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’ (Raudvere, 2003, 63)

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

‘[The name Úrðr] 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 Úrðr’ (Bauschutz, 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, Dæradarljóð 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 I clearly presents us with supernatural female creatures who spin:
Maidens flew from the south
through the dark woods
strange, young creatures
to fulfill 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 fulfill 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 Darradarljóð. Stanzas 2-4 from the poem read as follows (text and translation from Poole 1991):

Sjá er orpinn vefr
ýta þórmum
ok harðkýðar
höfðum manna;
eru dreyrrekin
dørr at skóptum,
jarnvarðr ylíir
en ðrum 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 headdle rods,
the shed is ironclad
and pegged with arrows.
With our swords we must strike
this fabric of victory.

Gengr Hildr vefa
ok Hjörprimul,
Sangríðr, Svipul,
sverðum tognun:
skarpt mun gnesta,

Hildr goes to weave
and Hjörprimul,
Sangríðr, Svipul,
with unsheathed swords:
the shaft will break,
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 Darðarljóð are valkyrjur, not nornir.

Darðarljóð 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 (Holtmark, 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 Darðarljóð 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 Darðarljóð 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,  
nornir kvómo  
þær er dölingi  
aldr um skópo:  
þann báðo fylki  
frægstan verða  
ok buðlunga  
bestan þikkia.

Night fell on the place,  
nornir 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.

Snøro þær af aflí  
órögbátto,  
þá er borgir braut  
i Bráluði;  
þær um greiddo  
gullin símo  
ok und mána sal  
míðian festo.

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

Þær austur ok vestr  
enda fálo:  
þær áttu loftungr  
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 *nornir* 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 *órögbátto*, ‘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 *nornir* 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 pld, 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 pld
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
cord is fastened in the sky – as if held by the person doing the twining – and the other
cord, 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 (Binar Ol. 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?

Bibliography:


