saga-Book* 11 (1928-1930): 202-214.
- Hansen, Olaf tr., *Den Ældre Edda*, København: V. Pios Boghandel, 1911.
- tr. *Vølvens Spaadom*, København: Selskabet for Grafisk Kunst, 1925.
- Harris, Joseph, 'The Senna: From Description to Literary Theory', *Michigan Germanic Studies* 5, No.1 (1979): 65-74.
- 'Eddic Poetry as Oral Poetry: The evidence of parallel passages in the Helgi poems for questions of composition and performance', *Edda. A collection of essays*, eds. Robert J. Glendinning and Haraldur Bessason, Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1983, 210-242.
- 'Eddic Poetry', *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A critical guide*, eds. Carol J. Clover and John Lindow, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985, 68-156.
- Hastrup, Kirsten, *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland. An anthropological analysis of structure and change*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984.
- Hatto, A.T., 'The Swan Maiden. A Folk-Tale of North Eurasian Origin?', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 24, (1961): 326-352.
- Hauksbok* ed. Finnur Jónsson, Udgiven efter de Arnamagnæanske Håndskrifter no. 371, 544 og 675, 4^o samt forskellige papirshåndskrifter af Det Kongelige Nordiske Oldskrift-Selskab, København: Thieles Bogtrykkeri, 1892-1896.
- Heide, Eldar, *Fjølsvinnsmål. Ei oversett nøkkelkjelde til nordisk mytologi*, Magisteravhandling i norrøn filologi, Universitetet i Oslo, [unpublished], 1997.
- *Gand, Seid og Åndevind*, Dr. art.-avhandling, Bergen: Universitetet i Bergen, 2006.
- Heiðreks saga. Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs*, ed. Jón Helgason, København: Jørgensen, 1924.
- Helga Kress, *Máttugar Meyjar*, Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1993.
- 'Taming the Shrew: The Rise of Patriarchy and the Subordination of the Feminine in Old Norse Literature', *Cold Counsel - Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology*, ed. Sarah M. Anderson, New York and London: Routledge, 2002, 81-92.
- Hennessy, W.M., 'The Ancient Irish Goddess of War', *Revue Celtique* I (1870-1872): 32-57.
- Hermann Pálsson, *Keltar á Íslandi*, Reykjavík: Háskólasagnaútgáfan, 1996a.
- *Vølpá. The Sibyl's Prophecy*, Edinburgh: Lockharton Press, 1996b.
- Hertz, Wilhelm, *Der Werwolf. Beitrag zur Sagensgeschichte*, Stuttgart: Verlag von A.

Kröner, 1862. Reprinted 1973 by Dr. Martin Sändig oHG. Walluf bei Wiesbaden.

History of the Langobards by Paul the Deacon / Warnefridus Paulus Diaconus, tr. William Dudley Foulke, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, New York: Longmans, Green & Co, 1907.

Hjortsø, Leo, *Græske Guder og Helte*, København: Politiken, 1984.

Hoffmann, Marta, *The Warp-Weighted Loom. Studies in the History and Technology of an Ancient Implement*, Studia Norvegica no. 14, Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1964.

Hofseth, Ellen Høigård, 'Spinnesiden – et uttrykk bare for flittige hender?', *Viking – Tidsskrift for norrøn arkeologi* 53 (1990): 102-116.

Holmqvist-Larsen, Niels Henrik, *Møer, Skjoldmøer og Krigere. En studie i og omkring 7. bog af Saxo's Gesta Danorum*, København: Museum Tusulanum, 1983.

Holtmark, Anne, (1939) "Vefr Darraðar", *Maal og Minne*, (1939): 74-96.

--- 'Skáro á Skíði. Til tolkning av Voluspá 20', *Maal og Minne*, (1951): 81-89.

--- 'Arbeidssanger', *Kulturhistorisk Leksikon for nordisk middelalder*, Reykjavík: Bókaverzlun Ísafoldar, 1956, vol 1, 201-203.

--- *Norrøn Mytologi*, Oslo: Det Norske Samlaget, 1990 (1970).

Homer - The Iliad, tr. Martin Hammond, London: Penguin Books, 1987.

Homer – The Odyssey, tr. E.V. and D.C.H. Rieu, London: Penguin Books, 1991.

Horneij, Ruth, *Bonaderna från Överhogdal*, [n.pl.]: Jämtlands läns museum, 1991.

Hougen, Bjørn, 'Osebergfunnets Billedvev', *Viking - Tidsskrift for norrøn arkeologi* 4 (1940): 85-124.

Hultgård, Anders ed., *Uppsala och Adam av Bremen*, [n.pl.]: Bokförlaget Nya Doxa, 1997.

Hyer, Maren Clegg, 'Textiles and Textile Imagery in the *Exeter Book*', *Medieval Clothing and Textile*, eds. R. Netherton and G.R. Owen-Crocker, Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005, 29-39.

Højrup, Ole, *Landbokvinden. Rok og kærne, grovbrød og vadmél*, København: Nationalmuseet, 1978 (1966).

Ilkjær, Jørgen, (2002) 'Den Bevidste Ødelæggelse i Krigsbytteofringerne', *Plats och praxis. Studier av nordisk förkristen ritual*, Vägar till Midgård, eds. K. Jennbert, A. Andrén, C. Raudvere, Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2002, vol 2, 203-213.

