

HEROIC LEGEND, PARRICIDE, AND ISTABY

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Introduction

With one or two notable exceptions, the attempt to tease history out of legendary history has been considered a desperate enterprise for several generations at least. It was not always so, but the approbation which once greeted the credulity of earlier scholars who sought to read out of Beowulf, Ynglinga saga and so on the early dynastic histories of northern Europe (e.g. M.G. Clarke's Sidelights on Teutonic History during the Migration Era, being Studies from Beowulf and other Old English Poems) has generally turned into amusement and scorn. Yet it is not difficult to understand why these investigators, in the absence of contemporary historical materials, would hope to explore northern Europe through the comparative examination of written documents which were assumed to be the products of lengthy oral traditions. For the most part, recent scholarship has persistently rejected the temptation to see history in such monuments (e.g. Lönnroth 1977:7). Yet one cannot help but wonder if the trend among social historians to examine oral history and oral literature with a renewed appreciation for the ability of such materials to detail accurately broader aspects of societal concern, if not history in its most technical sense, will not begin pushing the pendulum in the other direction (e.g. Darnton 1984). The following discussion of interlocking patterns in Germanic legends may in the view of some tread dangerously close to these long-abandoned practices-- but it does so with its eyes wide open to the dangers inherent in the process. Although my comments should not be construed as an attempt to argue for any specific links between surviving heroic legends and possible historical figures, they do take an essentially Durkheimian approach to the study of discourse and culture, *viz.*-- the concerns, institutions, mental constructs, and cultural realities of the latter are inevitably reflected, however obscurely, in the former.

Yet while agreeing that legendary texts are unlikely to yield significant information on history, such an admission does not mean that there is or can be no connection between history and legend. After all, some of the best known legendary cycles of northern Europe possess a degree of historicity: Alexanders saga, Karlamagnus saga ok kanna hans, Diðreks saga af Bern, and even the Völsung materials are, however thinly, informed by traditions based on historical personages and often inspired, but hardly controlled by an appreciation for actual events (cf. de Vries 1963: 194-209). A relationship between history and literature need not imply factual verisimilitude: one of the most celebrated cases in which an historical event has been re-shaped by the aesthetic demands of literature is that of the remarkable inversion in the Hildebrandslied, where Theodoric's successful invasion of Italy is turned into Theodoric's forced exile. But it has been no revelation to learn that legendary texts are apt to alter historical data to fit aesthetic considerations; the great surprise has been, not that traditional literature is often a temperamental record-keeper, but that it can sometimes be such a good archive. Some years ago, for example, Brynjulf Alver (1962) undertook a project in which he was able to compare early eighteenth-century documents to Norwegian legendary material from local tradition with some notable success; a similar project in Skåne produced similar results (Runnquist 1983). In these cases the events and the legends are separated by only a few hundred years, but Alver cites additional instances concerning Norwegian and Danish legends which suggest great continuity in oral tradition over vast time spans, from the Viking Age to modern times. Perhaps the best and most fully documented example of the odd relationship between history and literature is that of Yngvars saga víðforla. Its fabulous narrative-- the encounters of its heroes with flying dragons, giants, Russian princesses, floating islands and marble cities in Russia-- gives us little reason to believe that it is grounded in real events. Despite the saga's colophon detailing its transmission from an oral narrative to a written text, we might be quite willing to dismiss Yngvars saga as simply another example of inventive saga writing, were it not for the fact that over two dozen runic monuments from the Mälaren region of central Sweden commemorate members of a disastrous journey to Russia in the company of Ingvar. The story appears to be further

corroborated outside Scandinavia by the observations of chroniclers writing in the Persian and Arabic traditions (Pritsak 1981:422-60). Solid contemporary evidence of several different sorts thus documents the historical event at the core of the later narrative, a tale which has undoubtedly been embellished and developed in oral tradition and in Icelandic saga tradition. The point is not that all legendary materials should be assumed to present accurate reflections of historical events, or even be grounded, however vaguely, in history; far from it -- in the absence of reliable confirmation, we properly assume the opposite to be the case. Yet I think we would want to hold out the possibility, however remote, that the legendary materials from the Germanic Middle Ages may on occasion have historical connections susceptible to, and worthy of our consideration. In the following paper I present one such possible case from Scandinavia, the interpretation of which promises important and intriguing implications for the larger pan-Germanic matrix in which it is situated.

