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Sonatorrek: Religious Ideas and Preservation

Sonatorrek is a poetic elegy, twenty-five strophes in length, which, according to *Egils saga*, was composed by Egill Skalla-Grímsson for his dead son Böðvar, shortly after the middle of the tenth century. Reliable sources suggest that at this time, Iceland was still wholly pagan.[1] Only the first strophe of the poem was recorded in the earliest manuscript of the saga which was composed shortly after 1220. Another half-strophe is contained in Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda* (from around the same time), but nothing more than the first strophe is found in the *Möðruvallabók* manuscript of the saga, which was written between 1325 and 1350. The oldest extant version of the poem as a whole is found in two *Ketilsbók* manuscripts from the mid-seventeenth century. Most scholars in recent years have come to believe that *Sonatorrek* must have been preserved in the oral tradition between the time it was composed until it eventually came to be recorded in the original manuscript upon which *Ketilsbók* was based.[2]

If *Sonatorrek* survived intact for all of this time, it would probably contain an uncorrupted reflection of a way of thought stemming from old Nordic pagan belief. On the other hand, if any Christian ideas can be detected in the poem, this would imply either that the poem has become corrupted in the oral tradition or that it is younger than the saga account states.

The surviving manuscripts of *Sonatorrek* contain several obvious minor errors which have been corrected by previous editors and publishers. These will be examined more closely later. There are, however, other sections of the poem which have posed problems for scholars. Some of their interpretations have resulted in a number of contradictions seeming to appear in various strophes. In the following article I mean to examine these difficult passages.

"Lifnaði á nökkva nökkvers"

In st. 1 of *Sonatorrek*, the poet turns to the myth of the origin of the poetic mead, stolen by Óðinn. This same theme continues in st. 2 which talks of the "fagnafundur Friggjar niðja sé ekki auðþeystur úr hyggju stað" ("how hard to pour forth/ from the mind's root/ the prize that Frigg's/ progeny found"[3]) . Here the poet describes the creation of his poem by making direct reference to Óðinn's behaviour as he delivered the stolen poetic mead to Ásgarður (spitting it into a container). Following directly on from this, st. 3 states:

lastalaus,
es lifnaði
á nökkvers nökkva bragi.

These lines have caused scholars a number of problems. "Nökkver" has been interpreted as being the name of a dwarf, but as Sigurður Nordal states, "'er lifnaði" ("which came to life"/ "was inspired with life") and 'bragi' have posed an insoluable riddle".[4]

In my edition of *Sonatorrek* I made an attempt to explain this part of the strophe without altering the text by more than a single letter: I read "bragr" ("poetry") rather than "bragi" in the fourth line of the strophe in both versions of *Ketilsbók*. One can then take this

[1] *ÍF* II, 245; Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 2001, 26-28, and the other works cited there.
[2] Jon Helgason 1961; cf. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 2001, 37ff. and the other works cited there.
[3] The translation of *Sonatorrek* used here is based on that given by Bernard Scudder in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* I, 151-156, except where it conflicts with the present author's findings.
[4] Sigurður Nordal 1933, 247, note. Cf. Turville-Petre 1976, 29: "The first half of the strophe has not been explained".

section of the strophe as reading "lastalaus *bragr* es lifnaði á nökkvers nökkva". "Lastalaus bragr" would then mean "unflawed poetry", but what would "lifnaði á nökkvers nökkva" mean in this context?

"Nökkver" may originally have been "nökkva-verr", meaning "the man of the boat", formed in the same way as other words like *skipverji* and *bátverji* (meaning crewman, passenger, or traveller). "Nökkvers nökkvi" would then be the boat of the crewmember, or the means of transport used by the traveller. Elsewhere Snorri Sturluson refers to the poetic mead as the "farm Óðins" ("Óðinn's cargo").[5] In this sense, Óðinn would be the means of transport and/or the one who steers, both the *nökkvi* (boat) and the "nökkverr" (crewmember). In the poem *Háleygjatal*, the poet Eyvindur *skáldaspillir* says the following about Óðinn and the poetic mead:

hinn es Surts
ór søkkdölum
farmögnuðr
fljúgandi bar.[6]

(that which he,
farmögnuðr,
carried in flight
from Surtr's dales.)

