

Gods, Warlocks and Monsters in the *Örvar-Odds saga*

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Örvar-Odds saga, without doubt one of the most renowned and popular *fornaldarsögur*, is handed down in several medieval and post-medieval manuscripts. Since the nineteenth century, Old Norse scholarship has identified three main redactions to which the different texts belong: an ancient, or short redaction (S), dating from the second half of the thirteenth century; an intermediate redaction (M), perhaps only a few decades younger, and a later, long redaction, probably dating from the fifteenth century. The manuscripts containing this late version of the saga have been ordered in three groups, A, B, and E, of which the first two have furnished the basis for most modern editions and translations of the saga, while the third one has been to date quite neglected, being considered a mere later variation on the A and B versions.

The short redaction is one of the oldest preserved specimens of the *fornaldarsögur* genre. Apparently, its author relied on a pre-existing tradition, which is proved not only by the Arvaroddus episode in Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* (V, XIII), but also by the references to Oddr's participation in the Brávalla battle contained in the *Sögubrot af fornkonungum* and in *Ketils saga hængs* – an episode of Oddr's life which is not preserved in any version of his own saga. Whatever material – oral or written – he took into use in order to write the saga, the author of the short redaction clearly intended to create the coherent biography of an exemplary man. It is possible, as Torfi Tulinius suggests, that he drew inspiration from hagiographic models (Tulinius, 1995, 144); surely he knew Snorri's *Heimskringla*: his description of Bjarmaland presents striking similarities with the description of the same land in Snorri's historiographic work, and – which is more relevant – Oddr follows the steps of the Christian king Sigurðr Magnússon 'Jórsalafari' in his journey from Sicily to Syria via Jerusalem. Moreover, it is noteworthy that this version of the saga mentions only Viðkunnr í Bjarkey among Oddr's descendants, and this very Viðkunnr, according to Snorri, was a friend of King Sigurðr's. Elsewhere (Ferrari 2005) I have tried to demonstrate how the redaction S puts on stage the political conflicts in Iceland during the late thirteenth century; my purpose is here to show how the author made use of different traditional patterns and beliefs in order to present his hero not only as a champion of the ideals and the hopes of the Icelandic rural oligarchy, but also as a consistent enemy of pagan gods and practices. The construction of such an ideological frame required a cautious use of traditional lore, whilst the insertion of new fantastic motifs and figures in the youngest version of the saga entailed, in fact, a thorough modification of the meaning of the whole narrative.

Even in the short version, the universe in which Oddr lives and acts is pervaded by magic. He himself resorts to enchanted objects and forces in order to reach his goals, such as the magical arrows, the shirt of invulnerability, and the always favourable wind. Magical objects and forces seem to be strictly connected with human and non-human peoples which inhabit the fringe areas of the Norse world: the Sami and the Permians of the North and of the North-East, the Irishmen of the West and, of course, the trolls, who populate a land which seems here to lie in the same part of the

world as Lapland and Permian. It is quite difficult nowadays to find out to what extent the author made use of traditional but still living beliefs about magic, and to what extent he took over simple narrative motifs which had no resonance in the audience's fears or its ideas about the supernatural. The boundary between belief and folktale, on the other hand, could be rather uncertain (Lassen, 2003, 215), depending also upon social conditions and education. As Oddr warns his warriors not to leave the corpses of their companions in the hands of the Permians, lest they could use them magically against the Norsemen (*Örvar-Odds saga*, 35), his words probably refer to a widely diffused belief in the magical force inherent in the limbs of a dead body (von Sydow, 1935, 109). More generally, the depiction of the Sami and of the Permians as powerful and often hostile practitioners of magic seems to be deeply rooted in Norse culture even after the conversion to Christianity. More complicated is the question about the giants, who in this redaction of the saga appear to be the neighbours of both Sami and Permians. The malignant and ugly giants whom Oddr fights against during his first journey to the North are the same grotesque trolls, deprived of any primeval, mythological greatness, that we find acting in many sagas – especially in *fornaldarsögur*, but not only in them – and in folk tales. Most likely, the Icelandic audience of the saga did not believe in their existence and did not really fear them (Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, 1990), but it knew them and could collocate them spatially and ethically, their repulsiveness being a manifestation of their extraneousness to ordered social life and moral values.