- Ingunn Ásdísardóttir, *Frigg og Freyja. Kvenleg goðmögn í heiðnum sið*, Reykjavík: Reykjavíkur Akadémían and Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 2007.
- Íslenskur Söguatlas. 1. bindi: Frá öndverðu til 18. aldar*, eds. Árni Daníel Júlíússon, Jón Ólafur Ísberg, Helgi Skúli Kjartansson, Reykjavík: Almenna Bókfélagið, 1989.
- Jacobsen, Mads Andreas and Christian Matras, *Føroysk – Donsk Orðabók / Færøsk – Dansk Ordbog*, Tórshavn: Felagið Varðin, København: J.H. Schiltz, 1927-1928; 2. útgáva, nógv broytt og økt, Tórshavn: Føroya Fróðskaparfelag. Tórshavn, 1961.
- Jackson, Elizabeth, 'Scáro á scíði ørlög seggia': The Composition of *Völuspá* 20 and the Implications of the Hauksbók Variant', *Alvíssmál* 9 (1999): 73-88.
- Jakobsen, Alfred, 'Et Problem i Helgakviða Hundingsbana I', *Maal og Minne* (1966): 1-10.
- Jarlmanns saga ok Hermanns*, ed. Agnete Loth, Late Medieval Icelandic Romances III, Copenhagen: [n.pub.], 1963.
- Jesch, Judith, *Women in the Viking Age*, Woodbridhe: The Boydell Press, 1991.
- Jochens, Jenny, 'The Female Inciter in the Kings' Sagas', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 102 (1987): 100-119.
- 'Gender Symmetry in Law? The case of medieval Iceland', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 108 (1993): 46-67.
- *Women in Old Norse Society*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995.
- *Old Norse Images of Women*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996.
- Johansen, Erling, 'Billedveven fra Haugen – en Arkeologisk Åpenbaring i Farger', *Viking – Tidsskrift for norrøn arkeologi* 49 (1986): 147-152.
- Johansson, Karl G., 'Urds Brunn – en källa till förkristen religion i Norden? Et försök att tolka *Völuspá* 17-20', *Gudar på Jorden. Festskrift till Lars Lönnroth*, eds. Stina Hanson and Mats Malm, Stockholm/Stehag: [n.pub.], 2000, 44-56.
- Josefsson, Gunlög, 'Var Embla en klängranka? Om den fornnordiske skapelsemyten såsom den möter oss i *Völuspá*', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 116 (2001): 71-96.
- Jóhannesson, Alexander, *Isländisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, Bern: Francke Verlag, 1956.
- Jómsvíkinga saga efter arnamagnæanske Håndskriften No. 291. 4to*, ed. Carl Petersen, København: [n.pub.], 1882.
- Jón Árnarson, *Íslenzkar Þjóðsögur og Ævintýri I*, Reykjavík: Prentsmiðjan Hólar, 1954.

- Jón Helgason, *Tvær Kviður Fornar*, Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1962.
- Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, 'Blót and Þing. The Function of the Tenth Century Goði', *Temenos* 21 (1985): 23-38.
- *Blót í Norrænum Sið. Rýnt í forn trúarbrögð með þjóðfræðilegri aðferð*, Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, Félagsvísindastofnun, 1997.
- *Under the Cloak. A pagan ritual turning point in the conversion of Iceland*, Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, Félagsvísindastofnun, 1999.
- 'The *Varðlokkur* of Guðriður Þorbjarnadóttir', *Northern Lights. Following Folklore in North-Western Europe. Essays in honour of Bo Almqvist*, ed. Séamas Ó Catháin, Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2001, 97-110.
- 'Scmied, Schmiedehandwerk, Schmiedewerkzeuge', *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, ed. Johannes Hoops, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004, vol 27, 194-197.
- 'War Freyja eine Kriegsgöttin?' *Skandinavistik* 36, No.1 (2006): 32-42.
- Jónas Kristjánsson, 'Tólf álna garn', *Festskrift til Ludvig Holm-Olsen*, 207-219, Øvre Ervik: [n.pub.], 1984.
- *Eddas and sagas. Iceland's medieval literature*, tr. Peter Foote, Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1988.
- 'Heiðin trú í fornkvæðum', *Snorrastefna*, ed. Úlfar Bragason, Reykjavík: Stofnun Sigurðar Nordals, 1992, 99-112.
- Kalevala – The Land of the Heroes*, tr. W.F. Kirby and M.A. Branch, London and Dover: The Athlone Press, 1985.
- Kasik, Jon C., 'The Use of the Term *Wyrd* in *Beowulf* and the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxons', *Neophilologus* 63 (1979): 128-135.
- Kershaw, Nora ed. and tr., *Anglo-Saxon and Norse Poems*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922.
- Kiil, Vilhelm, 'Hliðskjalf og Seiðhjallr', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 75 (1960): 84-112.
- Kinsella, Thomas tr., *The Tain*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969.
- Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda 2: Götterlieder (Skírnismál, Hárbarðsljóð, Hymiskviða, Lokasenna, Þrymskviða)*, eds. Klaus von See et al., Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1997.
- Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda 3: Götterlieder (Völundarkviða, Alvíssmál, Baldrs draumar, Rígsþula, Hyndluljóð, Grottasöngur)*, eds. Klaus von See et al., Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 2000.

Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda 4: Heldenlieder (Helgakviða Hundingsbana I, Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar, Helgakviða Hundingsbana II), eds. Klaus von See et al., Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2004.

Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda 5: Heldenlieder (Frá dauða Sinfjötla, Grípisspá, Reginsmál, Fáfnismál, Sigrdrífumál), eds. Klaus von See et al., Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2006.

Konungsbók Eddukvæða. Codex regius, eds. Vésteinn Ólason and Guðvarður Már Gunnlaugsson, Reykjavík: Edda, 2001.

Kragerud, Alv, 'De Mytologisk Spørgsmål i Fávnesmål', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 96 (1981): 9-48.

Krákumál, ed. Finnur Jónsson, Oversigt over det kongelige danske Videnskabernes Selskabs forhandlinger, No.2, København, 1905.

Krömmelbein, Thomas, 'Creative Compilers. Observations on the Manuscript Tradition of Snorri's *Edda*', *Snorrastefna*, ed. Úlfar Bragason, Reykjavík: Stofnun Sigurðar Nordals, 1992, 113-129.

Kulonen, Ulla-Maija, Irja Seurujärvi-Kari, Risto Pulkkinen eds., *The Saami. A cultural encyclopedia*, Seura: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden, 2005.

Kure, Henning, 'Drinking from Odin's pledge', *The Fantastic in Old Norse / Icelandic Literature. Sagas and the British Isles. Preprint papers of the 13th International Saga Conference*, eds. John McKinnell, David Ashurst, Donata Kick, Durham: Durham University, 2006, 533-540.

Kuusi, Matti ed., *A Trail for Singers. Finnish Folk Poetry: Epic*, tr. Keith Bosley, Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 1995.

Lampe, G.W.H. ed., *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961.

Landnámabók Íslands ed. Finnur Jónsson, Udgiven efter de gamle håndskrifter af Det Kongelige Nordiske Oldskriftsselskab til minde om dets hundrede år 1825-1925; på Carlsbergfondets bekostning, København: H.H. Thieles Bogtrykkeri, 1925.

Landnámabók – Book of Settlements, eds. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, University of Manitoba Icelandic Studies Vol.I, Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1972.

Larrington, Carolyne ed., *The Feminist Companion to Mythology*, London: Pandora Press, 1992.

--- tr., *The Poetic Edda*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Larson, Laurence Marcellus, *Canute the Great and the rise of Danish Imperialism during the Viking Age*, New York and London: G.P.Putnam's Sons / The Knickerbocker Press, 1912.

- Lassen, Annette, *Øjet og Blindheden i Norrøn Literatur og Mytologi*. København: Museum Tusulanum, 2003.
- Laxdæla saga*, eds. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969.
- Lehmann, Edvard, 'Tvekønnede Frugtbarhedsguder i Norden', *Maal og Minne*, (1919): 1-4.
- Lewis, Mark Edward, *Writing and Authority in Early China*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999.
- Lexicon Poeticum – Antiquæ Linguae Septentrionalis. Ordbog over det norsk-islandske Skjaldesprog*, ed. Finnur Jónsson oprindelig forfattet af Sveinbjörn Egilsson, 2. udgave ved Finnur Jónsson, København, 1931.
- Liberman, Anatoly, *Word Heath. Wortheide. Orðheiði. Essays on Germanic Literature and Usage (1972-1992)*, Roma: Il Calamo, 1994.
- 'What Happened to Female Dwarfs?' *Mythological Women. Studies in Memory of Lotte Motz*, eds. Rudolf Simek and Wilhelm Heizmann, Wien: Fassbaender, 2002, 257-263.
- Lid, Nils, 'Light-Mother and Earth-Mother', *Studia Norvegica* 4 (1946): 3-20.
- Lindholm, Dan and Walther Roggenkamp, *Stave Churches in Norway*, London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1969.
- Lindow, John, *Murder and Vengeance Among the Gods. Baldr in Scandinavian Mythology*, FF Communications 262, Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1997.
- *Handbook in Norse Mythology*, Santa Barbara, California; Denver, Colorado; Oxford, England: ABC-CLIO, 2001.
- Lindquist, Ivar, *Galdrar – De gamla germanska trollsångernas stil undersökt i samband med en svensk runinskrift från folkvandringstiden*, Göteborg: Elanders Boktryckeri Aktiebolag, 1923.
- Louis-Jensen, Jonna, 'A Good Day's Work: Laxdæla saga, ch. 49', *Twenty-eight papers presented to Hans Bekker-Nielsen*, Odense: Odense University Press, 1993, 267-281.
- 'Kristus ved Urds Kilde', *Gudar på Jorden. Festskrift till Lars Lönnroth*, eds. Stina Hanson and Mats Malm, Stockholm/Stehag: [n.pub.], 2000, 76-84.
- Loumand, Ulla, *Ad de Dødes Stier – en religionsvidenskabelig analyse af hestens symbolske funktion i den førkristne begravelse med særlig vægt på Island*, speciale i religionsvidenskab, Århus: Aarhus Universitet, [unpublished], 2005.
- Lund, Troels, *Dagligt Liv i Norden i det sekstende Aarhundrede VIII*, København and ristiania: Gyldendalske Boghandel / Nordisk Forlag, 1908.

