

Are the Spinning Nornir just a Yarn?
A closer look at *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* 2-4

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The paper concerns the *nornir* – a group of Old Norse female supernatural beings that, in some way or other, represents some notion of fate. Often, they are stereotyped as three beings personifying past, present and future or as three women who spin and/or weave. This latter image is the one concerned here, and it appears to be a well-established image – it is perhaps one of the best-known things about the *nornir*, so well known that often scholars seem to feel little need to substantiate descriptions of weaving or spinning *nornir* with references to text passages wherein the image can be found, as can be seen from the following:

‘They are said to carve runes or to weave fate’ (Raudverc, 2003, 63)

‘It is said that the *nornir* weave or spin fate for gods and humans’
 (Meulengracht Sørensen and Steinsland, 2001, 53)

‘[The name *Urðr*] suggests spinning, and indeed the idea of an individual’s destiny as woven is prevalent in Old Norse’ (Larrington, 1992, 155)

‘We know that weaving and spinning are among the evolved or related attributes of *Urth*’ (Bauschatz, 1982, 38)

Indeed, we know that. But how is it that we know this?

More academic texts could be quoted for similar statements; the problem is that only a few Old Norse texts contain passages which support the same notion. While we know that the *nornir* spin and weave, the truth of the matter is that, when we go to the source material, we find that the *nornir* are primarily engaged in things other than the textile industry. To the best of my knowledge, there is not a single unequivocal description of spinning *nornir* to be found in the sources. This ought to raise a certain amount of suspicion, for how can we have the image of spinning, weaving *nornir* in our heads if we do not have it in the source material available to us?

However, there are at least three text passages which are of significant interest to the discussion of the validity of this image: *Völundarkviða* 1-3, *Darraðarljóð* and *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* 2-4. There are more texts which are of more marginal relevance to the discussion of fate and textiles as such, but these three have immediate interest, as the first two clearly describe the actions of spinning and weaving respectively, and the third is the only text which explicitly mentions *nornir* engaged in some sort of textile-related activity.

As I see it, there are two important questions to ask:

- 1) If the source material does not give us the image, then where do we get it from and how can we justify our acceptance of it?
- 2) Seeing that the image of fate as spun or woven is well known in other European traditions, is it realistic to imagine that the *nornir* would be completely free of this idea?

Völundarkviða 1 clearly presents us with supernatural female creatures who spin:

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

Maidens flew from the south
through the dark woods
strange, young creatures
to fulfil their fate.
There on the shore
they sat to rest,
the southern ladies
spun precious linen.

Here, three maidens come flying from the south and as they rest on the shore of a lake, they spin precious linen. These women are immediately connected in the poem with the concept of fate in that they are said to arrive in order to 'fulfil their fate' (Crozier, 1987, 9).

This is exactly what they do, they fulfil fate, but they do not create it. In this poem, the women are subject to fate, they are not in charge of it, and they are not *nornir*. Although the prose introduction refers to them as *valkyrjur*, they have rather little in common with *valkyrjur* as we know these from skaldic poetry and from other eddic poems: they do not occur in the context of warfare, they do not carry weapons or ride horses and they do not stay with their chosen heroes but leave them behind (Dronke, 1969, 301-302).

The women in *Völundarkviða* are often called 'swan maidens' (a term which is employed in scholarship only, not the text itself) and insofar as they seem to be otherworldly women to whom are attached certain features common to a whole range of otherworldly women in Old Norse tradition, this is true. But they are not *nornir*; they are not creating fate, they are simply following it, exercising the compulsive behaviour of migrating swans (Hatto, 1961, 333).

This is the only description of supernatural spinners which I have found. But we have a very powerful image of what are clearly supernatural weavers available to us in the poem *Darraðarljóð*. Stanzas 2-4 from the poem read as follows (text and translation from Poole 1991):

Sjá er orpinn vefr
ýta þörmum
ok harðkljáðr
höfðum manna;
eru dreyrrekin
dörr at skóptum,
járnvarðr yllir
en örurum hrælaðr.
Skulum slá sverðum
sigrvef þenna.

The fabric is warped
with men's intestines
and firmly weighted
with men's heads;
bloodstained spears serve
as heddle rods,
the shed is ironclad
and pegged with arrows.
With our swords we must strike
this fabric of victory.

Gengr Hildir vefa
ok Hjörprimul,
Sanngríðr, Svipul,
sverðum tognum:
skart mun gnesta,

Hildir goes to weave
and Hjörprimul,
Sanngríðr, Svipul,
with unsheathed swords:
the shaft will break,

skjöldr mun bresta,
mun hjalmgagarr
í hlíf koma.

the shield will shatter,
the sword will
pierce armour.

Vindum vindum
vef darraðar
þann er ungr konungr
átti fyrri:
fram skulum ganga
ok í folk vaða
þar er vinir várir
vápnum skipta.

Let us wind, let us wind
the weaving of the pennant
which the young king
had before:
we must go
and advance into the throng
where our friends
set weapon against weapon.

Undoubtedly, the activity described in stanza 2 has to be weaving as this is done on an upright loom; the textile allusion could hardly be any clearer. But there is no mention of *nornir* anywhere, the women engaged in the weaving are clearly described as *valkyrjur*: they have *valkyrja* names, they are deeply engaged in the battle itself and in the prose passages surrounding the poem they are said to ride horses. This of course raises the question as to how sharp a line it is possible to draw between these two groups of supernatural women. I do not mean to say that *valkyrjur* and *nornir* constitute entirely separate and easily distinguishable categories, but nevertheless there are differences and it is very clear that the women in *Darraðarljóð* are *valkyrjur*, not *nornir*.

Darraðarljóð is alone in attaching this motif to *valkyrjur*; the image is not even alluded to elsewhere. If the poem is to be relevant to the discussion of whether *nornir* spin and weave, it must be proven that it deals with fate, and on this point the argument has been made both for (Holtsmark, 1939; Eiríkr Magnússon, 1910) and against (Poole, 1991; von See, 1959; Genzmer, 1956).

The crux of both interpretations rests in the weaving activity.

Weaving is most definitely a feminine activity, and part of the metaphor in *Darraðarljóð* is that while weaving is the work of human women, guiding battles and presiding over life and death is, as Poole also points out (1991, 136), the work of supernatural women. That these two images should combine in the poem without the poet noticing that he could be alluding to ideas about female supernatural guardians of life and death seems to me a stretch of the imagination, and I believe that some idea about fate must have been in the poet's mind.

Interpretations of *Darraðarljóð* will probably continue to differ for some time yet, and a consensus as to whether or not it portrays fate is probably not impending, but to me, the question here is whether the image of fate as something woven is native to Norse tradition or not. On this point, the most convincing arguments have been put against – the idea does not appear native either to Old English or to Old Norse tradition, and it has probably been imported (Weber, 1969, 115-125).

One Old Norse text clearly portrays *nornir* doing something with threads, namely *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, stanzas 2-4:

Nótt varð í bæ,
 normir kvómo
 þær er öðlingi
 aldr um skópo:
 þann báðo fylki
 frægstan verða
 ok buðlunga
 bestan þikkía.

Night fell on the place,
normir came,
 those who were to shape
 fate for the prince:
 they said that he
 should be most famous
 and that he would be thought
 the best of warriors.

Snæro þær af afli
 ørlögþátto,
 þá er borgir braut
 í Brálundi;
 þær um greiddo
 gullin símo
 ok und mána sal
 miðian festo.

They twisted very strongly
 threads of fate,
 as the fortification broke
 in Brálundr;
 they combed out
 golden threads
 and fastened them in the middle
 of the moon's hall.

Þær austr ok vestr
 enda fálo:
 þar átti loðungur
 land á milli;
 brá nipt Nera
 á norðrvega
 einni festi,
 ey bað hon halda.

East and west
 they concealed the ends:
 the prince should have
 the land in between;
 the kinswoman of Neri
 to the north
 fastened one,
 asked her to hold it forever.

Both spinning and weaving have been suggested as explanations for what the *normir* are doing in this text (Larrington, 1996, 278; Davidson, 1998, 115 and 119-120), which is strange when one considers that these two activities do not look anything like each other in practical terms and they require vastly different tool kits. On seeing people engaged in either activity, one would usually not be in any doubt as to whether they are spinning or weaving. In order to understand the image employed here, I think we need to approach it from a practical angle.

