

## Snorri's Invention of Hermóðr's *helreið*

Christopher Abram  
(University College London)

In the aftermath of Baldr's funeral, Hermóðr rides to Hel, the Norse underworld realm of the dead, to bargain with a mythological being (also named Hel) for the release and return of the innocent god whose death has been accomplished by Loki's treachery. His mission is unsuccessful, as Loki's further machinations prevent the fulfilment of Hel's conditions for Baldr's release: every living thing must weep for him, and the giantess Þökk (probably Loki in disguise) refuses. It is a well known story from the main eschatological cycle of Norse myth, spanning the period between Baldr's death and Loki's binding, the event that precedes, even if it does not immediately precipitate, the beginning of Ragnarök. For all its apparent importance to the mythology as a whole, however, the narrative of Hermóðr's ride is found in but one text: Snorri Sturluson's *Gylfaginning*. Snorri's principal model for the temporal progression of mythic history, *Vǫluspá*, moves straight from Baldr's death to Loki's binding, as the gods attempt to gain revenge without the intermediate step of attempting to reverse the effects of the dire blow that has been struck against them. *Vǫluspá* does not narrate Hermóðr's *hel-reið*. Neither that poem nor any other text from the Codex Regius of the *Poetic Edda* even mentions Hermóðr. Snorri clearly thought the story was worth telling, without its belonging to any of his most authoritative poetic sources. The purpose of this paper is to inquire as to where, and how, Snorri might have obtained his version of the Hermóðr-myth. Its title, which suggests that this story may have been Snorri's 'invention', is intended to allude to two possible connotations of that word. In modern English, we tend to think of an inventor as being a creator, somebody who is guided by their genius to come up with something entirely new; in its older usage, however, the Latin-derived noun 'invention' was 'the act of coming upon or finding; [...] discovery (whether accidental or the result of search and effort)' (*OED*, s.v.). So Alexander Graham Bell's telephone was an invention in the current sense of the word: he created something that previously had been non-existent. The discovery of the True Cross by Constantine's mother, Helena, on the other hand, long celebrated by the festival of the Invention, represents the archaic use of the term: the Cross was certainly pre-existent, and the idea of it was by no means original to Helena. I hope here to preserve the tension between the two meanings of 'invention', as I ask how much of Hermóðr's *helreið* Snorri has created *ex nihilo*, what elements of the narrative pre-existed the story in *Gylfaginning*, and where, and in what form, Snorri may have discovered them.

The first possible explanation of the origin of Snorri's Hermóðr-narrative is that he had available to him a source that has been lost to us: presumably this source would have been a poem in an eddic metre. Many scholars have accepted the existence of this lost poetic archetype of the myth (e.g. de Vries, 1955), some going so far as to give it a title – it has been called *for Hermóðs* by Magnus Olsen (1924, 151), *\*Baldrskviða* by Richard Dieterle (1986, 302) and 'Hermod's Helfahrt' by Franz Rolf Schröder (1924, 97-99) – or to attempt its partial or complete reconstruction (Bugge, 1881, 48; Schröder, 1924, 99). Dieterle has summed up the opinion of this school of thought:

'the myth [of Baldr as Snorri tells it] belongs within the elder Eddic tradition, and is in fact a non-innovative and rather close translation of an earlier poem' (Dieterle, 1986, 291). For some reason, Snorri has chosen to cite only one stanza of this source poem, and that without attribution. He has also cited it in a non-typical manner: whereas most quotations of eddic verse in *Gylfaginning* are authenticating, this stanza, unusually, is situational, in that its utterance is integral to the narrative, rather than being used to confirm or paraphrase a piece of information given by one of the narrating triumvirate.<sup>1</sup>

