Encounters with Völlur

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Among the various kinds of encounter between gods or men on the one hand and female representatives of the Other World on the other, episodes involving völlur occupy a rather problematic place. It is true that völlur possess supernatural powers, and that those we meet in Völuspá and Baldr’s draumar are associated with giants and the dead, but one might ask whether this is not merely a mythic version of a familiar social phenomenon, that of the human prophetess who travels from farm to farm offering prophecy about the seasons and the fates of individuals in return for food, lodging and gifts. Such figures are, after all, fairly common in fornaldarsögur and family sagas.

However, when we turn to contemporary sagas, there is a striking absence of women who might be considered to be völlur. In Sturlunga saga there are no explicit references to them (or to spákunur, seiðkonur or vísinglekonur), and only two episodes, so far as I have found, which might be considered to involve them. One is in Íslendinga saga ch. 190,1 where the dead Guðrún Gjúkadóttir (who is explicitly said to be heathen) repeatedly appears in the dreams of the

sixteen-year-old Jóreiðr to give information about the fates of important political figures; this is said to have happened in 1255. However, Jóreiðr is not herself a prophetess, and the whole account is contained within a dream. The other appears incidentally in Sturlu saga ch. 7, where the mid-twelfth-century farmer Póroðdr Grettisson is said to have fathered a son (who turns out to be a criminal) on a göngukona ‘female vagrant’ called Þórdís ina lygna ‘Þórdís the Liar’, but it is not said that she acted as a völva, and if she did it is clear that her prophecy commanded no respect.

This suggests that the concept of the völva may have been less familiar in the period when our prose texts were written than is usually assumed, and in fact there are at least four instances where they are introduced with an explanation of what a völva is. Orms þáttur Stórolfssonar ch. 5 provides a good example:

Þat var þa tízka í þer mundir, at konur þer fóru yfir land, er völur váru kallaðar, ok sögðu mönnum fyrir orlög sin, árferð ok aðra hluti, þá er menn vildu visir verðu.

Another may be found in Norna-Gests þáttur ch. 11:

Þar fóru þar um landit völur, er kallaðar váru spákonur ok spáðu mönnum aldr. Því baðu menn þeim ok gerðu þeim veizlur ok gáfu þeim gafir at skilnaði.

These authors clearly thought it necessary to explain what a völva was - and since no two of these passages closely resemble each other in expression, they are probably independent of each other.

The distribution of the word völva in Old Norse verse also suggests that it was regarded as archaic and used chiefly in mythological contexts. There are nine surviving instances of it in eddic poems of mythological content: five in Baldrs draumar (stt. 4, 8, 10, 12, 13), and one each in Völuspá (st. 22), Hávamál (st. 87), Lokasenna (st. 24) and Hyndluljóð (st. 33). To this we may add only one in a heroic legendary poem - in Helgakviða Hundingsbana I, st. 37, and this clearly belongs to the same tradition of mythological senna as Lokasenna 24, where Loki alleges that Öðinn has practised seiðr on Samsey

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3 McGrew - Thomas I 453 gloss the nickname as ‘cool liar’, ‘cool customer’.
4 Íslenzk fornrit XIII, 405.
5 FSN I, 186. These are merely the two clearest examples - see also the embedded definitions in Örvar-Odds saga ch. 2 (FSN I, 286): Hún var völva ok seiðkona ok vissi fyrir órönna hluti af frólóði sínum. Hún fór á veizlur ok sagði mönnum fyrir um vetrfar ok forlög sín. Similarly, Vilmundar saga viðután ch. 1 (ed. Loth, 140): en kona ein uar þar su er mest uar tignud af uisenda mönnum. og letu ríkar konur jafnan sekia hana at mæla jodmælvum yfer baurnum sínun. þuat þat geck jafnan epter sem hun sagði fyrir. after this, the woman is once called uisenda kona and then consistently uöluan.
6 See Neckel- Kuhn for all citations of poems in the Poetic Edda, and for Baldrs draumar and Hyndluljóð; for Svipdagsmál, see Sijmons -Gering.
and beaten on the drum as völur do. There are two instances in eddic verses embedded in fornaldrarsögur (Örvar-Odds saga ch. 32, st. 4; Orms þáttur Stórólfssonar ch. 6, st. 2, see below - both may be older than the prose narratives round them); and three in skaldic verses attributed to the tenth or early eleventh centuries: Kormákr, lausavísa 48; the anonymous lausavísa II B 6 (in a stanza defining a giantess); and Höfgarða-Refr’s travel verses 2 (where Gymis völva refers to Rán).