Parricide, Anthroponymic Patterns, and Warrior Bands

Among early Scandinavian runic inscriptions few have attracted more attention than those from near Sølvesborg, Blekinge. Four inter-related inscriptions make up the Lister- and Listerby-stones: Istaby, Stentofien, Björketorp, and Gummarp. They are generally dated to the seventh century, with Istaby placed ca. 625. For the purposes of this presentation, the only text of concern is Istaby, which states:

A: 1. AfatRhAriwulafa
 2. hApuwulafRhAeruwulafIR
 B: warAitrunARpAIAr

'After hAriwulfr. hApuwulfr, the son (or descendant) of hAeruwulfr, wrote the runes.' In other words, hApuwulfr, who claimed affiliation of some sort (presumably descent) from hAeruwulfr, had raised the monument in honor of hAriwulfr. This monument, together with the others from the group, appear to have a special connection by way of 'anthroponymic bundling' to Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka, an heroic text known only from a single early fifteenth-century saga manuscript. The possibility of a relationship between these runic monuments and the medieval legend complex has been noted previously by Lukman (1961) and Nielsen (1968:46).

Hálfs saga contains a large amount of poetry and at least one of the several plots which make up the text has had a generous legacy in the ballad tradition of both the Faroe Islands and Sweden (Mitchell 1985). The father, Hjørleifr inn kvensami, is the subject of one of the sections which make up the *mélange*; his son Hálfr dominates another. A further son, Hjørólfr, plays a small role, but is primarily a foil for his brother and a vehicle for explaining a 'fools go a-journeying' phrase in Icelandic (*er þat kallat síþan Hiorólfs færri, er ofimlegt er*, p. 177). The main story concerns Hálfr's death at the hands of his step-father, Ásmundr, who had fostered both Hálfr and Hjørólfr. Ásmundr greets Hálfr as he returns from a viking trip, makes himself Hálfr's man, and invites Hálfr to his hall. For unexplained and unmotivated reasons, although one assumes jealousy over Hálfr's success, Ásmundr and his men set fire to the hall while Hálfr and his troops sleep and in the ensuing battle, Hálfr and most of his men fall. Although a late saga text, there are good grounds for believing that the main figures of Hálfs saga were traditional in Nordic lore: both a Hálfr and a Hjørólfr are mentioned in the *pulur* of 'sea-kings' in Snorra Edda. The Hálfr and Hjørleifr figures recur regularly in such genealogical contexts as Landnámabók, Geirmundar þáttur heljarskinns of Sturlunga saga, and Hversu Nóregr byggðiz (see Seelow 1981:158-60). And by the thirteenth century, Hálfr's name was well-known enough to be used by Snorri to define *rekkar* as being those men who followed Hálfr. Þjóðólfr ór Hvinis uses the kenning *banj Hálfs* for 'fire' in his ninth-century Ynglingatal (v.6), a concept repeated in the eleventh-century Sexstefja of Þjóðólfr Arórsson, which uses the kenning Hálfs galli for 'fire'. A variety of other connections strengthens the proposition that Hálfr was an active figure in Nordic tradition (Seelow 1981:157-66; Mitchell 1987).

If we turn to the names of the two monuments, the saga evinces a transparent connection with the 'family' on the Istaby stone. The names of the inscription follow what has been widely perceived as a common Germanic naming principle, alliterating variation in the first element with full repetition of the second element (Oliuk 1903:22-25). The second element -wulfR 'wolf' is one of the most common building blocks of early Germanic names (Schramm 1957:77-82; Müller 1970:4-10); the first elements in the three names are 'army', 'war', and 'sword' (de Vries 1962:204, 224, 226-27, 234). Considered in the light of the radical phonological changes which separate the runic inscription from ON, such as syncope, breaking, mutation, and the loss of glides, hAriwulfR > HerjólfR, hAeruwulfR > Hjørólfr, and hAþuwulfR > HálfR.¹ There is then similarity between the Istaby names and the characters of *Hálfs saga*, but by no means exact correspondence, and clearly the relationships are no longer the same. The appearance of HálfR in both is of particular importance, all the more so since aside from Istaby (and the other Lister and Listerby-stones), it is only rarely encountered in runic inscriptions (e.g. Första, Södermanland) and in ON literature it is used almost exclusively in reference to the saga hero. I will not enter into a full discussion here, but I believe that the list of 'sea-kings' in *Snorra Edda*, together with the HálfR of *Góðrunarvíða onnur* and *Volsunga saga*, underscore the plausibility of an historical link-- in the broadest sense-- between the various HálfR's of Scandinavian tradition.