Stanza 3 mentions *ørlögþátto*, 'fate-threads', a word clearly conveying the notion of fate as a thread although the word in itself in no way describes the relationship between the fate and the thread. The *normir* are said to twist these threads together, fastening them in the sky ('the moon's hall') with what seem to be three separate strands stretching out from there in the compass directions. It is stated in stanza 4 that Helgi will possess the lands in between.

The verb used is *snúa*, 'to twist', not *spinna*, 'to spin', as one might expect were the intention to **unequivocally** portray spinning. The use of *snúa* does not in itself prove that they are **not** spinning, but it allows for the fact that this might be a description of something else. However, it would hardly be used to describe weaving; for sure, the fastening of vertical threads may be likened to setting up a warp on a

loom, and a horizontal thread could then be seen as the weft. But the poem refers to only three threads, and that is hardly enough to weave with.

The purpose of the threads seems to be revealed in the phrase: 'the prince should have / the land in between'. Two things happen here: Firstly, separate threads are united into one, and secondly, threads are used to mark off boundaries in what appears to be physical space.

Concerning the unification of threads, this image seems to portray the process of twining rather than that of spinning. The *nornir* already have the three threads; they are not making these from scratch out of raw material, which is what spinning is. When a thread has been spun it is often plied, either with one or more threads, or with itself, in order to stabilise it, otherwise it will have a tendency to constantly curl back on itself. This can be done on a spindle by fastening the ends of the threads onto the spindle and, whilst carefully keeping the individual threads separate, twisting them together by turning the spindle in the opposite direction from that in which the threads were initially spun. This process would yield an image very similar to that described in the poem, and the use of the verb *greiði* in stanza 3 goes rather well with the notion of keeping the threads apart.

At first, one might also imagine something like braiding, but this fits less easily with the description, because it involves continuously moving the loose ends of the threads as these are laid over one another in succession. The poem seems to have the loose ends quite stationary, so the twisting motion must be happening at the end where they come together.

Rather than spinning or weaving, the situation described in the poem seems to be that of twining. Already Jacob Grimm appears to have come to this conclusion, but the casual way in which he distinguishes between spinning and twining would seem not to have been understood by all scholars:

Of such stories [folk-tales] there are plenty; but nowhere in Romance or German folk-tales do we meet, as far as I know, with the Norse conception of *twining* and *fastening the cord*, or the Greek one of *spinning* and *cutting the thread of life*.

(Grimm, 1883, 413)

In *Helgakviða Hundingsbana* I, 2-4, three threads are in the process of being plied together into one, and what we see is the process rather than the finished product. One end of the three threads has been formed into a cord where they are combined and this end is fastened in the sky – as if held by the person doing the twining – and the other end, where the individual threads split, are fastened in three of the compass directions, east, west and north. Thus is measured out the area which will belong to Helgi.

Quite technically, our poem does not portray spinning, neither does it portray weaving, but it does show *nornir* engaged in some textile related creation process, which I believe is probably twining, clearly linked to fate in the text. But this still leaves us with some questions.

Does the poem prove that *nornir* spin and weave?

I suppose it does not disprove it. I also suppose that it hints strongly in that direction. But we must take into account that the poem is generally thought to be quite late, probably belonging to the eleventh century, and this might have allowed for foreign influences to have crept in and coloured the poet's perception of what *nornir* are and what they do (Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 1962, 478; Weber, 1969, 124). Foreign

influence must also be at least considered as the root of the image in *Darraðarljóð*, which is thought to have been composed in the British Isles, describing a battle between the Norse and the Irish, and the Classical image of fate as something woven appears to have been imported into England at an early stage (Weber, 1969, 121-122).

Our two references to female supernatural textile workers who have to do with fate are both fairly late ones. This in itself does not amount to an argument against the idea of fate as something spun or woven in Old Norse tradition. But when faced with some twenty other references to *nornir*, none of which makes any allusions to textile work whatsoever, I think we must concede that this was simply not the most dominant image of *nornir* at the time – even if the metaphor has since entered our thought world to such an extent that we appear to see it because it is in our heads rather than in our texts. Perhaps we see it because we already have it in mind before we even start looking for it, and perhaps this is why we have been willing to grant it the dominant status which we have done – undeservedly, I would say.

But this, of course, leaves us with one intriguing question: What do *nornir* do then?

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