Other words for magic-working women show a similarly restricted currency. Seiðkona does not appear in verse at all, and spákona and spámær occur once each, both in allegedly tenth-century verses (Kormákr, lausavísa 53; Porarin máhlíþingr, lausavísa 7; the second is part of a kenning for spears, which are said to ‘sing’, in a metaphor which suggests knowledge of the sort of inspired verse utterance often attributed to völur). The noun seiðr and the verb sía or seiða are also rather rare. The noun appears six times: twice in its literal sense (Völuspá 22, Orms þátttr), and four times in kennings for ‘battle’ - which may represent a fossilised usage; two of these date from the twelfth century, but one of them is a direct echo from Egill Skallagrímsson and the other is by the noted antiquarian Sturla Pórðarson. The verb síða or seiða appears six times: twice in mythological eddic poems (Völuspá 22, Lokasenna 24), three times in early skaldic verses (Kormákr Ögmundarson, Sigurðardrápa 3, alluding to the myth of Öðinn and Rindr; and twice in Vitgeirr seiðimaðr’s verse on Rögnvaldr réttileíni), and once in a verse attributed to a giantess in Gríms saga lodínkinna ch. 1.

We have too little evidence to be able to tell whether völur were a fact of social life in the heathen period, but so far as the surviving texts are concerned, they look more like a literary feature which is particularly associated with mythological sources and with stories about giants or the dead. It seems more likely that the quasi-realistic presentations of völur in some sagas of Icelanders are naturalised versions of mythological tales, rather than that the mythological and legendary völur are derived from real-life fortune-tellers. It is therefore worth asking whether the stories in which they appear use them as a free-

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1 Kock I, 48, Íslenzk fornrit VIII, 284; Einar Ólafur Sveinsson lists this verse among those which include linguistic evidence of early date (‘Kormákr the Poet and his Verses’, 35).
2 Kock I, 92
3 Kock I, 151.
4 Kock I, 49, 61.
5 Fjölnis seiðr, Eiríkr viðsjá, lausavísa 6 (Kock I, 105); sverða seiðr, Sturla Pórðarson, Hákonarkviða 12 (Kock II, 64); vigra seiðr, Egill Skallagrímsson, lausavísa 6 (Kock I, 28) and Guthormr Helgason kêrr, lausavísa (Kock II, 59).
6 Kock I, 42; Einar Ólafur Sveinsson lists this among the verses which he considers to be ‘old’ on linguistic grounds (‘Kormákr the Poet and his Verses’, 35).
7 Kock I, 18.
8 Kock II, 164; FSN I, 271
standing motif, or whether they typically feature within patterns which have something in common that is not dictated by the mere presence of the völva and her predictions or magic.

The term völva is not used consistently to refer only to those who predict a pre-determined future, nor are all such women called völur. The word is used of workers of effective magic (e.g. curses or antidotes to them) in Ynglinga saga ch. 14 and Gull-Póris saga chs. 18-19. Women who make magical predictions but are not called völur appear in Öláfs saga Tryggvasonar ch. 50 in Flateyjarbók, Hauks þáttur hábrókar and Vīga-Glúms saga ch. 12.

