

**The Use of Magic Spells and Objects in the Icelandic *Riddarasögur*:
Rémundar saga keisarasonar and *Viktors saga ok Blávus***

Vera Johanterwage
(Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster)

1. Introduction

Magic plays an important role in the French romances and their Norse adaptations, the translated *riddarasögur*. What, for example, would *Tristrams saga* be without the love potion? Some objects such as the magic fountain known from *Ivents saga* reappear in the younger Icelandic *riddarasögur*,¹ where, however, they figure as only *one* magic element among many others. In fact, the Icelandic romances are characterised by such an overabundant use of magic spells and objects that Margaret Schlauch concluded: 'It would be hopeless to attempt to discuss the magic objects which appear so frequently in the romantic sagas. [...] The modern reader can only throw up his hands in amazement at the diversity of the display.' (Schlauch, 1934, 146-148)

There can be no doubt that the mediaeval audience will have taken pleasure in this 'diversity', whereas from the author's point of view, magic elements must have provided ceaseless opportunities to create a plot which was not only thrilling but also allowed for a higher degree of complexity. Motifs such as a flying carpet, for example, gave him the opportunity to link separate strands and to push on with the story. Following this line of reasoning, the use of magic objects can be regarded as a structural element. Where magic in the *riddarasögur* is discussed in the secondary literature, however, the context of the passages within a specific text is hardly ever given the consideration it deserves. Instead, the main interest has been laid on the mere gathering of material, i.e. the compilation of motifs, both from a folkloristic and a narratological point of view.²

In my paper I will take a different approach and try to analyse how the sagas portray protagonists who are versed in magic. I will concentrate on the following questions: Which types of magic objects exist?³ How and for what purpose are they used? Who can exercise a spell or is in possession of a magic object (men versus women, Christians versus heathens)? Do the sagas distinguish between black and white magic? How is the use of magic commented upon by the narrator?

The aim of my paper is to offer some insight into two romances, and to prepare the grounds for further research on a broader textual basis. I will concentrate on the *Rémundar saga keisarasonar* and the *Viktors saga ok Blávus*, which have it in common that their main protagonists travel to India on a bridal quest. These sagas are

¹ Here and in the following the terms '*riddarasögur*' and 'romances', respectively, refer to the Icelandic *riddarasögur*.

² This can be observed as regards older works, such as Jiriczek, 1894, as well as more recent publications, such as van Nahl, 1981.

³ In my discussion of the different types of objects, I will not apply the elaborate systems established in folklore studies (see Eggers, 1932, and Jaide, 1932). For a general definition and discussion of 'magic' (and of the relevant secondary literature) see Kieckhefer, 1989, 8-17, Habiger-Tuczay, 1992, 9-16, and Petzoldt, 1999.

two representatives of a larger group of texts, in which India appears as a country full of wonders, as the favourite destination for quests for cures, inhabited by people skilled in all sorts of magic (see Johanterwage [forthcoming 2006]). Within this group, the *riddarasögur* (among others *Dinus saga drambláta*, *Gibbons saga ok Gregu*, *Nitida saga*, *Ála flekks saga* and *Ectors saga*) form a large subgroup. By using magic as a narrative device, India in these texts is characterised as a place completely removed from Icelandic reality, while, at the same time, the two worlds are conjoined by magic. I have chosen to concentrate on *Rémundar saga keisarasonar* and *Viktors saga ok Blávus* because of their relative antiquity and because of their contents. Both of them are likely to have been composed around the middle of the fourteenth century, and thus belong among the older *riddarasögur*.⁴ Since a high percentage of the Icelandic *riddarasögur* are bridal-quest romances (see Glauser, 1983, 12, and Kalinke, 1990), both texts can be considered as typical of the genre, which, however, does not imply that the use of magic as described in these texts is exemplary, too. I think that descriptions of magic in mediaeval literature should not be reduced to either structural elements or to folktale types, variants and motifs, but should also be taken as a vital part of the statements and ideals transported by a piece of literature.⁵ In the following I will analyse magic from the perspective of the interrelationships of the protagonists and will discuss how the authors of *Rémundar saga* and *Viktors saga* made use of magic in order to underline the intended message.