The issues raised by the possible relationship between the Istaby inscription and *Hálfs saga* comprise part of a larger pattern, summarized in the following chart:

FATHER-SON		FATHER-SON & BROTHER-BROTHER		BROTHER-BROTHER		?		
<i>Hildebrandslied</i>	<i>Hálfs saga</i>	<i>Asmundar kappbana</i>	<i>Gesta Danorum</i>	<i>Snorra Edda, Danorum etc.</i>	<i>Gesta Danorum</i>	<i>Beowulf</i>	<i>Heiðreks saga</i>	Istaby
'army'	Heribrant					Herseald		hAriwulafR
'strife/war'	Hadubrant	HálfR		Hqðr	Høtherus	Hæðcyn	Heiðrekr (?) (Heaporic)	hAþuwulafR
'battle'	Hiltibrant	Hildibrandr	Hildigerus					
'sword'		Hjørólfr, Hjørleifr						hAeruwulafR
(additional characters)								
'grandfather'							Angantýr	
'step-father'	Asmundr							
'(half-)brother'		Asmundr	Haldanus	Baldr (Balderus)			Angantýr	
'son'		unnamed	unnamed				Angantýr	
'grandson'							Heiðrekr álftamr (?)	

Several matrices of significance are embodied in this group. In general they conjure up the manifold injunctions in Germanic sententious literature concerning the killing of kinsmen, that is parricide, patricide and fratricide (cf. ON *frænda-víg* 'slaughter of a kinsman'; OE *mægcewealm* 'death of a father or kinsman,' [equated with *parricidio*], *mægmorð* 'murder of a kinsman,' etc.; OHG *magslaht* 'parricide'). The slaying of a kinsman held a special place in Germanic thinking, as evidenced by the fact that Baldr's death at the hands of Hqðr marks the beginning of the Æsir's demise. The same crime epitomizes the outbreak of moral decadence in the sibyll's précis of the history of men and gods: the world in decline is characterized by assorted social calamities-- adultery, whoredom, strife, violence-- but the unfathomable crime which introduces this descent into the moral abyss is that of kinsman slaying kinsman: 'Bræðr muno beriaz/ oc at þonon verðaz' (*Vsp.* 45, 1-2).

There are, of course, many such slayings of kinsmen in older Germanic literature (e.g. Helgi Hjörvarðsson's death at the hands of his brother Heðinn), just as there are abundant alliterating genealogies which build on such elements as hildi- 'battle' (e.g. the various Hildibrand's, Hilde's and so on of such texts as Sogubrot af fornkonungum). The focus here is on the inter-section of these two patterns, the presentation of frænda-víg, of parricide, where the anthroponymic paradigm suggests a further link between the traditions. The incidents of parricide of interest in this context are divisible into three categories: one in which the combatants transect generational boundaries (i.e. involving fathers and sons); another concerning inner-generational homicide (i.e. involving brothers and half-brothers); and a third category in which both types are present. The most prominent, and earliest, of the first type is the OHG Hildebrandslied itself, of course, and many of the later traditions related to it. In fact, the only text concerned with multigenerational homicide, but not specifically identified with the consanguineal strife of the Hildebrand tradition, is Hálfs saga. The fratricidal tales display considerable consistency: in those cases where the slayers bear a name built on habu- 'war', their always innocent and unsuspecting victims appear to have underlying name forms which suggest connections with deities (i.e. Baldr, Týr). Heðrekr admittedly presents difficulties, since one would expect to find the *Hǫðrekr in ON. Still, as Kemp Malone argues (1962), the evidence is surely on the side of connecting ON Heðrekr with the OE Heaporic of Widsith, where the underlying form is clearly displayed (< heapo- 'war'). The third type is represented by the two reflexes of the Hildebrand story in Icelandic and Danish tradition (Ásmundar saga kappabana and Gesta Danorum). In them, the innovation of one half-brother killing the other has been added to the tale of father killing son. The original tale is now little more than a narrative 'survival' of the sort so beloved by the British Anthropological School of the 19th century and the father's reluctance to kill his son has apparently been transformed into Hildibrand's attempts to avoid fighting his half-brother Ásmundr. Noteworthy in the paradigm is the fact that the figures whose names are based on habu- are either killed under shameful circumstances-- Hadubrand, Hálfr-- or perpetrate murders under equally terrible and generally tragic circumstances-- Hǫðr, Hæðcyn, Heðrekr (cf. the habu- derived Starkaðr, Niðuðr in this connection). Nor is the distribution haphazard: where the habu- warrior is the son in a father-son relationship, he is the victim; where he is one of two brothers, he is the killer of his unwitting sibling. It may be that the dark overtones of this association are even reflected in the inventory of OE kent heiti for 'warrior': although the other proper names of the paradigm constitute possible substitutions for military men (herewulfas, hildewulfas, heorowulfas), no corresponding *heapowulfas has survived.