A substantial majority of verse citations in *Gylfaginning* are introduced with close variants of the phrases *svá segir í...* (if Snorri attributes it to a named poem), or *svá segir hér* (if he does not state his source). Two of the three other occurrences of situational verse in *Gylfaginning*, however, also cite stanzas that are unknown in other contexts:<sup>2</sup> the exchange between Njǫrðr and Skaði, in which they declare their modes of life to be mutually incompatible (*Gylfaginning*, 24), is, like the Þökk-stanza, not extant elsewhere, even if, as seems likely, Saxo Grammaticus's euhemerized version of the Njǫrðr-Skaði story indicates that a poetic version of the myth did circulate (Faulkes, note to *Gylfaginning*, 64). Nor do we find the brief versified exchange between an unidentified member of the Vanir and the goddess Gná (*Gylfaginning*, 30) in any other source.<sup>3</sup> Situational verses in *Gylfaginning* do seem, on this basis, to occupy a different position to the main body of authenticating poetry cited by Snorri. They are very infrequent, they are not attributed (nor would we expect them to be, on the model of other Norse prosimetra), and three-quarters of them are from poems that are not preserved elsewhere. In no case is the source poem for one of Snorri's authenticating stanzas unknown, however, even when the author does not refer to it by name. The anomalous position of these situational verses in *Gylfaginning* deserves fuller attention than is possible here, but Snorri seems to have differentiated between eddic poems which he thought were authoritative, and worthy of repeated citation by name, and those which could more freely be manipulated as part of a narrative. The Þökk-stanza may very well be part of a longer poem that narrated part of the Baldr myth: on its own, however, Snorri provides us with no information to confirm its existence separate from the text of *Gylfaginning*. Snorri, skilled poet that he was, could, in theory, have created a verse to suit the circumstances of his narrative, as the authors of other prosimetra are often alleged to have done.

The evidence offered against this possibility, and in favour of the existence of a complete poetic *for Hermóðs* is primarily stylistic, and focuses on alliteration in Snorri's prose. *Gylfaginning's* account of Hermóðr's ride begins with thus: (Potentially significant alliteration has been emphasised in bold type.)

<sup>1</sup> The terminology used to describe the two different types of verse citation in Norse prosimetra is borrowed from Whaley 1993. See also Bjarni Einarsson 1974, Wolf 1965.

<sup>2</sup> In this analysis, I do not include the stanza from *Hávamál* that Gylfi declaims on entering Hár's hall (*Gylfaginning*, 8) during the frame-narrative section, but restrict myself to stanzas imbedded within mythological narratives.

<sup>3</sup> The remaining situational stanza in *Gylfaginning*, by my reckoning, is a citation of *Grímnismál* 36 (*Gylfaginning*, 31). Snorri, erroneously or artfully, places Óðinn's words from the eddic poem in the mouth of Skírnir.

*En þat er at segja frá Hermóði at hann reið níu nætr dökkva dala ok djúpa svá at hann sá ekki fyrr en hann kom til árinna Gjallar ok reið á Gjallar brúna. Hon er þokð lýsigulli. Móðguðr er nefnd mæx sú er gævir brúarinnar. Hon spurði hann at nafni eða ætt ok sagði at hinn fyrri dag riðu um brúna fimm fylki dauðra manna,*

*'En eigi dýnr brúin minnr undir einum þer ok eigi hefir þú lit dauðra manna. Hví riðr þú hér á Helveg?'*

*Hann svarar at 'ek skal riða til Heljar at leita Baldrs. Eða hvárt hefir þú nakkvat sét Baldr á Helvegi?'*

*En hon sagði at Baldr hafði þar riðit um Gjallar brú, 'en niðr ok norðr ligr Helveg.'*

'But there is this to tell of Hermóðr that he rode for nine nights through valleys dark and deep so that he saw nothing until he came to the river Gjöll and rode onto the Gjöll bridge. It is covered with glowing gold. There is a maiden guarding the bridge called Móðguðr. She asked him his name and lineage and said that the other day there had ridden over the bridge five battalions of dead men.

"But the bridge resounds no less under just you, and you do not have the colour of dead men. Why are you riding here on the road to Hel?"

He replied: "I am to ride to Hel to seek Baldr. But have you seen anything of Baldr on the road to Hel?"

And she said that Baldr had ridden there over Gjöll bridge, "but downwards and northwards lies the road to Hel."

(*Gylfaginning*, 47; translation Faulkes, 1987)

Although much of this alliteration is probably incidental or ornamental, John Lindow was sufficiently impressed by the poetic force of the phrase *dökkva dala ok djúpa* to state that this stylistic feature 'suggest[s] an underlying and presumably older eddic lay' (Lindow, 1997, 117). Dieterle (1986, 293) also identified the phrase *Vex vidarteinungr einn fyrir vestan Valhöll* (*Gylfaginning*, 45) as having been borrowed directly from the beginning of his hypothetical \**Baldrskviða*. Two lines of alleged verse in a narrative as long as Snorri's telling of the Hermóðr-myth is not proportionately very high, but their existence is suggestive, at least, of a poem somewhere in its background. Or it is if one believes that alliterating phrases can only be symptomatic of oral-traditional poetic style.