2. Magic in *Rémundar saga keisarasonar* (*Rsk*)

The bridal-quest of *Rsk* is generated by a dream: Rémundr, Prince of Saxland, dreams of his marriage with a beautiful maiden. When he wakes up, he finds the wedding ring on his finger. Rémundr suffers from *amor hereos*, love sickness, and consoles himself with a statue of the dream maiden. When Eskupart, the heathen prince of Tartária, claims that she is his beloved, the two knights engage in combat, in which Eskupart is mortally wounded. The point of his sword, however, becomes lodged in Rémundr's head. Eskupart prophesies that only the unknown dream maiden will be able to heal him. One day a stranger called Viðfjull appears and surprises Rémundr by knowing everything about his fight with Eskupart. Viðfjull builds a gold and silver chariot for the prince and together they set out for the kingdom of Africa, where Princess Rosamunda falls in love with Rémundr. When he rejects her advances, she urges her father to attack him, but the African army is defeated by Rémundr and Viðfjull. They continue their journey to India and finally encounter Princess Elína, who turns out to be the maiden of Rémundr's dream. Soon it becomes clear that the dream was a mutual one and that Rémundr's love is reciprocated by Elína. Unsurprisingly, she is able to remove the iron piece from his head. Before the lovers can be happily united, however, they have to face various difficulties, and Rémundr has to go through a lot of fighting. Finally, their engagement day arrives and the time has come for Viðfjull to reveal his true identity as prince Perciákús of *Indialand hit minna*, who had been sent

⁴ *Rémundar saga* was most likely written shortly before 1350, *Viktors saga* shortly after, see Glauser, 1983, 23 with note 86, 280, 306.

⁵ I restrict myself to this aspect and will not discuss the sources of the two sagas in this paper. For excellent overviews see Broberg, 1909-1912, and Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 1964.

to Saxland with the order to find Elína the man of her dream. In the end Rémundr takes Elína to Saxland, where they get married and rule happily ever after.

As for the magic elements in *Rsk*, a few episodes are of special interest with regard to either negative or positive variants of magic. In two passages, magic is clearly presented as a danger. In the first of these, Rémundr tells his parents of his dream. His father explains that *draumar eru lygnir* (23.1) and warns him of witches who beguile men by assuming a beautiful appearance:

yör hafi sýnz nokkur flagðkona með goldrum ok gøringum ok brugðit á sik fríðri ásjónu til þess at heilla yör með djöfligum flærðum. (23.3-5)

Rémundr contradicts his father and claims that his dream was not *galdrar né gøringar né flagðkonulist* (23.15-24.1), and that the ring on his finger is an irreproachable proof of this (the ring can of course be interpreted as the materialised symbol of the union to come). In the course of events it becomes clear that Rémundr's assessment of the dream is right, and later it is even pointed out by the narrator that the wondrous mutual dream was an expression of God's will:

ok þykkir þat i slíkum atburðum likast, at þann veg má allt vera, sem guð dróttin vill, þó (at) þat sé í móti náttúrunni fyrir sumar greinir. (345, 2-4)

According to the logic of the saga, wondrous incidents, which are explicitly stated to be against nature, may either be the result of dangerous magic or one of the possible ways of God intervening in his childrens' fate.

The second passage in which magic is presented as dangerous, is the episode about Eskupart. The narrator is unequivocal in characterising the *heathen* prince of Tartária as bad; Eskupart is:

mikinn sem risa ok sterkan sem troll. Hann var ákafliga digr með sterkum hlífum ok stórum vápnum, sem einum risa byrjaði at bera. Ok øngvan mann þóttuz þeir hafa sét jafntorveldligan sem þenna. (32.5-9)

As regards the fight between Rémundr and Eskupart, the narrator is clearly on Rémundr's side - see the repeated statements of the type *Gæti nú guð keisarasonar!* (39.11) or designations such as *hinn illa Eskupart* (42.8). The way in which the point of Eskupart's sword flies through the air and ends up in Rémundr's head is somewhat unnatural: *En oddrinn af sverði Eskuparts fló i lopt upp ok kom niðr i hǫfði Rémundi.* (40.5-7) Finally the *álög* which are spoken by Eskupart immediately afterwards (40.10-14) leave no doubt that Rémundr's opponent makes use of black magic.

