

The Edge of Water in Old Norse Myth and Reality

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The Binary Model

Interpreting edges presumes a defined centre and an oppositional marginality. This is known above all from anthropological studies as a binary model, a model that has been called in question by for example Margaret Clunies Ross. She criticises the binary model for over-emphasising a clear division between, for instance, *Miðgarðr* and *Útgarðr*, and underlines the importance of adding other cultural categories to this model. She also focuses on a group of supernatural beings that belong to the world outside *Miðgarðr* and *Útgarðr*. In addition to the other two groups – the first group implying gods, human and giants and the second group elves and dwarfs – she suggests a number of characteristics that define a third group of supernatural beings. This group is defined above all by lack of social control, by one-parent families and by association with natural forces.¹

I would like to take this questioning of the binary model as a starting point for this paper, and also to discuss edges and margins with regard to the world outside *Miðgarðr* and *Útgarðr*, partly by comparing features of early Scandinavian culture with Old English literature. One hypothesis would be that the medieval mentality contained a concept of the bestial within quasi-human figures, and that within this concept one might imply some kind of binary model or set of cultural boundaries. The task is not in the first place trying to identify topographical centres but to identify a space that in respect to norms and attitudes was regarded as being 'on the edge', and how this edge was imagined and dealt with in different sources. Among other things I would like to discuss

- a) an early binary model;
- b) images of female sea monsters;
- c) images of one-parent-families.

One-parent families

The one-parent family is a characteristic of the earlier mentioned third group of supernatural beings, with a mother and son or a father and sons.² A better term may be needed, since the term 'family' suggests some kind of social organisation, but for the moment I will continue to use it. One could go further in trying to identify the relationships within the one-parent families, as for example what kinds of relationship are significant for the mother and son respectively, for father and sons, and maybe also between the children. It is interesting that the children often seem to be depicted as worse than their parent. One example where myth seems to correspond to reality in this respect, at least linguistically, is in the law of *Grágás*. *Grágás* defines an outlaw as *skógarmaðr*, a designation that on a symbolic level associates the criminal with the

¹ Clunies Ross, M., (1998 [1994]), 55–79.

² Clunies Ross 1998 [1994]), 74.

forest and thus with marginality. The child of a male outlaw is called *vargdropi*, 'something that the wolf has left behind', and this associates the child not only with the forest but with what is bestial.³

A number of one-parent families are mentioned in Old Scandinavian myths, for instance in the Finnish epic *Kalevala*, where *Väinämöinen* and his mother might be defined as a one-parent family and are also associated with the sea. However, the most illustrative example of such a family, are Grendel and his mother in the Old English epic *Beowulf*. Grendel is among other things called 'famous march-riever' (*mære mearcstapa*, line 103), 'grim stranger', (*grimma gæst*, line 102), 'unhallowed wight' (*wergan gastes*, line 133), (ironically) 'hall-thane', (*healdægne*, line 142), 'dark ill-doer' (*deogol dædhata*, line 275), 'monster' (*eoten*, line 761), 'slaughterous stranger' (*cwealmcuman*, line 792) – all terms that define him as a non-social being.⁴

Grendel is said to be the offspring of Cain and the father of all evil:

Panon untydras ealle onwocon,
eotenas ond ylfe ond orcneas,
swylce gigantas þa wið Gode wunnon
lange þrage (*Beowulf*, lines 111-4)

'From him arose all evil broods, etins and elves and evil spirits, and also the giants who fought against God for a long time'.

but his father is unknown:

'They have no knowledge of a father, whether any (such) had been begotten for them in times past among the obscure demons' (lines 1355-1357).

His mother is described as, among other things, 'monster-woman' (*aglæcwif*, line 1259), 'wandering death-sprite' (*wælgæst wæfre*, line 1331) and 'strong wicked ravager' (*mihtig manscaða*, line 1339), but is also one example of an imagined female monster that lives in water or close to water. She is defined as *brimwylf*, *wæterwulf* ('sea/water wolf'), *grundwyrge*, ('cursed creature of the depths'), or *merewif*, ('lake-woman').

Grendel and his mother seem in many respects to belong to the bestial world. They are both defined as 'huge border-haunters' and their world is:

'a land unknown, wolf-slopes, wind-swept headlands, perilous marsh-flats, where the mountain stream goes down under the mists of the cliffs — a flood under the earth. It is not far hence, in measured miles, that the lake stands over which hang rimy groves: the wood fixed by its roots overshadows the water.'⁵

Nowhere else are marginality or the edges of the world-view expressed so clearly. It is expressed in topographical and symbolic contrast to King Hroðgar's hall Heorot and its social life, and even in contrast to *Miðgarðr*, as it is said that Beowulf comes from his own country to help King Hroðgar by fighting against Grendel. A clear division is

³ *Grágás* (1852-1870), 1: 118: 224.

⁴ *Kalevala* (1999); *Beowulf and the Finnsburg Fragment* (1911); *Beowulf* (1955); *Beowulf* (1994). The great number of names defining Beowulf is reminiscent of the numerous name-lists in Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál*, especially the designations for natural forces, see e.g. *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar* (1931), *Skáldskaparmál*, 173 ff.