The term völva often seems to be synonymous with spákona and vísindakona, and all three terms are sometimes used of the same woman (Öláfs saga Helga ch. 25 in Flateyjarbók, Eiríks saga rauða ch. 4). However, the same woman is also sometimes referred to indiscriminately as völva and seiðkona, which implies that prediction and effective magic were not regarded as clearly distinct abilities (see Hulð in Ynglinga saga chs. 13-14, Heiðr in Hrófs saga kraka ch. 3, Heiðr in Örvar-Odds saga ch. 24); and in legendary sources a völva is sometimes also referred to by terms which imply non-human origins (Hulð is also vitta véttr ‘creature of spells’ and trollkund liðs grím-Hildr ‘the people’s troll-born woman of night’ in Ynglingatal 3; Busla in Bósa saga is not called völva, but is both kerling ‘old woman’ and vánd vættr ‘evil creature’; Heiðr in Hauks þáttur is both kerling and hin mikla tröll).

As in the verse sources, the term völva is used in prose mainly of women from the far past, and many sagas of Icelanders seem to avoid it - thus Oddbjörg in Vīga-Glúms saga is simply kona...fróð ok framsýn ‘a wise woman who could see the future’; Gríma in Fóstbræðra saga ch. 9 attracts the muted comment pat töluðu menn, at hon veri fjölkunnig ‘people reckoned that she was skilled in magic’, though her enemy Bersi later calls her a troll; her namesake in Fóstbræðra saga ch. 23 is nökkut fornfróð ‘rather skilled in ancient things’; Æðís in Kormáks saga ch. 22 is called spákona in the prose, but völva in

15 Íslenzk fornrit XXVI, 31.
16 Íslenzk fornrit XIII, 220-222.
17 Flateyjarbók I, 81-2.
18 Flateyjarbók II, 66-9.
19 Íslenzk fornrit IX, 40-41.
20 Flateyjarbók II, 98-9.
21 Flateyjarbók IV, 206-9.
22 Íslenzk fornrit XXVI, 28-31.
23 FSN II, 9-11.
25 FSN II, 472-5.
26 Íslenzk fornrit VI, 161, 165.
27 Íslenzk fornrit VI, 242.
Kormákr’s (probably much older) skaldic verse (see st. 69).  

The easiest way of categorising the many accounts of völur is according to the nature of those affected by their prophecies or magic, and when this is done they fall into five types:

1. The unjust patriarch.
2. The hostile young man.
3. The young protegé of the völva.  
4. The female opponent.  
5. The new-born infant.

The new-born infant stories form a separate group of the ‘good and bad fairy’ type, but are not relevant to my concerns here. The examples I have found of the ‘protegé’ and ‘female opponent’ types are so various that the völva in these tales is probably best regarded as a motif that could be inserted into stories that otherwise have little or nothing in common. But the surviving examples of the ‘unjust patriarch’ and ‘hostile youth’ types do seem to share some features which are not dictated by the mere presence of the völva, and they may each reflect a common story-pattern. For the moment, I shall not include Völuspá or Baldr’s draumar in either group.

A. The Unjust Patriarch

I would place the following narratives in this group:

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28 Íslenzk fornrit VIII, 284.
29 See Svipdagsmál 1-16 (= Gróugaldr) (Sijmons and Gering I, 196-200); Gull-Póris saga (also called Porskfördinga saga) chs. 18-19 (Íslenzk fornrit XIII, 220-2); Fóstbræðra saga chs. 9-10 (Íslenzk fornrit VI, 161-9); Fóstbræðra saga ch. 23 (Íslenzk fornrit VI, 242-8); Hauks þáttur hábrókar (in Flateyjarbók, Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar chs. 467-8, Flateyjarbók II, 66-9); Saxo, Gesta Danorum I.vi.4-6 (Olrisk - Ræder I, 22-3; Fisher-Davidson I, 23-4). Other stories which might more generally be included in this group appear in Kormáks saga chs. 9, 22 (Íslenzk fornrit VIII, 233, 282-5) and Eiríks saga rauða ch. 4 (Íslenzk fornrit IV, 206-9).
30 See Hyndaljóð, Helreit Brynhildar; perhaps also Víga-Glúms saga ch. 12 (Íslenzk fornrit IX, 40-41); and possibly Laxdela saga ch. 76 (Íslenzk fornrit V, 223-4) and Vilmundar saga viðutan ch. 1 (Late Medieval Icelandic Romances IV, ed. Loth, 140-1).
31 See Helegakviða Hundingsbana I, 2-4, and the same story in Völsunga saga ch. 8 (FSN I, 186-7); Nornagest þáttir ch. 11 (FSN I, 186-7); Saxo, Gesta Danorum VI.iv.12 (Olrisk - Ræder I, 150; Fisher - Davidson I, 169); and perhaps Vilmundar saga viðutan ch. 1 (ed. Loth, 141). However, in the majority of these, the prophetess figures are called norns.
32 For the protegé stories, this may be best illustrated by the sheer variety of magical tasks accomplished by the völva on the protagonist’s behalf: informing him of the magical spells he needs (Svipdagsmál), or of his opponent’s movements (Gull-Póris saga); raising a storm to make the opponent vulnerable to the hero (Gull-Póris saga); making her protegé invulnerable to weapons (Fóstbræðra saga 9-10); making him invisible to pursuers after he has carried out a wounding (Fóstbræðra saga 9-10) or a killing (Fóstbræðra saga 23); reciting a poem to give him a fair wind (Fóstbræðra saga 23); travelling with gandar in her sleep in order to discover a danger threatening him (Fóstbræðra saga 23); supplying him with a magic weapon (Hauks þáttir); raising up a dead man to discover the future (Saxo).
Ynglinga saga ch. 13 (and Ynglingatal 3, narrative verse, fornyrðislag).  
Ynglinga saga ch. 14 (and Ynglingatal 4, narrative verse, fornyrðislag, though this does not mention the völva).  
Hrólfs saga kraka ch. 3 (including 4 short stanzas of monologue verse, part of an underlying fornyrðislag poem).
Saxo, Gesta Danorum V.xvi.1-2 (no verse).
Bósa saga ch. 5 (including 9 stanzas of monologue verse, apparently part of an older fornyrðislag poem).

The main features of the pattern are as follows:

1. The völva (so-called except in Bósa saga: kerling and Saxo matrona magicæ rei perita) is either nameless or has a traditional single-element name (Hulð in Ynglinga saga 13, 14; Heiðr in Hrólfs saga Busla in Bósa saga). In Ynglinga saga she lives in Finnmark.

2. The patriarch is a king descended from a god (Vanlandi, Vísburr in Ynglingatal, Ynglinga saga, both descended from Freyr; Hringr in Bósa saga, the grandson of Óðinn, but with a name suggesting links with the Vanir), or a king with a traditionally ‘Vanir’ name (Fróði in Hrólfs saga, Frotho in Saxo).

3. The patriarch does something unjust (breaks his promise, Ynglinga saga 13; denies his ex-wife the gold necklace which is her mund, Ynglinga saga 14; kills his brother, usurps his kingdom and seeks to kill his brother’s sons, Hrólfs saga; wants to exile his son and kill his son’s foster-brother, Bósa saga). Saxo reacts against this, making Frotho conspicuous as an upholder of justice.

4. The patriarch has two sons (Ynglinga saga 14), nephews (Hrólfs saga), or a son with a foster-brother (Bósa saga), with whom he is in conflict; in Saxo there is only one son, who becomes that of the matrona (perhaps it would have undermined his view of Frotho’s idealised imperium to present treachery and murder within the royal family).

5. The völva is provoked by the patriarch’s injustice (Ynglinga saga 14, Bósa saga), or is paid to act against him (Ynglinga saga 13, Hrólfs saga), or is paid to prophesy for him, but does so in a hostile manner (Hrólfs saga), or is inspired by greed to act against him (Saxo).

6. A gold ring or necklace is involved, either in the quarrel with the son (Ynglinga saga 14, Saxo), or in a payment (in Hrólfs saga, a payment to break off the prophecy). In Bósa saga the king is called Hringr, and the quarrel involves two chests of gold.