Things are completely different with Princess Elína. When she uses her magic skills, it is to bring about the union with Rémundr envisaged by God. Her magic touch removes the iron from Rémundr's head. In *Tristrams saga*, undoubtedly the source from which this scene derives, the iron is removed with a *töng*, while in *Rsk* this is achieved by the mere power of Elína's healing hands:

Nú hefir konungsdóttir heyr at þessa ágæta manns hǫfði, þegar á burt komandi því illa járni (142.9f.)

The *náttúrusteinar* which Elína owns render the person holding them invisible, and facilitate the nightly encounters of Elína and Rémundr (138, 147f., 337f.). The wondrous powers generally associated with gems in the Middle Ages were widely considered a natural quality of certain types of precious stones. Consequently, quasi-scientific explanations could be given, such as that rendering someone invisible was an illusion of the eye caused by the gem's bright shine (see Kieckhefer, 100-105;

Habiger-Tuczay 317f.). I think that this concept has also found its way into *Rsk*. Note that Elína never makes use of a magic spell; she simply possesses objects with extraordinary, yet not supernatural qualities, and she knows how to apply them.

As I have hinted at before, everything that happens in *Rsk* is described as following a divine plan, and Elína's magic skills are no exception to this rule. Christian faith and magic in no way exclude each other in the text. Rather, the white magic (clearly opposed to the dangerous magic used by witches or heathen opponents) is conceived of as a necessary and positive means in the hands of ideal Christian protagonists.

3. Magic in *Viktors saga ok Blávus (VsB)*:

The plot of this saga can be summed up as follows: At the age of twenty Viktor becomes King of France. He is so lavishly generous that he dissipates the wealth of the kingdom within three years. As a consequence he declares his mother the governor of the kingdom and leaves the castle. In a great forest Viktor encounters Blávus who makes a rather unusual appearance on a flying carpet. The knights fight against each other, but neither of them succeeds in wounding the other. They become sworn-brothers and face a number of adventures in the following years. They are joined by a wise man named Kódér and win the assistance of the dwarf Dímus. With their aid Viktor and Blávus are able to defeat the sea-kings Ónundr and Randver and the terrible rulers of Cyprus, Falr and Sóti. Moreover the sworn-brothers acquire immense wealth. After twelve adventurous years Viktor returns to France with Blávus. When Kódér tells him about the beautiful and wise Fulgida, who rules over India, Viktor decides to ask for her hand. His visit to India, however, does not result in a happy union: The maiden-king has Viktor's hair cut off, has him smeared with tar and flogged. In the following year Viktor travels to India again and manages to take Fulgida to France by making use of the flying carpet, yet the clever queen shoves him off the carpet and goes back to her homeland. Shortly after, Blávus and Kódér sail to India. Fulgida recognises Blávus as her half-brother and follows his advice to go to France and marry Viktor. In the end Viktor and Fulgida rule over France, Blávus marries Rósida of Serkland and becomes ruler of it, and Kódér becomes King of India.

It is obvious at first sight that magic plays a major part in the outcome of the story. Not all the magic objects have an impact on the course of events, however. When Viktor is on the point of departure his mother gives him a magic box which replenishes itself with money. This box is not of much use in terms of the bridal-quest plot. There is only one situation in which it plays a role in Viktor's attempts to win Fulgida: the maiden king has heard of this box and is keen on seeing (or rather owning) it, a fact that helps Viktor in making her step onto the flying carpet. Yet in this situation the box is nothing but an exchangeable requisite. Viktor, disguised as the rich merchant, could easily have aroused Fulgida's curiosity by means of any other object of wealth. The box is never used to serve its actual purpose – when it is given to Viktor, one expects him to be in desperate need of gold sooner rather than later, but this turns out not to be the case. The same can be said of the tablecloth and can that replenish themselves with food and drink, which are in Blávus' possession. They are introduced just after the heroes have become sworn-brothers, but are never mentioned

again and are of no relevance whatsoever for the plot of the saga. Probably our author knew the second *þáttur* of *Karlamagnús saga*, where dwarfs own a magic *handklæði* and a magic *postr* (ch. 13f.), and simply included similar objects in his text because he conceptually liked them. But I think that it is possible to go beyond this simple explanation: the box, cloth and can be understood in the context of the exaggerated generosity which initiates Viktor's adventures. Viktor's way of dealing with his possessions is not put to the test with the help of these objects, as one would expect, but nonetheless they potentially raise the reader's awareness for the moral lesson to be learned: They function as symbols illustrating that the person who prudently deals with his fortune will not suffer any shortcomings. Later it is made clear that Viktor has learned his lesson, when he returns as a wealthy man from his adventures with Blávus.