Here Óðinn is said to be "farmögnuðr" for carrying the poetic mead from the giants to the Æsir. To the best of my knowledge, the word "farmögnuðr" has not been satisfactorily explained,[7] but "mögnuðr" certainly means one who empowers ("magnar"), often with magic. In such a way, Óðinn gave power to (*magnaði*) the head of Mímir.[8] The word *far* has a double meaning, on one hand meaning a ship or boat, and on the other the cargo. In this sense, "farmögnuður" would refer to the person who "empowers" the means of transport or the cargo, and the only thing that Óðinn could "empower" in this aforementioned flight was the poetic mead, which had originally fermented in the cauldron Óðrerir.[9]

The meaning of the verb *að lifna* (comes to life) is very similar to that of the verb *að magnast*. Any object that is *magnað* (empowered) comes to life. And just as *Háleygjatal* talks of how the poetic mead "magnaðist" (gained magical strength) in Óðinn's stomach on the way to Ásgarður, *Sonatorrek* talks of it "coming to life" in the same place on the same trip. The repetition of this sacred act was probably regarded as taking place every time that a poet created at the time of the Old Nordic religion. The poetry gained strength and the poem came to life as the poet "spat" the poetic mead out of his mouth just as Óðinn did with the poetic mead.[10]

"Á enda stendur"

In st. 4 of *Sonatorrek*, the poet says that his family "standa á enda sem hræbarin tré í skógi" (lit. "stands on end like a pounded tree in a forest"). These words have usually been interpreted as meaning that the poet sees his family as being exhausted and on the verge of

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[5] *Snorra-Edda* 1935, 121.
[6] *Den norsk-islandske skaldediktningen* 1946, 37.
[7] The explanation for "farmögnuður" in *Lexikon Poeticum*: "som kraftig foretager en rejse" (who powerfully travels) says next to nothing.
[8] *ÍF* XXVI, 13. Cf. *Lexicon Poeticum*: "magna".
[9] *Snorra-Edda*, 1935, 123.
[10] Cf. Harris 1999, 55, and the other works cited there.

dying out.[11] If we examine *Egils saga*, however, this statement turns out to be far from true. Þorgerður, the daughter of the poet, who had recently married and was probably expecting a child, was supposedly sitting beside her father when he composed these lines. Two other children of Egill's, Bera and Þorsteinn, whose lines also continued, were also said to be alive at this time.[12] I have permitted myself to propose a new interpretation of these words stated by the poet about his family. The word *hræ* has two meanings in Old Icelandic:

1. The body of a man or the carcass of a dead animal
2. A broken tree in a forest, or a broken branch.

It is this last meaning which I think the author of *Sonatorrek* was using when applying the word "hræbarnir" to the state of his family. The tree in the forest is "hræbarin" ("beaten to a *hræ*") when storm goes through the forest. "Hræbarin" trees, which are still alive, have been pulled up by the roots, overturned and tossed about. As regards the forest as a whole, one can say that everything is in chaos. With regard to individual trees, one can say that they are upside down, in other words that they "standa á enda" (are "standing on end"), as in the words of the strophe.

The closest interpretation of the poet's words that he is saying his family is "upside down", in other words stating that he feels his family has been literally overturned, changed from a state that would have been regarded as natural. According to both *Egils saga* and *Sonatorrek*, two of Egill's sons had recently died: Böðvar had drowned, and Gunnar had died of illness. It was not normal that parents lived longer than their sons. In such circumstances, one can say that the normal state of the family had been "overturned", or "turned upside down". The family was literally "standing on its head". Here one can refer to my earlier interpretation of st. 21 in *Sonatorrek* as meaning that the third son of the poet must have also died before the poem was composed.[13]

"Af lífi á munvega" – "Byrbær bískips"

Two of the strophes of *Sonatorrek* have generally been interpreted as describing the journey of the drowned son to Óðinn in Valhöll.[14]

In the tenth strophe, the poet says that his son has disappeared "...af lífi... á munvega". By making reference to the words "munarheimur" and "goðheimur", scholars have regarded "munheimur" as meaning "the way to Valhöll". I would like to take a closer look at this. "Munr" has three meanings in Old Icelandic: 1. Thought or temperament. 2. Longing, desire, will or joy. 3. Love. I think that the first of these meanings is the most likely interpretation of "munr" in this case. The poet is then simply stating that his son is dead, and has disappeared to the invisible existence of thought and memory in the world of the dead, i.e. literally to "the tracks of thought". I do not think that the poet describes the world of the dead in any more detail than this. St.18 of *Sonatorrek* runs as follows in *Ketilsbók:*

Erumk þokt
þjóða sinni
þótt sérhverr
sátt um haldi;
bír er bískips

[11] Sigurður Nordal 1933, 247. Cf. Turville-Petre 1976: "For my line is at its end..."