The alliterating doublet of *djúpa* ('deep') and *dala* ('valleys') is found in the *Poetic Edda*, in *Hárbarðsljóð*, 18 and *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, 28, as well as in the late *Heiðreks gáur*, 7; *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, 47 has *dala dögögóta dæcvar hliðir*. Nowhere does the phrase *dökkva dala ok djúpa* occur, however, despite the semantic congruence between valleys, deepness, and darkness. It cannot be considered on the present evidence to be an eddic formula, therefore, even if it is apparently eddic in style. If we are prepared to look outside the corpus of native Norse poetry for Snorri's model, however, we find an example that seems to resemble *Gylfaginning's* *helreið*, in both sense and sound, more than any extant eddic poem does.

At the time of *Gylfaginning's* writing, the popularity of narratives that described the visit of a Christian soul to hell and heaven, as both moral exemplum and gory voyeuristic treat, was at its apogee across Europe (Morgan, 1990; Dinzelbacher,

1981); Scandinavia was not immune to the appeal of this genre (Dinzelbacher, 1993), and parallels to many of the distinctive features of Hermóðr's journey can be found in contemporary Christian vision-literature. The similarities between Snorri's narrative and Christian traditions have not passed unnoticed (Lindow, 1997, 117-19), but scholars have not challenged the idea that Snorri's alliterating style in this passage must show influence from eddic poetics. In fact, some of the best comparanda to Hermóðr's journey are found in a text that combines analogous topographical features with strikingly similar stylistic elaboration. This text is the vision of the Irish monk Tundale, dating to the mid-twelfth century, which was transmitted both in a widespread Latin version and in Norse translation.

Like Hermóðr, the visionary Tundale begins his journey into the underworld by passing through a vale of darkness. The Latin original describes the scenery that confronts him in typically gloomy terms:

*Cumque longius simul pergerent et nullum preter splendorem angeli lumen haberent, tandem venerunt ad vallem valde terribilem ac tenebrosam et mortis caligine coopertam. Erit enim valde profunda et carbonibus ardentibus plena.*

'Together they proceeded a distance, and they had no light except for the splendour of the angel. Finally they came to a very terrible and dark valley covered by the fog of death. The valley was very deep and full of burning coals.'

(*Visio Tnugdali*, 12-13)

We should note the alliterating triplet *venerunt ad vallem valde*, which forms part of the description of the valley together with the doublets *terribilem ac tenebrosam* and *caligine coopertam*. The author of the *Visio Tnugdali* plainly brings extra emphasis to his description by use of alliteration, as it marks the point at which the audience is first exposed to the horrific landscape of hell. It is not likely that Snorri knew the *Visio Tnugdali* directly (Lindow, 1997, 117), even if he had sufficient functional knowledge of Latin to understand it, which some scholars have denied (see Clunies Ross, 1987, 28, for a highly reasonable review of this debate; compare Faulkes). In the Norse translation of the above passage, however, Snorri could have found similar alliterative embellishments of the passage through the infernal valley:

*En suo sem þau hófðu leingi geingit og hófðu ecki líos nema þat er stod af einglinum og um síder komu þau í dal einn mikinn og miog ogurligan myrkan og allan huldan dauðans blinnleik. Sa dalr uar miog diupur og fullr gloandi glóða.*

'And when they had gone for a long time and had no light except that which shone from the angel, eventually they came into a valley, large and very awful, dark and covered altogether by the blindness of death. This valley was very deep and full of glowing embers...'

(*Duggals Leiðsla*, 25)<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The Norse translation of the *Visio Tnugdali* exists in several manuscripts, some of which are mere fragments (Wolf 1993). This passage is edited from AM 681 4to a, which is slightly more accurate at this point than AM 624 4to, the only other manuscript to preserve this particular part of the text. There is, however, no significant lexical or stylistic variance between the two versions.

The elements that the translator emphasises with alliteration are analogous to those which Snorri is supposed to have taken from his lost eddic source, and includes the collocation of *dalr* with *djúpr* (which is also found twice in the description of the second valley through which Tundale/Duggai passes: *Duggals Leiðsla*, 29). This dale is deep, and very dark; compare also the idea of *blinnleik daudans* ('blindness of death') with *Gylfaginning's* description of the valley as being *so deep and so dark* that Hermóðr could see nothing in front of him (*svá at hann sá ekki fyrr*). Tundale and Hermóðr may travel into their underworlds for radically different reasons, but what they encounter on the first part of their journeys is strikingly similar.