All the other magic objects either help Viktor and Blávus to achieve their goals or are used against them by their opponents. First of all there is the magic carpet owned by Blávus: it flies when the golden letters on its right side are read out aloud, and lands when the letters on the left side are read out. As Blávus, Viktor and Fulgida all use the carpet, we can conclude that it can be used by everyone who is knowledgeable enough to read the letters.

The episode dealing with the sea-kings Randver and Öundur beautifully illustrates how the use of magic objects can – at least on the surface – be decisive in a combat. At first Randver and Öundur own a magic *kesja* and a *brynþvari* (two types of 'spear'/'halberd', see Falk, 1914, 78-81). They have been made by the dwarf Dímus and kill those whom their owners choose to be killed, one man per day – which explains why the sea-kings are considered invincible opponents. But then the dwarf promises Viktor and Blávus that he will assist them against Randver and Öundur. He exchanges the sea-kings' charm-weapons for identical yet 'normal' weapons and gives enchanted swords to Viktor and Blávus. Not only do they receive these enchanted weapons, they are also supported physically by the strong dwarf when they are at the point of falling backwards in the combat. Thanks to his assistance they defeat their opponents. Notably, Blávus and Viktor explicitly state the sea-kings' qualities as gallant warriors:

B(laus) m(ælti) þa litil frægd hefer mier aukizt j þott at ek hafa Aunund at velli lagt. þuiat þat var meir af viel en karlmennsku. satt er þat kuad V(ictor) at sidr war ek jafn Randuer at hann hefði lagt at jordu slika .ij. sem ek er ef suika laust hefði verit. en huat mun nu giora at syrgia þa dauda. (27.15-20)

The sworn-brothers are fully aware of the fact that they would not have defeated the sea-kings without the dwarf's help, and they even mourn their opponents' deaths. The way in which they bury Randver and Öundur in a mound (27.8-15) and the fact that they later fulfil their last wishes and name their sons after them (49.6-8) clearly express how much they respect them. At first sight it is hard to tell whether the use of magic appears in either a positive or a negative light in this episode, as both parties rely on charmed weapons and all four warriors are described as brave and fine men. Viktor and Blávus are simply the luckier ones in gaining Dímus' help and consequently defeating the sea-kings. The central question is, then, whether they are lucky because they have access to magic or whether they simply are *gæfumenn*. To put it differently: Is the use of magic to be considered the decisive element in a battle

between equal opponents? According to the dying Ónundr his fate causes his death at the hands of Blávus:

Engi skyldi taka sik fram wr maata ne treysta sier leingur enn heimurinn
ok hamingjan will duga. (VsB, 26.18f.)

To judge from the outcome of this episode, and since *hamingja* is explicitly mentioned here, one is prone to conclude that magic helps those protagonists who are destined to live, viz. that magic and fate go hand in hand.

This conclusion is not entirely confirmed, if we take into consideration another battle episode. In the epilogue, where the younger Randver's and Ónundr's lives are summed up in brief, we hear that they fall in combat against the warrior king Geirminir despite possessing the charmed weapons. The following reason for their defeat is given:

Enn med þui at Geirmini vard eigi þat lagat at verda vopndaudum.
hellðr annðazt wr sott med naaturligu edll heimsins ok deyia vegliga j
sinum kongdómi. þa fiellu þeir f(ost)b(rædr) fyrer honum bader Ran(duer)
<ok> Aunundr (49.19-21, my accentuation).

Since Geirminir is destined to die a natural death, he cannot be overcome – not even by magic. We can thus conclude that the use of magic does not intervene in one's personal fate; all it can do is to promote the success of those protagonists who would be the lucky ones anyway.