7. The völva directs her attack against the patriarch and/or his family (Ynglinga saga 14). It may be either a curse (Ynglinga saga 13, 14, Bósa saga),

33 Íslenzk fornrit XXVI, 28-9; Kock, I, 4.
34 Íslenzk fornrit XXVI, 30-1; Kock, I, 4-5.
35 FSN II, 9-11.
36 Otlrik - Ræder I, 142; Fisher-Davidson I, 157.
37 FSN II, 472-5.
38 See Friis-Jensen (especially p. 74) for the importance of the imperium Frothonis, and of Frotho as the idealised law-giver, to Saxo’s overall view of the Danish kingdom.
or a prophecy (*Hrólfs saga*, *Völuspá*, *Baldr’s draumar*), but the distinction between the two is weak, for in *Ynglinga saga* 13 and *Bósa saga* the curse is a conditional prophecy - this *will* happen if the patriarch does not act as the *völva* wishes him to. In Saxo this is changed: the *matrona* changes herself into a seacow and gores Frotho in a direct attack.

8. The *völva’s* curse or prophecy includes the death of the patriarch (*Ynglinga saga* 13, 14, *Hrólfs saga*, *Bósa saga*); in *Ynglinga saga* 14 she adds that members of the family will always kill each other.

9. The *völva* may speak in fornyrðislag of her own role and the reliability of what she says (*Bósa saga*; in *Hrólfs saga* this is only preserved in the prose, but may have been in the lost parts of the poem on which the story seems to be based). She may refer to herself in the first person (*Hrólfs saga*) or in first and third persons (*Bósa saga*). Prophetic verse may come to her from elsewhere (‘*ok varð henni þá ljóð á munni*’), and she may refer to ‘seeing’ in a vatic way (*Hrólfs saga*).

10. The patriarch dies, or will die, sometimes by fire (killed by the curse and then cremated, *Ynglinga saga* 13; burned in his hall by his sons or nephews, *Ynglinga saga* 14, *Hrólfs saga*; in *Bósa saga* he is threatened with having his hall burned, but is eventually killed in battle by two other brothers).39 Again, Saxo may have reacted against this, possibly because of the Christian prejudice against cremation for a figure who is otherwise idealised - Frotho is gored to death, his courtiers try to conceal his death by parading his body in his waggon, but eventually bury him when the body rots.

This story type can be summarised as follows:

The *völva* has a traditional name (in the case of Heiðr, it is one associated with giants); she may come from the far north. The protagonist is a king descended from a god (usually from Freyr). The protagonist commits an injustice against his two sons/nephews/son and son’s foster-brother, and the *völva* takes their side against him; either the injustice or the magic involves the payment of a gold ring. The *völva* curses the king or prophesies against him, and her words, expressed in fornyrðislag, come to her from elsewhere. The sons kill their father, possibly by burning. (Saxo’s version differs from the others in a number of respects, but all of these can be explained by his political need to idealise King Frotho).

B. The Hostile Young Man

This group includes the following:

*Rövar-Ódds saga* ch. 2 (including 3 stanzas of monologue, fornyrðislag, apparently part of a pre-existing poem).40 At the end of the saga (ch. 32), the dying Oddr recites what is probably a

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39 See *Bósa saga* ch. 10, *FSN* II, 484.
40 *FSN* I, 286-9; for ch. 32, v. 4, see I, 391.
separate poem of 71 stanzas, in st. 4 of which he acknowledges the truth of the völva’s prophecy).

Orms þáttir Stórolfssonar ch. 5 (including one stanza of monologue, fornyrðislag, apparently part of a pre-existing poem). In chs. 6-7 there are 11 further stanzas recited by Ásmundr, all but the first when he is dying; in st. 2 he refers to the völva and his intention to defy her prophecy).

Vatnsdeyla saga ch. 10, and the same story in Landnámabók, S179, H145 (no verse).

Two other narratives look like Christian adaptations of the same pattern:

Oddr Snorrason, Saga Óláfs Tryggvasonar ch. 6, and the same story in Flateyjarbók, Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar ch. 50 (which I shall call Flateyjarbók I).

Flateyjarbók, Óláf saga Helga ch. 25 (which I shall call Flateyjarbók II).

The main features of this pattern are:

1. The völva (so-called except in Oddr [spákona], Flateyjarbók I [kerling... framsýn af fitonsandaði], is either nameless or is called Heiðr (Örvar-Odds saga, Landnámabók). She is Lappish (Vatnsdeyla saga), is so decrepit with age that she has to be carried on a bed, and is the patriarch’s mother (Oddr and Flateyjarbók I).

