

'Helta-sk hellor flíóta hvatt sem korn á vatne':
a paradigm for paradox in Kormákr Ögmundarson's *lausavísur*

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Although it goes pointedly against the interpretative strategy inculcated by the ideation of *Kormáks saga*, a historicist analysis of Kormákr Ögmundarson's verse must be anchored within this poet's most reliably attested historical milieu: that of the Hlaðajarl *drótt* sometime during the early part of Hákon Sigurðarson's lifetime (Wyly 2004, 158). Only insofar as this historical setting permits the reconstruction of an ideological frame of reference, conditioned as it is through a praxis of elaborate rhetorical expression, can one develop secure epistemological criteria for the interpretation of Kormákr's poetry. As a working hypothesis, I believe that a good portion of the verse preserved in *Kormáks saga* was occasioned by the treacherous death of Sigurðr Hákonarson, to which Eyvindr skaldaspillir attests in *Háleygatal* (11-12). Within the Hlaðajarl *drótt*, a suitable successor to Sigurðr would have had to be found for this body to persist. If one knows how to contextualize Kormákr's expression within a cognitive matrix heavily conditioned by the Hlaðajarl mythology, this poet's verse has much to tell us about the institutional role of the court poet within the Viking Age retinue.

As my title, I cite a *helmingr* which has been widely taken as a fantastical proposition: stones floating as if grain on water. Yet any well-versed mineralogist can verify that certain stones are buoyant in water. An acquaintance with pumice (O. N. *vikr*) is attested as early as Þjóðólfr's *Hauslǫng* (19), yet the buoyancy of amber (O. N. *rgf*) is even more remarkable, in that its relative density is such that it only floats in water with a certain degree of salinity. Another of amber's properties not particularly prototypical of rocks is that it is subject to combustion, like coal. In this brief paper, I should like to explore how reference to amber can explicate certain scaldic expressions as coherent and credibly logical.

Among Kormákr's verses which Snorri cites in his *Edda*, two (*Korm* 1.1, 1.3) especially refer to female entities, although in neither instance would I propose to classify these figures as relating to historical women in any straightforward fashion. While both these fragments have posed interpretative problems, I believe the following explications to be sound.

In the former excerpt, Kormákr juxtaposes two parallel kennings for poetry: the difficulty of coordinating *fen-tanna Sýrar greppa aurr* with *min iast-Rin* has lain in recognizing *aurr* as potentially, even if not prototypically, falling within the category of liquids, as it does in the mythological context of Yggdrasils Ask in *Vǫluspá* (19 cf. 27), so that it can operate as the kenning's base determinand (Wyly 2004, 188-89). The compound *fen-tennr* permits a double interpretation, depending on whether *fen* is categorized as water or, as direct the continuation of the Proto-Indo-European locative of 'fire' most likely lexicalized in Germanic in the sense 'hearth' (Wyly 2004, 183), among terms for fire. In the first case, this compound conventionally signifies 'island' or 'stone', whose 'goddess' would be a 'giantess' whose 'poets' would be 'giants', whose 'liquid' is poetry.

While Meissner collected no example of a 'teeth of the hearth' type kenning, the cognitive basis is clearly attested among the fragments Snorri attributes to *Ynglingatal* (4): *glymiande garmr glóða beit allvald i aren-kióle* 'the roaring hound of embers bit the ruler in the hearth-keel'. Combustion is likened to a 'hound' which 'bites' its fuel with glowing coals (*glóðar*) operating as teeth. If, on etymological terms, *brisingr* is categorized along with *glóðr* as a term for fire, then *fen-ianna Sýr(r)* can be interpreted as *brisinga Sýr(r)*, whose 'poets' (*greppar*) are, according to *Lokasenna* (30) no less than all the Æsir and elves. Their liquid would be 'poetry', but, if Snorri's claim of Freyia's special predilection for *man-söngvar* is to be believed (Faulkes 1982, 25), this kenning may be more genre specific than circumlocutions of this type are taken to be.

While the material composition of the *brisinga men* is something of a cultic mystery, Kormákr's compound suggests a substance which is at once mineral, like a stone, projecting above the surface of the water, like an island, and combustible, like an ember. As amber satisfies all these requisites, it may well serve as an emblem of this divine accoutrement.