I do not mean to argue here that either *Duggals Leiðsla* or the *Visio Tnugdali* was Snorri's direct source for the opening of the *helreið*-narrative; there is no evidence that the Latin *visio* was transmitted in Iceland, and its translation into Norse was accomplished in Norway, probably under the auspices of Hákon Hákonarson's (reigned 1217-63) programme of authorised translations of important foreign texts. It may, therefore, postdate *Snorra Edda* (Hallberg, 1973). It is tantalising, and probably unprofitable, to wonder whether Snorri was exposed to any of Norway's newly vibrant literary culture on his first visit there in 1218-20. The evidence of *Duggals Leiðsla*, however, shows up the assumption that alliterative prose must be modelled on alliterative verse for the fallacy that it is. Other Christian authors, in both Latin and Old Norse, presumably managed to make use of the device to embellish their descriptions of hell without recourse to the Germanic poetic tradition. Alliteration is not the same as poetry, and the impetus for its use could have come from an entirely different type of source, or indeed from Snorri's wide general knowledge of – and engagement in – Norse poetics, rather than from any individual poem.

In the remainder of this paper, I aim to identify the remaining iconographic elements that are included in Snorri's narrative of Hermóðr's descent. Where possible, I shall attempt to locate the building-blocks of the story in Norse mythological tradition as we know it from other sources, and to compare them to analogous episodes in Christian tradition, in the hope that we may be able to gain a clearer picture of the cultural and literary melting pot into which Snorri may have dipped during the composition of *Gylfaginning*.

### The descent itself

(a) The obvious Norse model that presents itself for a myth involving a descent into the underworld is the eddic poem *Baldrs draumar*, in which Óðinn is prompted by Baldr's troubling dreams to saddle up Sleipnir and ride to Hel, there to consult with a *vølva*. The parallels between *Baldrs draumar* and Hermóðr's ride are highly cogent: they both form part of the same myth-complex; they both feature a mythological figure riding the same special steed on a mission to retrieve something similar (news about Baldr on the one hand, Baldr himself on the other), but in both cases their mission ends in failure. In both cases, Hel's halls are described as being 'high' (*Baldrs draumar* 3/4: *hann kom at hávo Heljar ranni*) or surrounded by high gates (and presumably therefore walls): Snorri describes Sleipnir's great leap over them (*Gylfaginning* 47).

The correspondences between these two narratives are close, and for Dieterle (1986, 291-92) they must both be integral to the grand narrative architecture of the

original *\*Baldrs kviða*. One could object that it is strange that *neither* of these narratives in their current form is anywhere even mentioned in the *Poetic Edda*, as *Baldrs draumar* survives only in a fourteenth-century manuscript, AM 748 I 4to. On the other hand, very little is known for certain about the pre-history of the textual transmission of this type of material: neither Snorri nor the compiler of the Codex Regius poems can be assumed to have had access to the totality of eddic verse; we do not know from what texts or traditions either author was able to select, and so we do not know how selective each has been and how much he has omitted.

There are, however, many non-Norse texts that also feature the descent of a character into a mythological underworld in an attempt to retrieve something; the story is central to the genre of Christian vision-literature exemplified by the aforementioned *Visio Tnugdali* tradition. A mélange of motifs drawn from classical and Christian texts gradually came together to form a set of distinctive stereotyped images that were almost endlessly repeated and varied across the genre. Prominent among the most influential texts in the canon of underworld visions are Book VI of the *Aeneid* and the story of Christ's harrowing of hell, which was promulgated principally through the popular apocryphon the *Euangelium Nicodemi*; despite the apocryphal status of the *Euangelium*, the belief that Christ descended into hell had sufficient doctrinal credibility to be included in the Athanasian and Apostles' creeds. In some specific ways, the harrowing of hell is also typologically similar to Hermóðr's *helreið*. The mission is the same: to free hostages who, though entirely blameless, have been incarcerated in the underworld. Hermóðr seeks stainless Baldr's release, Christ that of the Old Testament prophets and patriarchs who, through no fault of their own, had been condemned to hell. In *Niðrstigningar saga* (*Heilagra Manna Sögur*, II, 1-20), the Old Norse retelling of the *Descensus Christi ad Inferos* section of the apocryphon, Christ enters hell on a great white horse: this detail may be original to the Norse, although the textual history of the *Euangelium* is so complex and diffuse that it has not been possible to identify with any precision from which version of the Latin the translation has been made.