- Lönnroth, Lars, 'Hetjunar líta bleika akra. Athuganir á Njáls sögu og Alexanders ögu', *Skírnir* 144 (1970): 2-30.
- MacCana, Proinsias, *Celtic Mythology*, London: Chancellor Press, 1996 (1968).
- MacKillop, James, *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004 (1998).
- Martialis, Marcus Valerius – Epigrammata*, ed. W.M. Lindsay, *Recognovit brevique adnotatione critica instruxit. Scriptorum classicorum bibliotheca Oxoniensis*, Oxonii e typographeo Clarendoniano, 1903.
- McKinnell, John, *Both One and Many. Essays on change and variety in late Norse heathenism*, *Philologia* 1, Roma: Il Calamo, 1994.
- 'Mantik', *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, ed. Johannes Hoops, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2001a, vol 19, 245-257.
- 'On Heiðr', *Saga-Book* 25, No.4, (2001b): 394-417.
- 'Þorgerðr Hölgabrúðr and Hyndluljóð', *Mythological Women. Studies in Memory of Lotte Motz*, eds. Rudolf Simek and Wilhelm Heizmann, Wien: Fassbaender, 2002, 265-290.
- 'Encounters with Völur', *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross, Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2003, 110-131.
- *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005.
- McKinnell, John and Rudolf Simek with Klaus Düwel, *Runes, Magic and Religion. A Sourcebook*, Wien: Fassbaender, 2004.
- McMahon, James V., 'Valkyries, Midwives, Weavers, and Shape-Changers: Atli's Mother the Snake', *Scandinavian Studies* 66, No. 4, (1994): 475-487.
- McNamara, Jo Ann tr., *The Life of St. Eligius*, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsa/basis/eligius.html>, 1997.
- McNaughton, Douglas, 'A World in Transition. Early Cartography of the North Atlantic', *Vikings. The North Atlantic Saga*, eds. William W. Fitzhugh and Elisabeth I. Ward, Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000, 257-269.
- Meletinskij, Eleazar, (1973a) 'Scandinavian Mythology as a System', *Journal of Symbolic Anthropology* 1 (1973a): 43-57 and 2 (1973b): 57-78.
- Meulengracht Sørensen, Preben, *Saga og Samfund*, København: Berlingske Forlag, 1977.
- *The Unmanly Man. Concepts of sexual defamation in early Northern society*, Odense: Odense University Press, 1983.

- *Fortælling og ære. Studier i Islændingesagaerne*, Århus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 1993.
- Meulengracht Sørensen, Preben and Gro Steinsland eds., *Vølvens Spådom*, København: Høst & Søn, 2001.
- Meyer, Kuno ed., 'The Song of the Sword of Cerball', *Revue Celtique* 20 (1899): 7-12.
- Miller, William Ian, 'Dreams, Prophecy and Sorcery: Blaming the secret offender in medieval Iceland', *Scandinavian Studies* 58 (1986): 101-123.
- *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking – Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- Mitchell, Stephen A., 'För Scírnis as Mythological Model: *frið at kaupð*', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 98 (1983): 108-122.
- *Heroic Sagas and Ballads*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991.
- 'Warlocks, Valkyries and Varlets: A Prolegomenon to the Study of North Sea Witchcraft Terminology', *Cosmos* 17, No.1, (2001 [2004]): 59-81.
- Mittner, Ladislaus, *Wurd. Das Sakrale in der altgermanischen Epik*, Berlin: Francke Verlag, 1955.
- Morkinskinna*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, København: Jørgensen, 1932.
- Motz, Lotte, (1980) 'Sister in the Cave; the stature and the function of the female figures of the *Eddas*', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 95 (1980): 168-182.
- Muir, Bernard J. ed., *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry. An edition of Exeter Dean and Chapter MS 3501 1: Texts*, Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1994.
- Mundal, Else, *Fylgjemotiva i Norrøn Litteratur*, Oslo, Bergen, Tromsø: Universitetsforlaget, 1974.
- 'Supernatural beings –5. Norns', *Medieval Scandinavia. An Encyclopedia*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano, New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1993, 625-626.
- Müller-Wille, Michael, 'Offerplatser på Kontinenten. Några exempel från förkristen tid', *Plats och Praxis, studier av nordisk förkristen ritual*, Vägar till Midgård, eds. K. Jennbert, A. Andrén, C. Raudvere, Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2002, vol 2, 135-166.
- Nagy, Gregory, *Poetry as Performance. Homer and Beyond.*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Naumann, Hans, 'Der König und die Seherin', *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 63 (1938): 347-358.