I should like to consider this hypothesis in conjunction with another of Snorri's citations from Kormákr (1.3), whose gnomic refrain refers to another superhuman female: *Yggr seið til Rindr*, which means something like 'Óðinn bewitched Rindr'. These refrains tend to present typological parallels with the rest of their matrix strophe (Wylly 2004, 153-58), with Óðinn references correlating to Kormákr's drawing attention to himself within his skaldic performance. The only syntactic complication in this verse lies in there being insufficient objects to explicitly denote the complements of the strophe's three verbal predicates (*eykr*, *bindr* and *breyti-*), so that one of these predicational arguments must be either taken as implicit or construed in an *apò koinóu* construction. Given the Norse idiom *breyta orðom/máloim* 'express oneself in speech', the *día fiarðar breyti-húnn beinn* 'accommodating bear-cub of the firth of the gods' looks to be a reference to the poet himself, who is subject to being bound (and possibly augmented) through a metonymic analogue to a textile of some sort worn on the brow (*enni-dúkr*).

The agent in these actions is a compound, *iarð-hlutr*, whose morphology indicates either a partitive construction (i.e. 'a portion of earth') or a deverbative reading (i.e. 'that which is allotted to the earth'). In the case of human referents, the cadaver constitutes that which ultimately is consigned to the earth through inhumation (so that the interred corpse paradoxically increases in substance as it undergoes its sea-change back to the primordial dust from which it sprang). There need be nothing incredible in the posthumous influence of the deceased upon members of their community, particularly when late occupants of offices as powerful as that of the *grundar hliótr* (*Vellekla* 33) are involved.

Kormákr's genius as an esoteric poet comes through his ability to construct verses with multivalent and mutually enriching readings. Sigurðr's dynasty took its name from the toponym *Hlaðer*, whose morphology has all the hallmarks of a feminine *i*-stem, yet the honorific *Hlaða jarl* could equally connote *hløðr* 'nemesis' as *hlað* 'precious textile'. In *Vellekla*, Einarr skálaglamm denotes Hákon Sigurðarson as *grand-varr silkes síma brúna grundar geymer* 'a watchman, wary of harm, of the band of silk's ground of the brows' (14). Perhaps the headgear being described is nothing

more than a rhetorical play on the amphibolous form *Hlaða*, but were such a head covering a material part of the regalia of office, this would only enrich the conceptual development of both Kormákr and Einarr.

If an anonymous verse preserved in *Landnámabók* (Anon [X] B 5) is truly as old as it claims to be, it suggests that such headgear was not only a human attribute, but emblematic of godhead as well. The verse should be parsed thus:

*Éarns anna morð-kennaðar meiðr hugðe annat, en æser fære mann-ge,
þá's á Þorska-fjarðar þing gingo Hialta harð-fengs syner með holt-
vartares enni-tinglom.*

'The warrior thought otherwise, but the Æsir brought no one, when doughty Hialti's sons went into the Þorskafjörðr assembly with [their] Ægishialmar.'

The two kennings in this piece are certainly not without merit. The first contains an elegant inversion of the metonymy underlying the 'god of arms' circumlocution for a human warrior: the 'men of iron' are the divine *regen*, whose *morð-* is therefore *ragna røk*, whose eschatology is above all the provenance of Óðinn, a perennial patron of warriors, if of no other pagan functionaries participating in the legal assemblies of Iceland's pre-Conversion period. Balancing this is an elaborate description of their headgear: the 'forest-fish' is a serpent, whose 'decorative bowsprit of the brows' metonymically describes a commensurately ornate item of headgear. This construction would appear to be an allomorph of the epithet *holm-fiðtors hialme faldenn* with which headgear Einarr describes Hákon as going to meet his princely Danish allies in *Vellekla* (26).

In his *lausavísur*, Kormákr demonstrates a rather obsessive preoccupation with hair (*Korm Lv* 5) and its grooming (*Korm Lv* 10). Moreover, the name by which he denotes his adversary, *tin-teinn* (*Korm Lv* 38, 49, cf. 32, 39) may be a kenning for a comb, if the proterotheme is taken as *tína* 'plucking', deriving from the verb *tína* 'to pluck, pick clean', rather than from *tin* 'tin', as the prose would lead one to believe. A scraping instrument known as *tinings greinir* is recorded in Younger Icelandic, which might be as comparable in function as it is in morphology to *tin-teinn*. A second sense of *tína* 'to narrate' further enriches the potential for the personification of such an instrument: were a runic message or spell to be carved in it, such *skíðingar* 'products from a slip of wood' (*Korm Lv* 33) could be fairly denoted as a 'speaking stick'.