[12] *ÍF* II, 211; 242; 245. Scholar have generally had trouble with this contradiction: see North 1990, 158, and the works cited there.

[13] Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 2001, 72.

[14] Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 2001, 28-35 and the works cited there.

í bæ kominn
kvánar sonr
kynnis leita.

The first part of the strope is obvious, as meaning ""I do not relish/ the company of men/ though each of them might/ live in peace with me". In other words, the poet gains no pleasure from the company of others, even though everyone remains at peace. The second half, on the other hand, has remained an area of controversy. No acceptable conclusion for the meaning of these lines has so far been reached. Many suggestions, however, have been made for possible alterations to the text, which most believe refers to the the son having now come to Óðinn.[15]

I have reached the conclusion that st. 18 should be read as it stands (i.e. reordered as "kvánar sonr er kominn í byrbæ bískips kynnis leita"), and that it means simply that "the son of the woman has come to the world in the ocean, outside the ship, in search of company". I see a difference between the expressions *að eiga kynni* and *að leita kynnis*. *Að eiga kynni* in a particular place means that you have relations and friends that you can go to for companionship in this place. *Að leita kynnis* on the other hand seems to me to imply that you are searching for new companions in hitherto unknown surroundings. In this understanding, the strophe takes on an entirely different meaning from those that have previously been suggested, simultaneously making the anguish of the poem deeper. The poet no longer sees his son heading towards those relations that have already passed on, something which might well offer a form of consolation, but instead sees him moving into unknown territory in the grips of Rán and Ægir.

Skjálfhentur rúnameistari

As regards the second part of st. 19, which seems to be corrupt in the mansucript, I have followed the interpretation that two words should be turned into one. The strophe runs as follows:

Máka ek upp
í örvar grímu
rýnis reið,
réttri halda.

(I have not the power
to hold correctly
the *rýnis reið*
in the *örvar gríma*.)

"Örvar gríma" is a kenning for a hand, leading to the suggestion that the poet can not hold the rune stave ("rýnis reið": the "steed of thought") correctly in his hand.

This interpretation adds even greater depth to the reader's/ listener's understanding of the feelings of the poet. In st. 8, the is poet speaking of not being able to get justice against Ægir with the use of a sword, something that underlines the weakness and lack of support that an old man feels in the face of the world. In st. 18, his son was left in the realm of Ægir and Rán. In the first part of st. 19, Ægir faces the poet with a set and heavy mind. At this crux, the poet of *Sonatorrek*, an experienced warrior and skilled rune-master, may have had the idea of carving runes for his son, but he can no longer hold the rune stave in his hand. The poet is thus rendered powerless against an opponent who has made his life unendurable.

The conclusion of the actual elegy for the drowned son becomes especially powerful and effective if it is understood in the way I have suggested.

[15] See Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 2001, 95-100 and the works cited there.

Bjargföst trú

St. 22 of *Sonatorrek* reads as follows in *Ketilsbók*:

Átta ek gott
við geirs dróttin
gørðumk tryggr
at trúa hánum,
aðr umat
vagne runne
sigrhöfundr
of sleit við mik.

The traditional interpretation of this strophe is that it means: "I had a good relationship/ with the god of the spear,/ and took up a firm belief in him;/ until the friend of the wagons,/ the author of victory,/ broke friendship with me."

The first part is easy to understand. The poet states that he had a good relationship with Óðinn and thus became loyal to him, taking Óðinn as his personal god. This is a more powerful statement of the faith of an individual towards his god than is found in any other extant source concerning Old Nordic religious belief. Sigurður Nordal has previously discussed this half of the strophe and concluded that Egill was brought up to believe in the god of farmers (Þórr), but that as an adult he rejected this belief and became a follower of Óðinn. The strophe is thus seen as an expression of this change in belief.[16] Seen in this way, however, the second part of st. 22 contains two contradictions:

1. Óðinn is not connected with wagons in any other sources
2. Óðinn is said to have broken faith with the author of the poem.

However, in the following strophe, the poet states that he (still) makes sacrifices to Óðinn. I therefore think it right to attempt another interpretation.