Perhaps, as John McKinnell has recently suggested (McKinnell, 2005, 99), even the *völva* no longer belonged to the world of living beliefs of the Icelandic people when the redaction S was written down. The possibility of a truthful prophecy pronounced by a heathen witch, however, was absolutely acceptable to a Christian audience throughout the Middle Ages, and not only in Iceland: through the effectiveness of forbidden practices in fact, the devil could try to lead astray simple-minded souls and induce them to worship the false pagan idols (Schmitt, 1988, 455-495). Oddr's stern opposition to the visit of the *völva* to his foster-father's home, as well as his violent reaction against the prophecy concerning himself, are therefore perfectly coherent with his disdain for the idiotic practices of his own community, and point to his future conversion to Christianity.

Thus the author of the redaction S makes use of witchcraft, popular beliefs, folk tales and reminiscences of the old mythology in order to construct the diegetic world of the saga, to depict a trustworthy *fornöld* in which his hero acts, fights against the forces of evil and finally attains glory and wisdom. In this world the ancient gods have no place; they are not characters acting in the plot, but just a target for the hero's hatred and polemics. This deep ideological coherence of redaction S has been often concealed by the assumption, shared by several scholars, that Óðinn takes part in the action disguised as the old peasant Jólfr, the character who gives Oddr his most powerful weapons: the stone arrows with whose help he will defeat the wicked, heathen kings of Bjálkaland. Since Ferdinand Detter and R.C. Boer, at the end of the nineteenth century, identified the character of Jólfr with the father of the gods on the basis of an etymological explanation of his name (Detter, 1888; Boer, 1892), several scholars have taken over this assumption without putting it under critical examination. Heusler and Ranisch, however, had already pointed out in 1903 that Detter's and

Boer's supposition was without valid scientific arguments, and concluded: 'Íólfr bleib ein Bauer', 'Jólfr is still a peasant' (Heusler, Ranisch, 1903, LXVIII-LXX). A comparison with other texts, presumably contemporary with or some decades younger than redaction S of the *Örvar-Odds saga*, in which the same narrative pattern appears, shows that even the *sagnamenn* of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century did not identify the isolated wood-cutter in the forest with Óðinn. In *Ketils saga hængs*, Ketill's father-in-law, Brúni, appears in the same way as Jólfr in the *Örvar-Odds saga*, yet he is not a god, but belongs to the race of the trolls and is the brother of the Sami king Gusir (*Ketils saga hængs*, 158-160). In another *fornaldarsaga*, *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar* – presumably not much younger than redaction S of *Örvar-Odds saga* (Simek, 1993) – the heroes Þorsteinn and Beli run across a man endowed with magical skills who cuts wood outside his hut on an island (*Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, 60): far from being Óðinn, the man is Þorsteinn's cousin Brennir, and he, too, gives precious weapons to his relative as a present. An enigmatic wood-cutter, Tófi, appears even in the 'realistic' *Njáls saga* (*Brennu-Njáls saga*, 212-213), but he is just an *útlagi*, an outlaw, and he has nothing to do with the Old Norse gods. Even if the motif of the wood-cutter in the forest was once connected with Óðinn – and we cannot know this, since no myth supports this assumption – the author of the S redaction is completely unaware of this identity; to him Jólfr is just a rough but helpful peasant, and there is no contradiction in Oddr's using his gifts in order to fight against the adepts of the old religion.

The seriousness and religious commitment of this version of the saga have already disappeared some decades later, when a new *sagnamaðr* writes down the redaction. M. Stephen Mitchell has already pointed out the humour that pervades the episode of the conversion in this later version (Mitchell, 1991, 109-113). Oddr's eagerness to leave the peaceful life of the Christian community reveals in fact a thoroughly new attitude in describing the hero's personality. It is the long version, however, which drastically modifies the plot, the function and the ideological horizon of the saga. Such a result is attained principally by two means: on one hand the elaborator inserts a series of new episodes in his received narrative, and on the other he changes the centre of gravity of the story, making of the eerie Ögmundur – a secondary character in the previous versions – Oddr's true antagonist.