- Neckel, Gustav ed., *Edda. Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*. 1: Text, Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1936.
- Nedoma, Robert, *Es sol geoffenbaret sein | Ich bin genannt Wieland. Friedrich von Schwaben, Wielandssage und Völundarkviða. Erzählen im mittelalterlichen Skandinavien*, eds. Robert Nedoma, Hermann Reichert, Günter Zimmermann, Wien: Edition Praesens, 2000, 103-115.
- Neumann, Eduard, *Das Schicksal in der Edda I. Der Schicksalsbegriff in der Edda*, Giessen: Wilhelm Schmitz Verlag, 1955.
- Ney, Agneta, *Drottningar och Sköldmör. Gränsöverskridande kvinnor i medeltida myt och verklighet ca 400-1400*, Gidlunds Förlag, 2004.
- Njörður P. Njarðvík, *Sólarljóð*, Reykjavík: Bókmenntafræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands og Menningasjóður, 1991.
- Norges gamle Love. Norges Love indtil 1387 I-V*, eds. R. Keyser, P.A. Munch, Christiania: Grøndahl, 1846-95.
- Norrman, Lena E., 'Visual and Verbal Art: Weaving and Poetry in Classical Greek and Old Norse Narratives', *Cosmos* 20, (2004 [2006]): 121-151.
- Näsström, Britt-Mari, *Freyja – the Great Goddess of the North*, Lund: Department of History of Religions, University of Lund, 1995.
- O'Donoghue, Heather, *Skaldic Verse and the Poetics of Saga Narrative*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- O'Grady, Standish H. ed., *Silva Gadelica. A Collection of Tales in Irish*, Vols 1 and 2, London and Edinburgh: Williams and Norgate, 1892.
- ÓhÓgáin, Daithi, *Myth, legend and Romance. An Encyclopedia of Irish Folk Tradition*, London: Ryan Publishing, 1990.
- *The Lore of Ireland: An Encyclopedia of Myth, legend and Romance*, Cork: Collins Press, 2006.
- Onians, Richard Broxton, *The Origins of European Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951.
- Olsen, Magnus ed., *Norges Innskrifter med de Yngre Runer* 4, XI: Hordaland Fylke XII: Sogn og Fjordane Fylke XIII: Møre og Romsdal Fylke, Oslo: Bokcentralen, 1957.
- Ordbog over det Norrøne Prosasprog. Registre*, København: Den Arnamagnæanske Kommission, 1989.
- O'Rahilly, Cecile ed., *Táin Bó Cúalnge. From the Book of Leinster*, Dublin: The Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1967.

- ed. *Táin Bó Cúailnge. Recension I*, Dublin: The Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1976.
- Orkneyinga Saga – The History of the Earls of Orkney*, tr. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, London: Penguin Books, 1981 (1978).
- Ovid – Metamorphoses V-VIII*, tr. D.E. Hill, Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1992.
- Ovid – Sorrows of an Exile – Tristia*, tr. A.D. Melville and E.J. Kennedy, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Ovidi Nasonis – Tristivm Libri Qvinque Ibis Ex Ponto – Libri Qvattvor Halievtica Fragmenta*, ed. S.G. Owen, Recgnovit brevique adnotatione critica instrvxit. Scriptorum classicorum bibliotheca Oxoniensis, Oxonii e typographeo Clarendoniaono, 1915.
- The Oxford English Dictionary I-XII*, eds. J.A.H. Murray, H. Bradley, W.A. Craigie, C.T. Onions, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961 (1933).
- Oxford Latin Dictionary*, ed. P.G.W. Glare, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976.
- Ólafur Briem, *Heiðinn Siður á Íslandi*, Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfa Menningarsjóðs, 1985.
- Ólafur Halldórson, 'Morgunverk Guðrúnar Ósvífsdóttur', *Skírnir* 147 (1973): 125-128.
- Page, R.I., *Runes*, London: The British Museum Press, 1987.
- Petersen, Carl S and Vilhelm Andersen, *Illustreret Dansk Litteraturhistorie*, København: Gyldendal, 1929.
- Pokorny, Julius, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, Vols 1 and 2, Bern and München: Franckes Verlag, 1959-1969.
- Poole, Russell, 'Darraðarljóð 2: Qrum hrælaðr', *Maal og Minne*, (1985): 87-94.
- *Viking Poems on War and Peace. A Study in Skaldic Narrative*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991.
- Power, Rosemary, 'Le Lai de Lanval and Helga þátr Þórissonar', *Bibliotheca Arnamagnæana* 38 (1985): 158-161.
- 'Geasa and Álög: Magic Formulae and Perilous Quests in Gaelic and Norse', *Scottish Studies* 28 (1987): 69-89.
- Preller, L., *Griechische Mythologie. Erster band. Theogonie und Goetter*, bearbeitet von Carl Robert, Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1894.
- Prechtel, Martin and Robert S. Carlsen, 'Weaving and Cosmos amongst the Tzutujil Maya of Guatemala', *Res* 15 (1988): 123-132.
- Price, Neil S., *The Viking Way. Religion and War in Late iron Age Scandinavia*,

Uppsala: University of Uppsala, 2002.

Pulsiano, Phillip ed., *Medieval Scandinavia – An Encyclopedia*, New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1993.

Quinn, Judy 'Dialogue with a *Völva*: *Völuspá*, *Baldurs draumar* and *Hyndluljóð*, *The Poetic Edda – Essays on Old Norse Mythology*, eds. Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington, New York and London: Routledge, 2002, 245-274.

--- 'The Gendering of Death in Eddic Cosmology', *Old Norse religion in long-term perspectives. Origins, changes, and interactions*, eds. A. Andrén, K. Jennbert, C. Raudvere, Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2006, 54-57.

Raudvere, Catharina, *Kunskap och Insikt i Norrön Tradition. Mytologi, ritualer och trolldomsanklagelser. Vägar till Midgård*, Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2003, vol 3.

Ränk, Gustav, 'Lapp Female Deities of the Madder-akka Group', *Studia Septentrionalia* VI, (1955): 7-80.

Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde, Zweite, völlig neu bearbeitete und stark erweiterte Auflage, ed. Johannes Hoops, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1973-2007.

Rees, Alwyn and Brinley Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1961.

Reichborn-Kjennerud, I., *Vår Gamle Trolldomsmedisin II*, Skrifter utgitt av Det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi I Oslo, II: Historisk-Filologisk Klasse 1933, no.2, Utgitt for Fridtjof Nansens Fond, Oslo: Jacob Dybwad, 1933.

Reichel-Dolmatoff, R., 'The Loom of Life: A Kogi Principle of Integration', *Journal of Latin American Lore* 4, (1978): 1, 5-27.

Rimbert – Angars liv. Boken om Ansgar, tr. Eva Odelman, Stockholm: Proprius Förlag, 1986.

Roesdahl, Else, *Vikingernes Verden*, København: Gyldendal, 1996 (1987).

Roper, Alan H., 'Boethius and the Three Fates of *Beowulf*', *Philological Quarterly* 41, No. 2, (1962): 386-400.

Ross, Anne, *Pagan Celtic Britain – Studies in Iconography and Tradition*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, New York: Columbia University Press, 1967.

Roussell, Aage, *Farms and Churches in the Mediaeval Norse Settlements of Greenland*, Reprinted from: *Meddelelser om Grønland* 89, København: C.A. Reitzel, 1941.

Rud, Mogens, *Bayeux Tapetet og Slaget ved Hastings 1066*, København: Christian Ejlers' Forlag, 2000 (1983).

Rudebeck, Elisabeth, 'Vägen som Rituell Arena', *Plats och Praxis, studier av nordisk*

förkristen ritual, Vagar till Midgård, eds. K. Jennbert, A. Andrén, C. Raudvere, Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2002, vol 2, 167-200.

Sandvik, Gudmund and Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, 'Laws', *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, 223-244.

Sayers, William, 'Old Irish *Fert* 'Tie-pole', *Fert* as 'Swingletree', and the Seeress Feidelm', *Études Celtiques* 21, (1984): 171-183.

--- 'Women's Work and Words: Setting the Stage for Strife in Medieval Irish and Icelandic Narrative', *Mankind Quarterly* 31, No.1-2, (1990): 59-86.

--- 'Norse Weaves and Irish Woolens in Medieval Ireland: ME *Falding*', *American Journal of Germanic Linguistics and Literatures* 4, No.1, (1992a): 43-54.

--- 'Sexual Identity, Cultural Integrity, Verbal and other Magic in Episodes from *Laxdæla saga* and *Kormáks saga*', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 107, (1992b): 131-155.

--- 'A Scurrilous Episode in Landnámabók: Tjörvi the Mocker', *Maal og minne*, (1993): 127-148.

Saxo Grammaticus. The History of the Danes, Vols 1 and 2, ed. Hilda Ellis Davidson, tr. Peter Fisher, Cambridge: D.S.Brewer, 1979-1980.

--- *Gesta Danorum. Danmarkshistorien 1-2*, eds. Karsten Friis-Jensen and Peter Zeeberg, København: Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab and Gads Forlag, 2005.

Schjødt, Jens Peter, 'Nío man ec heima, nío íviði, miqtvið mæran fyr mold neðan. Tid og rum i Völuspá 2', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 107, (1992): 156-166.

--- 'Myths as Sources for Rituals – Theoretical and Practical Implications', *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross, Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2003, 261-278.

--- *Initiation, Liminalitet og Tilegnelse af Numinøs Viden. En undersøgelse af struktur og symbolik i førkristen nordisk religion*, Det Teologiske Fakultet, Århus: Aarhus Universitet. (Afhandling til forsvar for den filosofiske doktorsgrad), [unpublished], 2003.

Scott, Forrest S., 'The Woman Who Knows: Female Characters of *Eyrbyggja Saga*, *Cold Counsel – Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology*, ed. Sarah M. Anderson, New York and London: Routledge, 2002, 225-243.

See, Klaus von, 'Das Walkürenlied', *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur*, Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1959, 1-15.

--- *Edda, Saga, Skaldendichtung*, Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1981.

Shakespeare, William – Othello, ed. Kenneth Muir, London: Penguin Books, 1996.

- *Macbeth*, ed. John F. Andrews, London: Everyman, 1990.
- Sigurður Nordal ed., *Vpluspá*, trs. B.S. Benedizk and John McKinnell, Durham: Durham and St Andrews Medieval Texts, Number 1, 1978 (1952).
- Sijmons, B. and H. Gering eds., *Die Lieder der Edda III/1*, Halle: Buchhandlung des Waisenhauses, 1927.
- Simek, Rudolf, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, Cambridge: D.S.Brewer, 1993.
- 'Schicksalsglaube', *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, ed. Johannes Hoops, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004, vol 27, 8-10.
- Simek, Rudolf and Wilhelm Heizmann eds., *Mythological Women. Studies in Memory of Lotte Motz*, Wien: Fassbaender, 2002.
- Simpson, Jaqueline, *Icelandic Folktales and Legends*, London: B.T. Batsford, 1972.
- Sjoestedt, Marie-Louise, *Gods and Heroes of the Celts*, Mineola: Dover Publications, 2000 (1949).
- Skar, Johannes, *Bygdelliv. Gamalt or Sætesdal IV*, Kristiania: Olaf Norlis Forlag, 1909.
- Snorre Sturlason. Heimskringla or the Lives of The Norse Kings*, ed. Erling Monsen, tr. A.H. Smith, Cambridge: W. Heffer, 1932.
- *Kongesagaer*, tr. Anne Holtsmark and Didrik Arup Seip, Oslo: Gyldendal, 1957.
- Snorri Sturluson – Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. Anthony Faulkes, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982.
- *Edda*, tr. Anthony Faulkes, London: Everyman, 1987.
- *Edda: Skáldskaparmál. 1. Introduction, Text and Notes*, ed. Anthony Faulkes, Viking Society for Northern Research, London: University College London, 1998.
- *Edda*, Reykjavík: Iðunn, 2003.
- *The Prose Edda. Norse Mythology*, tr. Jesse L. Byock, London and New York: Penguin Books, 2005.
- *Heimskringla: Nóregs Konunga Sögur*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, København: GEC Gads Forlag, 1911.
- Stafford, Pauline, *Queen Emma and Queen Edith. Queenship and women's power in eleventh century England*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997.
- Statius – Thebaid 1-7; 8-12*, ed. D.R. Shackleton Bailey, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2003.