By altering a single letter in the manuscript we find the kenning "vagna runnr" (instead of "vagna runne"), which would be a kenning for Þórr rather than Óðinn, similar to the kenning "vagna ver" in *Álvíssmál* (st. 4).[17] I suggest that the incomprehensible word "umat" in the fifth line should be read as meaning "friendship". This would lead to the second half of the strophe reading as follows:

áðr umat (i.e.vináttu)
vagna runns
sigrhöfundr
of sleit við mig.

This would mean: "Before I took up belief in Óðinn, he (Óðinn) had put an end to *Þórr's* friendship with me.

This interpretation fits well with the aforementioned argument made by Sigurður Nordal about Egill's change in belief, simultaneously making the poet's relationship with Óðinn understandable, consistent and convincing. According to this interpretation, Óðinn never broke faith with the poet. Indeed, to my mind, a poet with the temperament of the poet

[16] Sigurður Nordal 1924, 157-159.
[17] Eddukvæði 1926, 154.

of *Sonatorrek* would never have made any sacrifices to any god who let him down at a time of his greatest need.

Context – The Degree of Corruption

If we look at the context of *Sonatorrek* in the light of the information gleaned from the above reading of the poem, and the interpretation of these difficult passages, it becomes clear that the poem has been surprisingly well preserved. The poet speaks directly to his listeners (and readers) and maintains a sharp, clear train of thought from one strophe to the next, displaying a sense of honesty, sincerity and frankness. Those who listen to the poem in performance (or read it) can sense a changeable temperament, and the variety of emotions running through the mind of the composer: deep sorrow, a rich feeling of love, direct hatred and a powerless sense of expectation. All of these come out clearly from the strophes. The poem then ends as it began, with references to the act of poetic creation and the valuable gifts bestowed by the god of poetry. The text, however, is obviously corrupt in places.

After a close analysis of those places where the text seems to be corrupt, it becomes clear that there are essentially two kinds of corruptions. First of all, certain incomprehensible words have found their way into the text in several places; and secondly, a number of letters have dropped out or been changed, most often at the end of words. From their nature, these textual errors would appear to be printing errors. The poem itself thus appears to have been preserved *and* corrupted in written form rather than within the oral tradition.

Since the errors seem to have originated in the scribal rather than oral tradition, we face two possibilities about the age of the poem and its form of preservation: either *Sonatorrek* is younger than the saga states, and was composed *after* the time at which the Latin alphabet was brought to Iceland with the arrival of Christianity; or the poem was recorded in runes when it was composed, and preserved in that form until it came to be recorded in the now lost original of the *Ketilsbók* manuscript.

The mental world of *Sonatorrek* is thoroughly pagan. The central figure is Óðinn himself, a figure that the poet refers to twelve times in the poem. There are few references to any other gods, with the exception of the sea gods, Ægir and Rán, who serve a vital role as the real enemies of the poet. There is hardly any sign of anything resembling Christian thought in *Sonatorrek*, something that would seem to rule out composition by a Christian poet. Considering both the pagan ideological world visible in the poem and the aforementioned nature of the scribal errors that can be detected, we also have to deny completely the possibility that the poem was preserved in oral form within a Christian society for three centuries. The only remaining possibility is that the poem must have been preserved in the form of runes.

"...en ek mun rísta á kefli" ("But I will carve on a Rune Stave")

Egils saga states that Egill's daughter Þorgerður encouraged her father to compose a poetic elegy for his son Böðvar, and that she also offered to write this down on a rune stave. For most of the last century, the source value of this legend was usually denied, mainly on the basis of mental logic and reference to the fact that convincing evidence of the use of rune staves from the period in question was not available.[18] Shortly after the middle of the last century, however, an opposing argument was presented, suggesting that that there was every

[18] Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 2001, 141-151, and the works cited there.

likelihood of Þorgerður having recorded the poem in runes.[19] During the last few years, this point of view has been strongly supported by leading runologists.[20]

The final conclusion that can be made about the preservation of *Sonatorrek* is thus that the only adequate explanation of the present state of the poem, considering its contents and likely age, is that the poem must have been recorded in runes shortly after its composition, and that it was preserved in this form until the time at which it was recorded in the now lost manuscript upon which *Ketilsbók* was based.

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[19] Jón Steffensen 1968, 26-35.

[20] Dillmann 2000, 352-383; and Þórgunnur Snædal 2000, 17. Cf. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 2001, 151-161, and the works cited there.