2. The patriarch is usually the head of a household (Örvar-Odds saga, Vatnsdeyla saga and Landnámabók, Orms þáttir); in Oddr and Flateyjarbók I he is King Valdimarr of Garðaríki (Russia); in Flateyjarbók II there is no patriarch figure, and the völva is consulted by St. Óláfr’s men.

3. The patriarch does nothing unjust except to invite the völva to prophesy, but this causes disapproval from the young protagonist (Örvar-Odds saga, Orms þáttir, Vatnsdeyla saga, Flateyjarbók II) or from the patriarch’s wife (Oddr and Flateyjarbók I).

4. The patriarch has a son, who is the foster-brother of the hero (Örvar-Odds saga, Orms þáttir, Vatnsdeyla saga and Landnámabók, where there are two sons), or the patriarch later becomes foster-father to the hero (Oddr and Flateyjarbók I). The relationship between patriarch and hero is good, but is strained by the patriarch’s invitation to the völva (Örvar-Odds saga, Orms þáttir, Vatnsdeyla saga and Landnámabók; in Oddr and Flateyjarbók I the king’s heathen practices cause tension between him and his queen).

5-6. The völva is sometimes paid for her prophecies (with gifts, Örvar-Odds saga, Orms þáttir).

7. The völva prophesies that the patriarch will live successfully in the same place til elli (Örvar-Odds saga, Orms þáttir; that nothing will threaten his kingdom - Oddr and Flateyjarbók I); she may also make a favourable prophecy for the hero’s foster-brother(s) (Örvar-Odds saga, Vatnsdeyla saga). She insists

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41 Íslenzk fornrit XIII, 404-6.
42 Íslenzk fornrit VIII, 28-30; Íslenzk fornrit I, 217.
43 ed. Finnur Jónsson, 20-1; Flateyjarbók I, 81-2.
44 Flateyjarbók II, 98-9.
on making a prophecy about the hero, despite his reluctance to listen to it (Örvar-Odds saga, Vatnsdœla saga and Landnámabók; in Orms þátttr the whole episode is about the foster-brother Ásbjörn, who becomes its protagonist; in Flateyjarbók II the prophecy is made with the permission but disapproval of Óláfr helgi, who is not present). The völva says that the prophecy will come true whether the hero likes it or not (Örvar-Odds saga, Orms þátttr, Vatnsdœla saga and Landnámabók).

8. The prophecy predicts glory for the hero, but also his death (he will live gloriously for three hundred years, but will die on this farm - Örvar-Odds saga; he will live gloriously and die of old age, provided he does not go to Norð-Mœrr - Orms þátttr; he will rule Norway gloriously, but not for long - Oddr and Flateyjarbók I; his brightness makes it difficult for the völva to see clearly, but he will make one slip of the tongue in his whole life, and will die that same day - Flateyjarbók II).

9. In Örvar-Odds saga and Orms þátttr, the völva speaks in fornyrðislag; she refers to her own reliability, and uses both the first and the third person (Örvar-Odds saga only); the verse comes to her from elsewhere (‘Pá / ok varð henni þá ljóð á munni’ introduces it in both, and in Örvar-Odds saga she claims: Öll veit hún manna / örlög fyrir).

9a. The hero reacts with resentment (Örvar-Odds saga, Vatnsdœla saga, Orms þátttr); in Örvar-Odds saga he attacks the völva with a sproti which he has ready. In Vatnsdœla saga Ingimundr would attack the völva were it not for his obligation to his foster-father. In Örvar-Odds saga and Vatnsdœla saga, the hero takes measures to thwart the prediction; in Orms þátttr he tempts its fulfillment in an attempt to prove the völva wrong.