Several aspects of the similarities between the Hildebrandslied, Hálfs saga, and the Istaby inscription invite comment: the consistent application of the naming principle in which shared second elements (-brant, -wulfr) are used together with alliterating first elements. In some instances, some of the first elements are identical: heri- / hAri- 'army' and hadu- / habu- 'war'. The remaining forms hilti- and hAeru- have as referents further aspects of the martial world of the Germanic peoples ('battle' resp. 'sword'), but do not share specific semantic fields. Moreover, Hálfs saga reflects the usage of the Hildebrandslied in another unique fashion: it is only in these traditions that the habu- names are those of the sons, and therefore also the victims, rather than those of the aggressors.

I would like to take some care at this juncture: none of this should be understood as suggesting that the runic inscriptions from Sölvesborg are in any way connected with an historical Hildebrant, Hadubrant, or Herebrant. Instead, what is at issue here is the possibility that a social reality lies behind the runic monuments, and thus that the texts may be relevant to our understanding of the poem and the larger framework to which it belongs. The Blekinge inscriptions may, in fact, reflect historical practices concerning warrior bands, initiation ceremonies in particular. Such suggestions about 'initiation rites' have been made before, with varying degrees of success (e.g. de Vries 1953, 1955; Kratz 1978-79). The circumstantial evidence for a warrior cult in this case is strong: certainly the Istaby names, 'army-wolf,' 'war-wolf,' 'sword-wolf,' conjure up images of the últheónar 'wolf-clad warriors [i.e. berserks in wolf skins]' known from ON literary sources. A probable parallel to the warrior band of 'wolves' of the Blekinge stones is found in Saxo's Gesta

Danorum (Book VI), where he describes twelve 'brothers' who harry and pillage Denmark from the safety of a fortress they have built for themselves on an island. His description leaves little doubt that these men constitute a warrior band of some sort. Significantly, the seven names Saxo knows demonstrate that the brothers are joined together by a shared animal designation: Gerbiorn, Gunbiorn, Arinbiorn, Stenbiorn, Esbiorn, Thorbiorn, and Biorn.

The literary image of the 'wolf warriors' has iconographic corollaries as well. Certainly the most clear-cut instance of a therianthropic presentation is that on the sixth-century helmet die from Torslunda (Öland), which shows what could only be a warrior (he bears a sword and a spear) wearing an animal skin; given the portrayal of its snout and long bushy tail, it is almost certainly a wolf's skin (cf. Beck 1968). Likewise the so-called 'Long Horn' from Gallehus (ca. 400AD) depicts several figures who appear to have wolf-heads (or other animal heads) on men's bodies bearing swords and axes. A similar animal-headed (wolf-headed?) warrior is represented on a seventh-century sword-sheath from Gutenstein. It should be noted that all of these materials, including Istaby, fall within a relatively narrow time-frame. The identification of berserkr with wolves (and other animals, especially bears) in ON is multidimensional; in addition to the evidence adduced above, the berserkr were said to 'howl' and the very word berserkr itself refers to 'bear sark' (i.e. bear-shirt, wearing a bear skin) (Noreen 1932). Despite the lateness of the testimony, it is telling that Hálfr is referred to in *Hversu Noregr byggðist* specifically as a 'berserkr,' and Hildebrandr Húnakppi of *Ásmunder saga kappabana* is said to kill his son while in a berserkr rage.

It has been suggested that the *Hildebrandslied* is to be understood against a background of warrior cults and initiation rites. De Vries (1953), for example, argues a filiation with Indo-European mythic archetypes, but the application of his idea to the ninth-century *Hildebrandslied* has tended to founder on the shoals of evidence, since his interpretation is largely based on the testimony of sources from the High Middle Ages (e.g. *Þjóreks saga*). The connection between the Hildebrand tradition and these other materials, including the Lister- and Listerby runestones, holds out the promise of much earlier evidence of such a pattern. Furthermore, the notion that there were *mythic archetypes* for the kind of initiation apparently envisioned by de Vries may be reflected in the Balder episodes of the *Elder Edda*, *Snorra Edda*, and *Gesta Danorum*, where the name of the assailant Hǫðr/Høtherus (< hǫþu-) provides the missing link. A further analogue to these patterns also exists in the extant mythological materials. It too is a reflex of the two interlocking schemes, if seen somewhat hazily, contained in the one eddic poem specifically dedicated to father-son conflict, *Hárbarðzlióð*. The poem is fundamentally a catalogue of exploits, adventures and mythological information set into the framework of Nordic traditions of confrontation and verbal abuse (i.e. the *senna* and the *mannajafnaðr*) between the disguised father and his son in which the son, Þórr, is handily beaten and humiliated. It may be objected that Þórr's paternity is frequently subordinated in the mythological materials, but it should be noted that in *Hárbarðzlióð*, when Óðinn asks Þórr his identity, Þórr is at some pains to place himself into the context of his male pedigree: 'ec em Óðins sonr, / Meila bróðir, / enn Magna faðir' (9, 4-6).