The amplification and reorganization of the narrative matter lend new motivations to the hero's actions (Bandle 1990), but at the same time they introduce new discrepancies into the diegetic world of the saga. The consistent universe of redaction S, mainly derived from Norse lore, is here replaced by a scenario which is much more complex, made up of heterogeneous elements taken from different genres and traditions, and integrated into the previous plot. As we know, for example, in this version of the saga Oddr finds himself among the giants on two different occasions. The first time is when he reaches the land of the giants – who are called here *jötnar* or *tröll* – during his journey to Bjarmaland. Although this episode differs in some ways from the corresponding one in the old redaction, the depiction of the monsters as evil and grotesque beings remains unchanged. The second time in when Oddr is carried off by a marvellous vulture (by a dragon in the manuscripts of group E) to an unknown, far-off land. Here he meets the giant Hildir, who takes him home to his land, where he becomes the lover of the giant's daughter Hildigunnr, with whom he begets the huge

and brave Vignir. Even if the narrator calls Hildir a *jötunn* (*Örvar-Odds saga*, 120), these giants are apparently different from the previous ones: they are neither ugly nor wicked, they are just not as clever as human beings. Their land – *Risaland* – could not be put on the map, and one cannot reach it following a specific direction: Oddr arrives in this part of the world by flight and he leaves it simply crossing a forest. This way of moving from one scene to another within the diegetic world is typical of the *riddarasögur* (Ferrari 1994), and to this group of texts point also the erudite, exotic references in the same episode, such as the mention of animals such as the tiger and the unicorn, called by their Latin names.

In his literary bricolage, in fact, the author of this version of the saga derives much of his material from learned literature and from international narrative motifs, proving to be highly educated and well informed about cultural and literary advances in Iceland and abroad. As the action moves to Eastern Europe, almost at the end of the saga, the elaborator expatiates on the lands and kings of this geographical area (*Örvar-Odds saga*, 187), taking his information from encyclopaedic and cosmographical texts (Simek, 1990, 341-345). From the same kind of texts, and in particular from a description of marvellous peoples, he may have derived his distinction between ugly and beautiful giants, in this way systematizing the quite contradictory and puzzling information given on the subject by Icelandic mythographic texts and by traditional lore (Simek, 1990, 465-473; Schulz, 2004, 23-24, 245-247).

The combination of native and international narrative motifs is particularly interesting in the case of Ögmundr's character. He is the son of a Permian king and of an ogress, and this is in fact enough to explain his evil nature and his astonishing strength. Moreover, he gets married to the giantess Geirríör and thus becomes the son-in-law of the *jötun* Geirröör, a well known figure in Old Norse literary tradition. The elaborator, however, adds to Ögmundr's personality some features which point to foreign literary traditions. In particular, the motif of the cloak made with the beards and moustaches of subjugated kings (*Örvar-Odds saga*, 134) is apparently taken from Arthurian literature: Geoffrey of Monmouth tells about the evil giant Ritho who collected the beards of defeated kings, and who was finally killed by King Arthur himself (Dubost, 1991, 610-613). Considering the wide circulation of Arthurian literature in Iceland (Tulinus, 1993, 182-187) we can assume that the audience was able to grasp the allusion and therefore to establish a comparison between Oddr and the famous British king. Furthermore, other elements in the text reveal the composite nature of this version of the saga and its relationship with the romances of chivalry, as for example the exotic name *Kvillanus* that Ögmundr assumes as he becomes the king of Novgorod, or the tournament to which Oddr challenges his mortal enemy (*Örvar-Odds saga*, 186-187).

The most perplexing and discussed insertion in the long version is that concerning the character of Rauðgrani, who is in reality the god Óðinn himself. This insertion does not play any important structural role in the narrative – Rauðgrani is more a counsellor and an informant than an actor, and without him the plot would develop more or less in the same way – but it involves a strategy of representing the *foröld* that is totally different from the one adopted in the old, short redaction. The uncompromising anti-heathen polemic gives way to a more subtle attitude, and we detect in the depiction of Rauðgrani the same humour and lightness of touch which we

noticed in the new version of the tale about Oddr's conversion. Like several other *sagnameñ* of the late Middle Ages, the author of the long version of *Órvar-Odds saga* feels free to put Óðinn on the stage of his narrative, but the ancient god is now as cunning and wise as he is cowardly (Lassen 2003); he is no longer a manifestation of the wicked power of a demonized heathenism, but his quickness in disappearing from the battlefield is openly comic, and clearly contrasts with epic traditions. As in the case of the new episode about the giants, the author of the long version thus inserts a portion of text which is internally consistent, but which is in contradiction – or at least in tension – with other parts of the text, and particularly with those parts which he takes over almost without any alteration from the short redaction (most likely through the intermediate redaction M). The result is a composite, quite heterogeneous and sometimes self-contradictory text. Nevertheless, it can give the impression of being more cohesive than the old redaction (Bandle 1990).