10. All the prophecies are fulfilled. Oddr is killed by the bite of a snake which crawls out of the skull of a horse killed in an attempt to prevent the fulfillment of the prophecy. Ásbjörn goes to Norð-Mœrr and is tortured to death by the giant Brúsi. Ingimundr and his foster-brothers settle in Iceland (though here no death has been predicted). Óláfr Tryggvason returns to Garðaríki and converts King Valdimarr and his queen, but his reign in Norway is short. Óláfr inn helgi makes a slip of the tongue just before the Battle of Stiklastaðir, in which he is killed.

The story-type can be summarise as follows:

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45 The formula þá varð henni/honum/Oddi/Hjálmari ljóð á munni also introduces a number of non-prophetic verses later in Örvar-Odds saga (see FSN I, 314, 316, 317,324, 326, 330, 370, 382), but these may be copied from its first use, for the verses given to the völva.
46 Is it a symbolic spear? cf. Gautreks saga ch. 7, FSN III, 25-8, where Starkaðr uses a sproti which suddenly becomes a spear, in the sacrifice of King Víkarr to Óðinn.
47 Vatnsdœla saga ch. 15, Íslenzk fornrit VIII, 42; Landnámabók, Íslenzk fornrit I, 217. This story also involves the hero losing his silver miniature idol of Freyr, and not regaining it until the moment when the prophecy has been fulfilled.
48 Flateyjarbók ch. 90, I, 126-9.
49 see the end of ch. 277, Flateyjarbók II, 458.
The völva is called Heiðr (a name with giant associations); she may come from the far north, or be extremely old. The patriarch is the sympathetic head of a household. He has a son and a foster-son, the latter being usually the protagonist. There is antipathy between patriarch and foster-son, but it is caused only by the presence of the völva. The protagonist resents the völva's prophecy and sometimes also her presence, and he may attack her physically. The völva prophesies glory for the hero, but also his death; when she uses verse, it is fornyrðislag, and she is mysteriously inspired with it. The prophecy is usually absolute (not in Orms þáttr), and always comes true.

C. Völuspá and Baldrs draumar

Most of the stories on which I have based the reconstruction of these two story-patterns are, of course, much later in date than Völuspá and Baldrs draumar, in which völur also play a central part. However, there is one clear exception, in Ynglingatal stt. 3 and 4, which show that some features of the ‘unjust patriarch’ story already existed by c.900 - certainly the confrontation between a king descended from Freyr and a prophetess of giant- or troll- origins (st. 3), the consequent death of the king (both stanzas), and in st. 4 his destruction by fire; it is not explicitly stated that his sons kill him, but there is no reason to suppose that the underlying stories known to Pjöðólfr differed from those told in Ynglinga saga. There is even a coincidence between two similar fire-kennings in Ynglingatal 4 (meinþjóf markar ‘harmful thief of woodland’) and Völuspá 52 (med sviga lavi ‘with the harm of brushwood’), though this might be pure coincidence. At all events, it seems probable that some version of the ‘unjust patriarch’ pattern already existed by the time Völuspá was composed.

It is fairly obvious that the narratives in Völuspá and Baldrs draumar resemble these two patterns in some respects, but that they do not altogether fit into them. In Völuspá st. 22 we encounter another völva called Heiðr, who is usually supposed to be a transformation of a figure called Gullveig (apparently one of the Vanir). I think this is a mistaken interpretation, and that Heiðr is more probably the narrating völva of the poem. The name also appears at the end of Hyndluljóð 32, among a list of giants of both sexes, where it is immediately followed by a line about the mythological ancestry of völur. This poem (or at least this section of it) is referred to by Snorri as Völuspá in skamma, and it shows clear textual echoes of the longer Völuspá; for its poet, Heiðr was clearly a giantess (like the narrating völva of Völuspá) whose name prompted a line about völur in general.