When Þórr calls to Óðinn, disguised as a ferryman, to help him across the river, Þórr asks who owns the boat. Óðinn's response deserves scrutiny: 'Hildólfr sá heitir, / er mic halda bað, / reccr inn ráðsvinni, / er býr í Ráðseyiarsundi' (8, 1-4). Although not known for his acumen, this identification should have tipped off even Þórr, since the only other Hildólfr in the ON literary tradition is his (half-)brother, another of Óðinn's sons. He is mentioned in several manuscripts of *Snorra Edda* (II, 473, 556, 616), interestingly enough in a half-line which couples him together with Þórr: 'Bvrrir ro óðins / balldr ok mæili / viðarr ok næpr / vali áli / þórr ok hildólfr' No other Hildólfr appears in ON literature, and we may thus be reasonably certain that if the name in *Hárbarðzlióð* had associations for its audience external to the poem itself, it would have conjured up the possibility of this conflict involving not only father and son, but also brother against brother. If, as some have thought, Óðinn's naming of Hildólfr is self-referential, the tie between this aspect of *Hárbarðzlióð* and other texts treating father-son conflicts, such as the *Hildebrandslied*, becomes even more striking. It is not the name alone which raises our

expectations, naturally, but the matrix in which it is embedded: it comes in the midst of a father-son conflict in which the relationship is known to the father but of which the son is unaware. While Þórr's defeat in Hárbarðzlióð is merely symbolic and spiritual rather than literal and lethal, it nevertheless represents the dominance of the son by his more experienced father, and certainly it has overtones of the 'treacherous blow' found elsewhere in the Hildebrand tradition (e.g. Þiðreks saga) in Óðinn's deceptive behavior. Moreover, the reduplicated association of Hildólfr with sagacity ('reccr inn ráðsvinni, er býr í Ráðseyiarsundi') indicates further associations with Hildólfr's continental counterpart, Hildebrand. This famous warrior was, after all, best known for his age, his prowess, and his cunning, a kind of Germanic Odysseus. Likewise, the Nordic Hildólfr is a wise warrior, the name of whose residence underscores the theme of wisdom.

Conclusion

The materials presented here represent, of course, only a few initial queries and observations, and there is a great deal of work to be done; it is clear that such questions as that of the OE Wyfingas, ON Ylfingar, and MHG Wulfinge (of whom Hildebrand is said to be the meister in later tradition) and their traditional antagonism with the 'hounds' (OE Hundingas, ON Hundingar) will play a decisive role in the discussion. In the context of this possible identification of Hildebrand with 'wolves,' Joseph Harris's work on the OE Wulf and Fadwacer poem, which he reasonably argues treats the story of Hildebrand, Odoacer, and Hildebrand's wife (Harris 1988:113-14), is suggestive and holds out the promise of yet further links between the disparate elements of this tradition. The case for Germanic warrior cults, 'wolves,' 'bears,' and 'hounds' has yet to be made, but the early indications are that it conforms well with some of the conclusions Kim McCone has reached concerning the Celtic literary and archaeological materials (McCone 1986; 1987). It is possible, as already de Vries believed, that what we are dealing with here is a cultural phenomenon with Indo-European roots. More narrowly, it may represent a common legacy of Celto-Germanic interaction in northwestern Europe. The gnomic wisdom of Hávamál (81, 5) admonishes us to trust 'is, er yfir kómur.' I readily admit that the outline I have sketched above hardly represent a safe conduct across the ice. Still, it might be said that the ice has been tested and that it holds out the possibility of bearing the weight of further examination.

1. hAþuwulfR > Hálfir is widely accepted (e.g. Lind 1905-31:452-53; de Vries 1962:204; Müller 1970:179; Hald 1971:33; Krause 1971:150-51). Without objecting to this development, Janzén (1948:76) suggests an alternative reading, but it has largely remained unembraced.

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