This topos may be another of Kormákr's Óðinnic traits. In describing Sigurðr Hákon's death in *Haleygiatal* (11), Eyvindr intertwines two raven kennings in such a way that *valr* 'the fallen' is paralleled by *Haddingia farma týr* as respective determinants. Pace Snorri's commentary to the passage, the determinant of *týr* is not *farmar* alone but *Haddingia farmar*. Given that the Haddingiar's etymological signature is denoted through their hair (*haddr*), their 'cargo' appears to be what they carry on their head. In his *Berudrápa*, Egill skallaGrímsson refers to an Óðinnic figure as *stalla fiðrs vinr* 'a friend of the oak of the altar' with the adjective *fall-haddr* 'falling haired' modifying either the Óðinnic 'friend' or the priestly 'oak', but the syntax alone does not allow for a more precise determination.

Unlike *holt-vartares enni-tingl*, Einarr's circumlocution epithet *holm-fiðtors hialmr* allows alternative parsing: the 'island-fetter' could either be a serpent or the surrounding sea itself. Generally, these elaborations are thought to be outgrowths of a

paronomasiastic *ægeshialmr* for an etymologically prior *ægeshialmr*. The *locus classicus* for this type of rhetorical development is in Egill's *Arinbiarnarkviða* (3-6): Eiríkr blóðøx is portrayed as a serpent, almost Jormungandr himself *und æges hialme* [MS M *in ras.*, MS 146: ýgrs]. But Egill's greatest enemy is the ocean itself: *Þó bólstr-verð of-bera þorða'k, má'k hæengs markar dróttne...* 'Though I durst carry away the pillow's portion of the meal, I prevailed upon the lord of the fish of the forest...' (6). Like so many of Egill's construction, the kenning *bólstr-verð* for 'head' is without parallel, but the idea of houses and items of furniture being compared to animals, whose doors are 'mouths' with which they swallow their inhabitants, is not. Besides this, the use of *mega* as a lexical verb, predicating a dative complement, appears to have proven sufficiently unusual to have thrown previous commentators off the trail of an accurate manuscript reading. Egill's *hæengs markar dróttenn* is particularly apt, in that if interpreted as 'serpent's lord', with *hæengr* determined by *mörk*, the circumlocution refers to Eiríkr as the husband of an equally reptilian Gunnhildr. Alternatively, with *mörk* determined by *hæengr*, Egill presumes to have gotten the better of the god of the sea himself.

Egill's depiction of Eiríkr in *Arinbiarnarkviða* emphasizes the baleful effect of the ruler's serpentine gaze (5) as opposed to the *sökk sám-leit* [*i.e. ulf-grá*] *síðra brúna* (8) of his own dark countenance in a way which cannot fail to resonate with Kormákr's description of a woman's deleterious gaze (*Korm Lv 2-4*) in contrast to his own dark eyes (*Korm Lv 6*).

Yet the female figure or figures in Kormákr's *lausavisur* are as much characterised by the *sörve* as by headgear, which Snorri describes as a kind of necklace (Faulkes 1998, 40). I have provided arguments for postulating an accoutrement which could be worn either wrapped around the head or breast, depending upon the status of the wearer and the occasion (Wyly 2004, 190-92), to which I should like to close this essay by adding one more.

Kormákr refers to his adversaries as *ey-steins syner* (*Korm Lv 33*) and *ey-steins arfe* (*Korm Lv 37*). With its possible associations with both *ey* 'island' and Runic Norse *auja* 'luck', these epithets could be personifications of products made from some type of rock-like material which both projects above the surface of the water and is capable of being used as a talisman. Amber again provides a suitable material referent for both properties. That amber was incorporated not only in the conceptualization of the *Brisingamen* but also in that of the *Ægishialmr* is indicated through the allomorphic *Ægishialmr* and its derivations. Insofar as amber floats in seawater, it effectively ornaments the 'helm' (read metonymically: surface) of the sea. Hence the allomorph is a function of sense as well as of sound, if not, in fact, of early Scandinavian cult as well.

Works Cited

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