Whether we give the narrator of Völuspá a name or not, she was brought up (or brought forth) by giants and remembers nine worlds (st. 2) - probably the nine worlds of the dead, into which human beings die out of Hel, according to Vafþrúðnismál 43. She is paid for her prophecy with hringa ok men (st. 29). Her magic is performed in a trance (leikin, st. 22) and her prophecy is delivered in
vatic fornýðislag verse to a patriarchal figure, in this case Óðinn; it represents a truth which she 'sees' (the verb is also used by the völur called Heiðr in Hrólfs saga and Órvar Odda saga), and one of her refrains - vittu ér enn, eða hvat? - is echoed several times by the giantess Heiðr in Hyndluljóð (vítu enn lengra?)\(^{50}\) and once by the enchantress Busla in Bósa saga (eða viltu þulu lengri?). The patriarch has three sons (by different mothers, so that they are half-brothers to each other) who figure in a central episode of the action (the killing of Baldr and the revenge for it). The völva's prophecy includes the death of the patriarch figure (though not at the hands of his sons), and fire is involved, although it is not the actual cause of his death.

On the other hand, there are several features of the 'unjust patriarch' pattern which are contradicted in Völuspá. Most importantly, there is no hostility between the patriarch and his sons, and they do not kill him (though they do kill each other). The deity with whom the unjust patriarch figures are associated is usually Freyr rather than Óðinn (Hringr in Bósa saga is the only exception, since he is said to be the grandson of Óðinn, but his name is easier to connect with the Freyr tradition). Nor is it clear that Óðinn is to be regarded as unjust in the same specific way as in the other stories, though he is the head of a family of gods who are presented by the poet as guilty of oathbreaking and murder (in the killing of the Giant Builder, st. 26) and probably of absorbing the sexual immorality of the Vanir - vices which they then appear to punish in human beings in a futile attempt to arrest the moral decline of the world (st. 39). But most importantly, the prophesied death of the patriarch is not the main point either of the prophecy or of the poem as a whole - the Völuspá poet has a larger vision than that, and although the 'unjust patriarch' story-type may have been used to construct the narrative framework of the poem, the purpose for which this has been done is strikingly new.

Baldr's draumar shows some features in common with the 'hostile young man' pattern. The völva has been long dead (st. 5), and in her final confrontation with Óðinn is said to be þrígga þursa móðir (st. 13). She is summoned and required to prophesy by the patriarch (Óðinn), whose three sons (Baldr, Höðr and Váli) are the subject of the prophecies; the prophecy includes the death of the implied protagonist (Baldr), though in this case at the hands of his brother.\(^{51}\) A powerful hostility remains between the völva and her questioner, though in this case he is the patriarch rather than the young man, he compels the prophecy rather than trying to refuse it, and there is no mention of any payment for the prophecy. If the poet of Baldr's draumar used a traditional story-pattern, it was, again, probably adopted in a strongly modified form, and the near-identity of text between Baldr's draumar 11,3-8 and Völuspá 32,7-8

\(^{50}\) Hyndluljóð stt. 17, 18, 34, 36, 39.
\(^{51}\) This is, however, another ancient story-pattern, see Ynglinga saga, chs. 20, 21 and Ynglingatal 11-13.
and 33,1-4 suggests a close relationship between the two poems. This influence could have been in either direction or from a third source which is now lost, but it seems to me more likely that Völuspá influenced Baldrs draumar than vice-versa.

I should like to finish with a few tentative and provisional conclusions:

1. The many stories about völr in Old Norse literature more probably reflect a literary type than a social fact of the authors’ own times, and their most likely origin is in mythological tales about prophetesses connected with giants and/or the dead.

2. The stories in which völr confront unjust patriarchs or hostile young men show narrative patterns in common that are not required by the mere presence and function of the völva; they probably reflect traditional story patterns, and at least some features of one of these can be seen as early as Pjöðôlf’s Ynglingatal (c. 900).

3. Most of these stories of völr have nothing to do with Óðinn; the two exceptions, Völuspá and Baldrs draumar, probably represent an original reworking of the traditional patterns, and the Völuspá poet may be responsible for this development. Certainly, a traditional assumption of an element of injustice in the figure who questions the völsa would fit the moral scheme of that poem, which uses it to introduce a new world-view, one which was influenced but not dominated by Christian ideas. I hope this study may have contributed towards the understanding of this startling and profound achievement.

Abbreviations and Bibliography


Vilmundar saga viðutan, in Late Medieval Icelandic Romances IV, ed. Agnete Loth, Editiones Arnamagnæanae B vol. 23, Copenhagen, 1964.