The episode in which Viktor and Blávus fight against Falr and Sóti, the rulers of Cyprus, shows magic in a completely different light. Falr and Sóti are *hamhleypur*, warlocks who travel in *hamfarir*, the assumed shape of an animal. They are unambiguously characterised as evil, they are *blaer berserker* (28.21), *blaer sem hel en digrer sem nauð*. (29.9) The details Kódér reports about these black opponents do not exactly make it more appealing to fight them: They spew out poison and they cannot be wounded by any weapon. Kódér concludes: *er þat ok eingra menskra manna at eiga við þa i orrustum*. (29.3f.) Thus, magic objects literally have to come into play. Since Viktor and Blávus protect themselves with clothes which can withstand poison (Viktor with an *osalabra* ('sable?') fur, Blávus with a *skyrta*) and since they are provided with swords by Dímus, they succeed in killing Falr and Sóti. In this episode it is clearly pointed out that such nasty opponents can only be defeated by means of magic. In mediaeval folklore, shape-changers were believed to be possessed by a demon; consequently the garments prepared by the dwarf Dímus must be considered the outcome of good magic, especially since it is suggested by Kódér that Viktor and Blávus were destined to fight the evil rulers of Cyprus. According to him, Dímus has made the garments:

Þuiat hann vissi fyrer þenna fund yduarn. eru þit nu suo bwner sem sia ma
ok er þat þo likara at þit fallit fyrer illmennum þessum. nema auðna styrki
yckr frammar en likendi eru aa. (30.13-16)

As regards the episodes set in India, we can observe that magic is used by both parties, by Viktor and Blávus on the one side, and by Fulgida on the other. Magic serves entirely the purpose of outwitting the 'opponent' in order to gain control in the 'battle of the sexes'. One example is the magic drink that sends Viktor to sleep (37.14-22). The use of the magic carpet belongs in the same category: disguised as a rich merchant, Viktor shows his treasures to Fulgida and invites her to step onto the magic

carpet. He is able to take her to France, but as soon as they get there, she pushes him off the carpet and returns to India. The final attempt to take Fulgida to France is successful thanks to the magic helper Dímus: Blávus, disguised as a monk, stays with Fulgida in a monastery, and one day he mutters to himself that he needs the dwarf's help. Immediately the mountain over the cell bursts apart and an *óvættir* (Dímus!) runs out of the mountain and enters the cell. Fulgida recognises Blávus – who is her half-brother – and consequently, he convinces her that Dímus should take her to France. He asks the dwarf to let Fulgida have Blávus' appearance, while Blávus, given Fulgida's shape, remains in India. This shape-change turns out to be useful in the following episode, when Blávus, disguised as Fulgida, succeeds in taking the beautiful princess Rosida to France by use of the magic carpet. Now both Viktor and Blávus are able to celebrate appropriate weddings.

Since it is clearly intended that Fulgida should be overcome by the sworn-brothers and that Rosida should become Blávus' wife, we can conclude that both the carpet and Dímus' magic skills facilitate the happy outcome of the story. The author of *VsB* was interested in demonstrating his main protagonists' superiority in all respects, and this also proves to be true when it comes to magic.

4. Conclusion

To conclude my paper, I only want to mention the main aspects of interest. In *Rsk* and *VsB* there are only a few instances of black magic. It is used by opponents of the heroes, who are portrayed as evil.

When magic is applied by the main protagonists and their helpers, it results in a positive outcome: The heroes and heroines succeed in winning battles and combats, in acquiring wealth, in finding the ideal spouse and, ultimately, in becoming powerful rulers of large kingdoms. Magic appears as an instrument by which they achieve their goals.

In *Rsk* the entire plot is based upon the resolute action and magic skills of the Indian princess Elina. Magic appears as a necessary part of the divine plan portrayed in the romance. In *VsB* magic helps the sworn-brothers to succeed in combats, but it is only a supportive element contributing to the role assigned to them by fate, i.e. to be victorious in battle. They win the hands of their wives due to their skilfulness in outwitting the women, yet depend upon the dwarf's magic skills. In both sagas, notably, the female protagonists simply possess magic objects and have natural magic skills, while the male protagonists are in need of helpers. A common trait shared by all positive characters who use magic is that they are clever and possess outstanding qualities. Moreover, the magic objects are made with great skill from rare, precious materials. The worth of these objects seems to correspond to their owners' power, and they could be considered a very special kind of status symbol. On the whole there can be no doubt that magic is portrayed as an art which is accessible only to the most cunning and outstanding men and women of royal descent.

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