*Niðrstigningar saga* survives in four medieval Icelandic manuscripts, which can be shown to be representative of a fairly extensive transmission history: the oldest and most complete witness to the Norse text, AM 645 4to, dates to the beginning of the thirteenth century. This story was undoubtedly popular and influential in Iceland (Wolf, 1997), and was in circulation in the period when Snorri was working on the *Edda*. Anatoly Lieberman's (2004, 38) dogmatic assertion that '[neither] Hermóðr's visit to Hel [n]or Óðinn's journey to meet a seeress in *Baldrs draumar* bear[s] any resemblance to the harrowing of hell' is unsustainable: there are certainly correspondences between all three narratives. It is the job of the critic to determine whether these correspondences have any significance. It seems to me that Hermóðr's ride to Hel is at least as close, when considered typologically, to Christ's *descensus ad inferos* as it is to Óðinn's chthonic consultation with the *vǫlva*.

### The Protagonists

There are also a few discrepancies between *Baldrs draumar* and Hermóðr's ride. Hermóðr, an obscure figure who is neither quite divine nor wholly human in the

handful of other references to him in the corpus, takes on the role played by Óðinn himself in the *Baldrs draumar* narrative; Lindow (1997, 104-15) traces the connections between the two figures in other sources, however, and shows that Hermóðr is a character with significant links to the chief of the gods. Hermóðr and Óðinn are thus alike in nature and function within this story; they are typologically analogous figures engaged in typologically analogous tasks, and the substitution of one for the other makes no fundamental difference to the typology of the descent-narrative. (It occurs to me, too, that if, as Snorri seems to have done, we regard Hermóðr as being the son of Óðinn, chief of the gods (Lindow, 1997, 112), then Hermóðr could be interpreted as having a Christ-like aspect: both figures are divine, and both the sons of the supreme patriarchal deity, even if this analysis would be certainly be problematic if applied to sources other than *Gylfaginning*.)

More significant, perhaps, and certainly less often remarked upon, is the absence of the mythological figure Hel from *Baldrs draumar*, and her presence in *Gylfaginning*. The story of Hermóðr's *helreið* is unique in all Old Norse literature in its portrayal of the Hel as inhabiting the realm of the same name and functioning as a protagonist in a myth. In the *Poetic Edda*, the name Hel denotes a place in all but one occurrence; pagan skalds demonstrate an awareness of Hei as a personification of death, but do not place her in mythological narratives (Abram, 2006). Only in *Gylfaginning* does Hel (the goddess) inhabit and thereby personify Hel (the realm), and only in *Gylfaginning* is Hel herself envisaged as actively having a role to play on the mythic stage. There are, once again, stronger parallels to this curious feature of Snorri's mythology to be found in Christian literature than in his poetic sources. A female personification of the Christian underworld is mentioned in *Bartholomeus saga postola* where, in a brief reference to the harrowing of hell, a demon cries out:

*'Latið af, vesalir menn, at blota mik, at þer hafit eigi verra; bundin em ek með eldigum rekendum af englum Jesus Kristz, þess er gyðingar krossfestu ok hugðu hann mann vera ok halldaz i dauða; en hann heriaði a Hel drottning vara ok batt sialfan heliar höfðingia elldligum rekendum.'*  
(*Postola sögur* 748-49)

'Stop sacrificing to me, wretched people, lest you have it worse; I am bound with fiery bonds by angels of Jesus Christ, he who the Jews crucified, thinking him to be a man, and susceptible to death; but he fought with Hel our queen, and bound the chieftain of hell himself with fiery bonds.'

An identification of this figure with Snorri's Hel is tempting but probably incorrect. As Michael Bell (1983) pointed out, a personification of hell is a common character in traditions about the harrowing deriving from the *Euangelium Nicodemi*. In one of the manuscript versions of *Niðrstigningar saga*, the fragmentary AM 238 folio V, *helviti*, an unambiguously Christian (and grammatically neuter) personification of the infernal realm engages in the bathetic cross-talk with Satan that is so characteristic of this part of the *Decensus Christi* tradition (*Heilagra Manna Sögur*, II, 18-19). The other texts of *Niðrstigningar saga*, meanwhile, replace the personification of *helviti* with a motley collection of devils and giants and *rikiströll*: it is just possible that other Norse redactors of the apocryphon, which has a personified (masculine) hell in most of its Latin versions, excised this character deliberately, to avoid conflating it with the pagan