The reason for this impression of consistency must be found in the change of the focus in the long version. Just because the new *sagnamaðr* is no longer concerned with the religious orthodoxy of his audience and does not seem directly interested in the social and political reality of his days, he takes over and fully develops a motif which was already present in the old redaction: the motif of Oddr's vincibility or imperfect invincibility. In the old redaction, in fact, one can recognize a recurrent pattern in Oddr's series of battles: he regularly carries off the victory twice, then, in the third battle, he is not the winner or he has to suffer a serious loss. So after the expedition to Bjarmaland, he first defeats the Viking Hálfðan, then Sóti, but he is unable to defeat Hjálmar, who becomes his friend and blood brother. Afterwards, Oddr and Hjálmar defeat five terrifying *berserkir* in Sjælland, and together they harry the coasts of Scotland, but as they carry out an attack on Ireland Oddr's foster brother Ásmundr gets killed, and the loss of his best friend is a great sorrow to Oddr. After leaving Ireland, again, Oddr has to confront three new enemies, Skolli, Hlödver and Ögmundr: the first one becomes his ally, Hlödver is defeated, and Ögmundr reveals himself to be invincible.

The worst of Oddr's defeats in the short redaction is his failure to escape the death predicted by the *völva* at the beginning of the story, yet he concludes his life as a winner: he, an *útiginn maðr*, has become the most powerful king of his world, and – what is more important – he has saved his soul from hell by refusing to adore idols and demons. To this main narrative strand, the author of the long redaction adds an eerier and more ambiguous one, making of Ögmundr the principal antagonist of the hero and the keystone of his elaborated version. Already in the short redaction Ögmundr seems to be something more and worse than simply a wicked warrior: his appearance is that of a troll, he has magic powers and all his being radiates evilness. Abandoning the fight against him, in fact, Oddr puts into question his very humanity: *ek á hér við fjáðr en eigi við menn*, 'I fight here against demons, and not against human beings' he declares (*Órvar-Odds saga*, 93).

On this basis, and making use of traditional Norse lore as well as of international narrative motifs, the elaborator builds up a character which is the personification of viciousness itself, and which seems to represent the active role played by demonic forces on the plane of history. In the long version, Ögmundr is a monster generated by a Permian king and by an ogress, his appearance and his skills

reveal him directly as a troll and a warlock, nevertheless he doesn't belong exclusively to 'the other world'. On the contrary, he acts as a man – although a very peculiar man – amongst other men, and at the end of his weird career he rules over Novgorod for a long time as a respected and powerful king. His invincibility, together with Oddr's resignation to it, forms the most puzzling and disturbing innovation of this version indeed. Paul Edwards and Hermann Pálsson saw in the character of Ögmundr a sort of 'dark side' of Oddr himself, a phantom with which he has to come to terms in order to achieve wisdom and self-consciousness (*Arrow-Odd*, XVII-XVIII). Such an interpretation appears to assume a point of view which is a little bit too modern, even if it explains perhaps why nowadays readers prefer the long to the short version of the saga. In any case, the character of Ögmundr contributes to taking from Oddr part of his greatness, and thus plays a relevant role in the rewriting strategy adopted by the elaborator. In the long version of the saga, in fact, Oddr is a hero who may appear ridiculous – as happens when he deals with his giant mistress and with his own giant son – and who may be overcome again and again by the champion of the forces of evil. He may even act as a villain (Bergur Þorgeirsson, 2000, 132), and that is because the intent of the author of the new version is no longer to present to his audience an ethical and social example to follow and to identify with, but to compose an interesting and exciting story, full of wonders and rich in turns of events. The result is a text which is less cohesive than that of the short redaction, but more adequate to the taste of a refined and learned audience in the fifteenth century: a text which shows great narrative dynamism and, above all, which is open to different readings and interpretations.

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