⁵ *Beowulf*, lines 1357—1364.

drawn between the centre and a water-associated 'edge', between King Hroðgar's hall and the social life of Heorot on the one hand and the bestial world that Grendel and his mother belong to in many respects on the other.⁶

As I have pointed out earlier, the third group of Old Norse supernatural beings is defined through their lack of social control, in contrast to *Miðgarðr* and *Útgarðr*, areas that have it in common that they are governed by some sort of social control. It would be of interest to know what bestial figures like Grendel meant in a long-term perspective, in a transferred meaning according to mentality and imaginations. Did they even have a function in a civilizing process?

The Bestiary Genre

Since the beastly is stressed in a contrastive way in Old Norse myth and reality, and since Old Norse literature is influenced by contemporary European literature and cultural taste, one might turn to the last-mentioned in order to compare beast themes and motifs. The function of bestiary motifs in the Middle Ages has been pointed out by, among others, the French historian Jaques LeGoff. Among other things he underlines the importance of bestiary marvels. Marvels were applied as moral symbols in Christian belief and might among other things be classified in terms of anthropomorphic figures such as giants, animals, or mixed creatures like the centaur and the siren.⁷ The centaur (Old Norse *finngálkn*) and the siren (Old Norse *margýgr*) are also present in the *Physiologus*, a bestiary genre, and one of the most widely disseminated books of the Middle Ages. It contains moral-didactic allegories and pictures of animals or birds and a text describing the characteristics of the animals and also various religious expositions. The oldest known *Physiologus* derives from the sixth century, with its provenance in the city of Alexandria. In Scandinavia there is only one *Physiologus* known, and it is preserved in two Icelandic manuscripts written about 1200, which are probably copies of a twelfth-century work.⁸

Like the Eddas, Sagas and the Medieval Scandinavian laws, the *Physiologus* gives emphasis to treachery, for instance in describing the centaur, and even more in describing the siren. The siren was, like Grendel, associated with treachery and water, and also with the female, like Grendel's mother:⁹

Sirena iarteiner í fegrþ raddar sínar {æ}sæte rása þera, es menn hafa til sælo í heimmi hér, oc gá þes eins oc sofna frá góþvm verkom. En dýret tek {r}menn oc fyrfer þeim, þá es þeir somna af fagri roddo. Svá farasc marger af sælifi síno, ef þat eit vilia gera í heimi hér.

'The siren is characterized through the beauty of her voice and the sweetness in her callings, that makes men filled with lust here on earth, and when they listen to it, they fall asleep from the good work [that they are doing]. And the siren takes the men and kills them, when they fall

⁶ *Beowulf*, line 196.

⁷ LeGoff, J., 1988 (1985).

⁸ 'The Physiologus', in *Icelandic Illuminated Manuscripts of the Middle Ages* (1935), 43–79.

⁹ 'The Physiologus', in *Icelandic Illuminated Manuscripts of the Middle Ages*.

asleep because of the beautiful voice. In this way many men destroy themselves because of lust, if that is what they want to do here on earth.'

A female sea-monster occurs even in *Ólafs saga helga*, and is illustrated in the manuscript of *Flateyjarbók*. It is pictured in the lower margin of the vellum, and placing it in this space is presumably not done by accident. The art historian Michael Camille points out that manuscript marginal pictures from the Middle Ages demonstrate among other things that the margin was used in a functional way, often in correspondence with the motifs of the main scenes or with the text. Animal associations and grotesques frequent the margins, which Camille considers to be a space for a specific communication with the spectators. Above all the marginal illustrations consist of a narrative dealing with taboos or comic details that correspond to prevailing contrasts, imaginary or real, in medieval society.¹⁰

The fight between hero and beast was a major theme in medieval art and literature. There are several scenes in Scandinavian art and literature that describe a hero fighting a beast, both in heathen and Christian contexts, such as Sigurðr the dragon-slayer. One difference between Fáfnir and Grendel is that the former is watching over a golden treasure, but doesn't attack. It is Sigurðr who attacks him, primarily because of an act of treachery (Fáfnir betraying his brother Reginn) and secondarily because of the gold, something that also will lead to the hero's own death. Grendel, by contrast, attacks the king's hall for no other reason than to kill, and he does not own or guard anything valuable. Both Fáfnir and Grendel are beast-like figures, but they do not belong to the same kind of *garðr*, though they share a common theme of betrayal. But while Fáfnir's betrayal is on an individual level, Grendel is treacherous to a social collective or society.

Treachery and Betrayal in the Bestial Zone ('Útgarðr')

The figures belonging to 'the outside-zone' are not ordinary animals, and they are far removed from domesticated animals; they are bestial figures with animal-like children, they lack control, and if they have families, they are one-parent families. They also do not speak. Not speaking is a point that goes well with a third difference between the gods and the giants and the supernatural beings 'outside': their children are in the shape of animals, and the parents themselves are also animal-like. One of my hypotheses is therefore that the zone outside *Miðgarðr* and *Útgarðr* is filled with non-speaking beings that contrast with the verbal ability of gods and giants.