- Stavropoulos, D.N., *Oxford Greek-English Learner's Dictionary*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Stefánsson, Finn, *Gyldendals Leksikon om Nordisk Mytologi*, København: Gyldendal, 2005.
- Steinsland, Gro, *Det Hellige Bryllup og Norrøn Kongeideologi – En analyse af Hierogami-myten i Skírnismál, Yngligatal, Háleygjatal og Hyndluljóð*, Utgitt med støtte fra Norges allmennvitenskapelige forskningsråd, [n.pl.]: Solum Forlag, 1991.
- *Eros og Død i Norrøne Myter*, Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1997.
- *Norrøn Religion. Myter, Riter og Samfunn*, Oslo: Pax Forlag, 2005.
- Stephenson, H.M. ed., *Selected Epigrams of Martial*, London: Macmillan and Co., 1929.
- Stevenson, William Henry, *Asser's Life of King Alfred – together with the Annals of Saint Neots*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1904.
- Stokes, Whitley ed., 'Bruiden Da Chocae. The Hostel of Da Choca', *Revue Celtique* XXI, (1900): 149-165, 312-327 and 388-402.
- ed., *In Cath Catharda – The Civil war of the Roman. An Irish version of Lucan's Pharsalia*, Irische Texte mit Übersetzungen und Wörterbuch, Vierte Serie, 2. Heft, eds. Stokes, W. and E. Windisch, Leipzig: Verlag von S. Hirzel, 1909.
- Storm, Gustav, 'Om Thorgerd Hölgebrud', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 2, (1885): 124-135.
- Strabo – The Geography* 3, tr. Horace Leonard Jones, London: William Heinemann and New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1924.
- Straubhaar, Sandra Ballif, (2002) 'Ambiguously Gendered: The Skalds Jörunn, Auðr and Steinunn', *Cold Counsel – Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology*, ed. Sarah M. Anderson, New York and London: Routledge, 2002, 261-271.
- Ström, Folke, *Diser, Nornor, Valkyrjor. Fruktbarhetskult och sakralt kungadöme i Norden*, Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1954.
- *Nordisk Hedendom – Tro och Sed i Förkristen Tid*, Göteborg: Akademiförlaget, 1985 (1961).
- Ström, Åke V., 'Scandinavian Belief in Fate. A comparison between pre-Christian and post-Christian times', *Fatalistic Beliefs in Religion, Folklore, and Literature*, ed. Helmer Ringgren, Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1967, 63-88.
- Strömbäck, Dag, *Sejd*, Stockholm: Hugo Gebers Förlag, 1935.
- *Tidrande och Diserna – Ett Filologiskt-Folkloristiskt Utkast*, Lund: [n.pub.], 1949.

- *Folklore och Filologi*, Valda uppsatser utgivna av Kungl. Gustav Adolfs Akademien, Uppsala: AB Lundequistska Bokhandeln, 1970.
- Sturlunga Saga I-III*, ed. Örnólfur Thorsson et al., Reykjavík: Svart á hvítu, 1988.
- Sundqvist, Olof, *Freyr's Offspring. Rulers and Religion in Ancient Svea Society*, Dissertation for the Degree of Doctor of Theology at Uppsala University, Distributed by the Department of Theology, Uppsala University, 2000.
- Svabo, J.C., *Dictionarium Færoense. Færøsk-dansk-latinsk ordbog*, Udgivet efter håndskrifterne af Chr. Matras, I-Ordbogen; II-Indledning og Registre, København: Munksgaard, 1970.
- Svava Jakobsdóttir, 'Gunnlóð and the Precious Mead (Hávamál)', *The Poetic Edda – Essays on Old Norse Mythology*, eds. Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington, New York and London: Routledge, 2002, 27-57. (First printed in *Skírnir* 162 [1988]: 215-245).
- Swanton, M.J. ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, London: J.M. Dent, 1996.
- Säve, C. and P.A., *Gotländsk Ordbok*, ed. Herbert Gustavson, Uppsala: Lundequistska Bokhandeln, and København: Munksgaard, 1941-1945.
- Sölvi Sveinsson, 'Allt veit eg, Óðinn. Hugleiðingar um Völuspá og túlkun hennar', *Tímarit Máls og Menningar*, (1993): 7-25.
- Tacitus – Cornelii Taciti. De Origine et Situ Germanorum*, ed. J.G.C. Anderson, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938.
- *The Agricola and the Germania*, ed. H. Mattingly, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970 (1948).
- *The Histories*, ed. D.S. Levene, tr. W.H. Fyfe, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Tang Kristensen, Evald, *Danske Sagn som de har lydt i Folkemunde. Ny række. II. Afdeling*, København: Woels Forlag, 1928.
- Taylor, Paul Beekman, 'Wielders and Wasters of Words: Bare Lies and Garnished Truths in *Njáls saga*', *Sagnaskemmtun*, eds. R. Simek, J. Kristjánsson, H. Bekker-Nielsen, Wien, Köln and Graz, 1986, 287-296.
- Tobing, Ph.O.L., *The Structure of the Toba-Batak Belief in the High God*, South and South-East Celebes Institute for Culture, Amsterdam: Jacob van Campen, 1963 (1953)..
- Todd, Malcolm, *The Early Germans*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992.
- Tolley, Clive, 'The Mill in Norse and Finnish Mythology', *Saga-Book* 24, No.2-3, (1995): 63-82.
- Torfi H. Tulinius, 'Sagas of Icelandic Prehistory (*fornaldarsögur*)', *A Companion to*