Hel. How and why Hel came to be feminine in *Bartholomeus saga* is unclear: Bell (1983, 263) suggests that it may reflect influence from an Anglo-Saxon version of the *Euangelium*, which also has a female personification of hell. In any case, there is rather little probability of any of these texts having been consulted by Snorri in the composition of *Gylfaginning*; it is sufficient for the moment to recognise that a personification of the underworld is an important character in Christian descent narratives that are typologically cognate with Hermóðr's *helreið*, but that outside Snorri's account there is no extant version of this or any other myth that features a personification of pagan Hel.

### The topography of the underworld

As well as the deep, dark dales that Hermóðr must navigate, he comes upon a river, and a bridge. The river is called *Gjöll*, and the bridge *Gjallarbrú*. Rivers and bridges alike are absolutely standard and non-culturally-specific components of underworld journeys: they are certainly extremely common features of the Christian hell as imagined by the authors of Christian *uisiones* (Morgan, 1990, 27-29; Dinzelsbacher, 1973). There is evidence from *Grímnismál* 28 that *Gjöll* was known as a river that ran through the underworld in eddic mythology, although the poem does not go so far as Snorri in stating that it is nearest to Hel's gates (*Gjöll er næst Helgrindum: Gylfaginning*, 9). The question of whether *Gjallarbrú*, too, had an existence in pagan iconology is one that is fraught with problems. Unfortunately, I do not have space to go into that matter here: I hope to expand upon these brief comments in the talk that will accompany this pre-print.

### Conclusion

Lack of space has prevented a truly comprehensive analysis of the motifs which have been combined by Snorri to make up the narrative of Hermóðr's *helreið*. I hope that sufficient evidence has been presented, however, to support the idea that Snorri's narrative need not be explained by inventing on his behalf a now lost eddic poem on Baldr's death and its aftermath. Nor do we have to credit Snorri with so much inventiveness as to imagine that he has created the whole narrative out of nothing. Rather, it seems likely that the episode in *Gylfaginning* is an integrative synthesis of ideas and motifs that were circulating contemporaneously in Norse literature, both Christian and 'native', but which are more significantly present in the former. Snorri was able to make typological links between pagan myths and biblical truths (as can be seen, for example, in his distortion of *Vafþrúðnismál* 35 into a type of the Noah's ark story: *Gylfaginning*, 11). If he had been exposed to contemporary vision-literature, or to the supreme example of the infernal descent narrative available to Icelandic authors as *Níðrstigningar saga*, he could undoubtedly conceptualize the Hermóðr-myth as being typologically analogous to these Christian stories. Whether or not we go so far as Arthur Mosher (1983) in seeing the whole of the Baldr-myth as being a type of the crucifixion, it does not seem out of keeping with Snorri's overall strategy for the presentation of pagan myths in the *Edda* that he should be on the lookout for



typological correspondences between his ancestors' myths and those of his own time and religion.

The idea for Hermóðr's *helreið* was presumably not Snorri's. Perhaps there really was a pre-extant eddic poem on the subject. It is a possibility that cannot be discounted. There is, however, no such poem available to us, nor are we ever likely to find one. If Snorri had access to *\*Baldrsksviða* in its entirety, his use of it (quoting only one stanza in full, but making an extensive unattributed paraphrase of its full narrative) would be out of line with his general treatment of eddic verse quotations elsewhere in *Gylfaginning*. But he does not need to have known *\*Baldrsksviða*; if this hypothesised poem never existed, the motifs that appear in this episode would still have been available to Snorri; they were in circulation, in Iceland and Norway, at this period, in Christian texts. Indeed, in many cases, the features of Snorri's underworld and Hermóðr's descent into it resemble Christian traditions about hell much more than they do any identifiable pagan notions about the Norse Hel. I believe that the analogues available to us within the extant corpus of Old Norse literature are sufficient to explain most of the substance of the *helreið*: the fact that many of these analogues come from 'Christian' texts does not by any means disbar them from consideration. It may, however, discourage some of the many critics who fetishize the original myth over its actual form, the pagan over the Christian, the non-existent over the readily available and who, in my opinion, often distort the evidence of *Snorra Edda* to fit in with their dogmatic preconceptions about the nature of Norse myth.

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