Treachery and betrayal seem to be major issues in the 'bestiary' zone, in both myth and reality. Treachery characterizes several mythological supernatural beings, such as the siren and the centaur. Fenrisúlfr also demonstrates by biting off Týr's hand that he is not to be trusted; besides, he and the *Miðgarðr*-serpent are the sons of Lóki, who is the very incarnation of treachery. The Fenrisúlfr had to be controlled through fetters, but to what world or *garðr* does he belong? To *Ásgarðr*? Does he belong among the third group of supernatural beings? He also seems to communicate with the gods in words by demanding a pledge. That supernatural beings do speak in a

¹⁰ *Ólafs saga helga*, in *Flateyjarbók II* (1860—1862); Camille (1992); see also Ney (2004).

mythological context, as in the well-known dialogue between Sigurðr the dragon-slayer and Fáfnir, is shown in the poem, but in spite of that the group of supernatural beings might in general be characterized as non-speaking.

While the division between *Miðgarðr* and *Útgarðr* is not clear, there seems to be a clearer division between *Miðgarðr* and *Útgarðr* on the one hand and the 'garðr' of the third group of supernatural figures on the other. While the gods travel between the two first named *garðar*, the third 'garðr' seems to be associated with something completely outside. The 'garðr' of the third group might thus be called '*Útgarðr*'. This makes sense in a linguistic respect since the Old Norse word *útan* means 'from outside' or '*from the sea*'.¹¹

A motif from one of the picture-stones in Gotland, dated 400—600 AD, shows in the centre a circle divided into four smaller segments filled with 'vindrings'. (Hangvar Austers I, Gotland, dated 400—600 AD). The symbolism of this circle has been discussed, but without any real conclusions. A snake-like animal with big round eyes is above the circle, or rather around it. Earlier research has interpreted a detail under the circle as the stem of a ship. To me it looks like the tail of the snake. The snake opens his jaws wide and a male figure is standing in front of the jaws. The figure has been interpreted variously by Swedish archaeologists: by Erik Nylén as Sigurðr Fáfnisbáni, and by Sune Lindqvist simply as a man fighting against a snake or dragon. Nylén, who presents the male figure as Sigurðr, comments that the dragon-slayer is an unusual motif in the very early Scandinavian flora of legends, and he stresses the great length of time between the stone picture and the written sources about Sigurðr. The picture on the stone could according to Nylén be one of the oldest iconographic representations of Sigurðr— if the figure represents him.¹² To me there are other plausible interpretations.

Given the fact that the most important attribute of *Sigurðr* in fighting the dragon, the sword, is actually missing, and that the man's left hand is placed in the jaws of the snake, what comes to mind is another mythological person, namely Týr. The man on the stone seems to be sticking one hand into the jaws of the snake— something that correspond to the Old Norse myth about Týr and how he lost one hand to the *Fenrisúlfr*. On the other hand it also resembles the *Miðgarðr* serpent twining itself around the world. It seems to be some kind of mixed up bestiary image. Also interesting, however, is the central circular motif with a bestial world (and perhaps water) surrounding it that may be an early example of contrastive images. As Margaret Clunies Ross has emphasised, the *Miðgarðr*-serpent is above all a symbol of water as a powerful natural force.¹³

That water is associated with strong forces is obvious in *Beowulf*, and it is also clear that water is associated with marginality, danger and supernatural beings. Grendel and his mother are examples of images of the danger from an outside and marginal world, similar to the natural forces that are incarnated in the *Miðgarðr*-serpent. Grendel is described as a beast, but is he an animal or a human being? He is

¹¹ Fritzner (1952 [1883—1896]), 3: 812, 814. The meaning of the word *útangarða* as 'outside the fence' and the term *útangarðsmenn* used of people who did not belong to the household also underline the image of 'edges' in some aspects of real life.

¹² Nylén (1978), 30; Lindqvist (1942), 69.

¹³ Clunies Ross 1998 [1994]), 60—64.

depicted as some sort of anthropomorphic being in the epic, while later sources (such as the *Rímur* about Þóðvarr bjarki) as a bear and/or his mother as a female wolf. Thus he is also associated with the Fenrisúlfr, and in that respect with both continuity and change: the change from water to the woods that characterises the spatial edges of society, and with the *úlfr* or *vargr*, both as literal animals as both concrete (at least in some parts of Scandinavia), and above all in legal contexts on a symbolic level, used to define the worst types of criminal as *morðvargr* or *brennuvargr*. Thus the legal sources are laying stress on the lack of social control and on the unacceptable behaviour that is only common in bestial contexts.¹⁴

¹⁴ Similar attitudes are expressed in the most pregnant sentences in the *Tryggðarmál* (the peace guarantee) of the law codes *Grágás* and 'Den ældre Gulathings-Lov' in *Norges Gamle Love I* (1846): *En sá ykkar er gengur á gervar sáttir eða vegur á veittar tryggðir, þá skal hann svo víða vargur rækur oc rekinn sem menn víðast varga reka.* 'But the one of you who tramples on treaties made, or smites at sureties given, he shall be hunted like a wolf, driven off as far and wide as ever men hunt wolves.'

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