Old Norse-Icelandic literature and Culture, ed. Rory McTurk, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, 447-461.

--- *The Matter of the North. The rise of literary fiction in thirteenth century Iceland*, tr. Randi C. Eldvik, Odense: Odense University Press, 2002.

Turville-Petre, E.O.G., *Scaldic Poetry*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976.

--- *Myth and Religion of the North. The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964.

Upplandslagen, ed. O.F. Hultman, Helsingfors: Skrifter utgivna av Svenska Litteratursällskapet i Finland, 1916.

Uther, Hans-Jörg, *The Types of International Folktales. A classification and Bibliography*, FF Communications 284, 285, 286, Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2004.

Úlfar Bragason ed., *Snorrastefna*, Reykjavík: Stofnun Sigurðar Nordals, 1992.

--- 'Sagas of Contemporary History (*Sturlunga saga*): Texts and Research', *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, 427-446.

Vaitkevičienė, Daiva, 'Laima gimtuvėse ir krikštynose', *Tautosakos darbai XVI (XXIII)*, (2002): 123-139.

Valtyr Guðmundsson, *Privatboligen på Island i Sagatiden samt delvis i det øvrige Norden*, København: Høst & Søn, 1889.

Vebæk, C.L., 'Vatnahverfi. An inland district of the Eastern Settlement in Greenland', *Meddelelser om Grønland – Man & Society* 17, Kommissionen for videnskabelige Undersøgelser i Grønland, København, 1992.

Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age. Narration and Representation in the Sagas of Icelanders*, tr. Andrew Wawn, Reykjavík: Heimskringla, Mál og Menning Academic Division, 1998.

--- 'Setbergs kveða sitja', *International Scandinavian and Medieval Studies in Memory of Gerd Wolfgang Weber*, eds. Michael Dallopiazza et al., Trieste: [n.pub.], 2000, 483-487.

--- 'Grottasöngur', *Gripla* XVI, (2005): 115-135.

Vigfusson, Gudbrand and F. York Powell eds., *Corpus Poeticum Boreale. The Poetry of the Old Northern Tongue from the earliest times to the thirteenth century 1: Eddic Poetry*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1883.

Vries, Jan de, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte 1-2*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co, 1956-1957.

--- *Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1961.

- Warmind, Morten, *From Severed Heads to Valkyries. Studies in the Relationship between Celtic and Germanic Religions and Literatures*, København: Københavns Universitet, [unpublished], 1997.
- Wax, Rosalie H., *Magic, Fate and History. The Changing Ethos of the Vikings*, Kansas: Coronado Press, 1969.
- Weber, Gerd Wolfgang, *Wyrd. Studien zum Schicksalsbegriff der altenglischen und altnordischen Literatur*, Frankfurter Beiträge zur Germanistik 8, Bad Homburg v.d.H. Berlin and Zürich: Verlag Gehlen, 1969.
- Whaley, Diana, 'The 'Conversion Verses' in *Hallfreðar saga*: Authentic voice of a reluctant Christian?', *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross, Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2003, 234-257.
- 'Skaldic Poetry', *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, 479-502.
- Whitman, F.H., *Old English Riddles*, Ottawa: Canadian Federation for the Humanities, 1982.
- Wierzbicka, Anna, *Semantics, Culture, and Cognition. Universal Human Concepts in Culture-Specific Configurations*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Winterbourne, Anthony, *When the Norns Have Spoken. Fate and Time in Germanic Paganism*, Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004.
- Wolfram, Richard, 'Weiberbünde', *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde*, Neue Folge Band IV, (1933): 137-146.
- Wright, C.E., *The Cultivation of Saga in Anglo-Saxon England*, Edinburgh and London: Oliver & Boyd, 1939.
- Zimmermann, W. Haio, 'Archäologische Befunde frühmittelalterliche Webhäuser', *Textilsymposium Neumünster. Archäologische Textilkunde 6.5-8.5*, (1982): 109-134.
- Østergård, Else, *Woven into the Earth – Textiles from Norse Greenland*, Århus: Aarhus University Press, 2004.

<http://skaldic.arts.usyd.edu.au/db.php>