

# Heimdallr's Charm

## The Lost *Heimdallargaldr* and Symbolism and Allusion in the Myths of Heimdallr

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Within the corpus of Old Norse mythological verse, one of the most grievous losses is the poem *Heimdallargaldr* ('Heimdallr's Charm'), of which only a tiny fragment remains as a quotation in the works of the historian and mythographer Snorri Sturluson (d. 1241). The loss is lamentable because we cannot supply from elsewhere the understanding we may surmise was contained therein of an otherwise obscure but intriguing god.

The very title of the poem poses two questions: what can be said about Heimdallr, and what can be said about charms, and specifically this charm, in Old Norse? As the god is explicitly the focus of the charm, I deal with him, and the many perplexing questions relating to him, in the first section; the question of what is meant by a *galdr*, or 'charm', whether the poem was an actual charm or rather merely an evocation of one, and what may be learnt from other charm traditions, is dealt with in the second section.

Apart from Snorri, the main sources relating to Heimdallr are the eddic poems *Rígsþula*, which is concerned with Rígr (Heimdallr) as the founder of the human estates and hence social order, and *Hyndluljóð*, where Heimdallr appears in what appears to be an incantatory invocation of his power; one stanza from the skaldic poem *Húsdrápa* forms an additional invaluable source of information on the god's encounter with his enemy, Loki, in contention (according to Snorri) over the goddess Freyja's necklace/girdle, the Brísingamen. Recent research on Heimdallr often fails, in my opinion, to grapple with sufficient insight with the complexity of the symbolism found in the mythic and poetic tradition that moulded the god; arguably, he emerges as a deity intimately connected with cosmic creation and order, symbolised in the world tree, and with human birth, the means of procreating and maintaining this order. Other obscurities are also touched upon, such as the god's connection with sheep and heads.

Having sketched a proposed interpretation of some of the god's main characteristics and associations, it is possible to consider what a charm devoted to him may have been concerned with. After looking at what may be meant by 'charm metre' (*galdralag*), I survey some poetic mentions of charms, and bring in comparisons from other Germanic traditions (Old High German and Old English), alongside some more recent Scandinavian charms. I then move on to a neighbouring tradition, the more recent yet archaic Karelian charms, particularly those relating to birth and creation. We cannot determine what *Heimdallargaldr* may have encompassed, in terms either of its mythological or incantatory content, but these parallel traditions suggest something of the parameters within which it may have functioned.

In Part III, I draw together the most significant points that the preceding sections have raised in an attempt to suggest what sort of text *Heimdallargaldr* may have been.

## I. The God Heimdallr

### *Heimdallargaldr* and Its Context in Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*

*Heimdallargaldr* is mentioned twice by Snorri Sturluson in his *Edda*, on both occasions within a context of brief summaries of the characteristics of Heimdallr. The first mention, in a general description of Heimdallr in *Gylfaginning*, ch. 27, is accompanied by a citation of the two parallel phrases that constitute all that survives of the actual poem, where, according to Snorri, Heimdallr declares his own birth, a citation given to support the assertion Snorri makes that he had nine mothers:<sup>1</sup>

Heimdallr heitir einn; hann er kallaðr hvíti áss, hann er mikill ok heilagr; hann báru at syni meyjar níu ok allar systr; hann heitir ok Hallinskíði ok Gullintanni; tennr hans váru af gulli; hestr hans heitir Gulltoppr. Hann býr þar er heita Himinbjörg við Bifröst; hann er vörðr goða ok sitr þar við himins enda at gæta brúarinnar fyrir bergrisum; hann þarf minna svefn en fugl; hann sér jafnt nótt sem dag hundrað rasta frá sér; hann heyrir ok þat, er gras vex á jörðu eða ull á sauðum ok allt þat, er hæra lætr; hann hefir lúðr þann, er Gjallarhorn

<sup>1</sup> In *Skáldskaparmál*, ch. 17, where a passage from *Húsdrápa* describing the contest between Heimdallr and Loki is quoted, Snorri notes that Úlfr designates Heimdallr as son of nine mothers: thus, Snorri need not have relied on *Heimdallargaldr* to show this; its occurrence in *Gylfaginning* is in line with the tendency to use eddic poetry as source material there.

heitir, ok heyrir blástr hans í alla heima.<sup>2</sup> Heimdalar sverð er kallat höfuð. Hér er svá sagt:

Himinbjörg heita,  
 en þar Heimdall kveða  
 valda véom.  
 Þar vörðr goða drekkur í væru ranni  
 glaðr hinn góða mjöð. [*Grímnismál*, st. 13]

Ok enn segir hann sjálfir í Heimdallargaldri:

“Níu em ek mœðra mǫgr,  
 níu em ek systra sonr.”

*Gylfaginning*, ch. 27

Heimdallr is the name of one; he is called the white god; he is great and holy; nine maidens bore him as son, all sisters; he is also called Hallinskíði and Gullintanni; his teeth were of gold; his horse is called Gulltoppr. He dwells at the place called Himinbjörg by Bifröst; he is the watchman of the gods and sits there at the end of heaven to guard the bridge against mountain giants; he needs less sleep than a bird; he sees a hundred leagues from him as well by night as by day; he also hears the grass growing on earth or wool on sheep, and everything louder; he has that trumpet which is called Gjallarhorn, and its sound is heard in all worlds. Heimdallr's sword is a term for 'head'.<sup>3</sup> So it is said here:

Heaven Mountains they are called,  
 and there Heimdallr, they say,  
 rules the sanctuaries.  
 There the watchman of the gods drinks in a splendid hall,  
 glad, the good mead.

And furthermore, he says himself in *Heimdallargaldri*:

“Of nine mothers am I the boy,  
 of nine sisters am I the son.”

Even here, there is a variant reading in manuscript U of “meyja” (‘maidens’) for “mœðra” (‘mothers’). A stronger case might be made for maidens, in that it renders the birth irrational not only in terms of the number of mothers, but also in their virginity (though *mær* is not always a certain indication of maidenhead); it also links more obviously with the nine daughters of the sea deity

2 At *ragna rök*, Heimdallr blows upon the Gjallarhorn: “En er þessi tíðendi verða, þá stendr upp Heimdallr ok blæss ákafliga í Gjallarhorn ok vekr upp öll goðin, ok eiga þau þing saman” (‘When this news arrives, Heimdallr stands up and blows powerfully on Gjallarhorn and wakes up all the gods, and they hold parliament together’) (*Gylfaginning*, ch. 51).

3 Less likely is the more literal rendering, ‘Heimdallr's sword is called “Head”’.

Ægir, who Wilhelm Müller (1824: 227 ff.) identified as being Heimdallr's mothers (Cöllen 2015: 139).

Snorri's second mention of *Heimdallargaldr*, in *Skáldskaparmál*, relates more specifically to skaldic diction:

Hvernig skal Heimdall kenna? Svá, at kalla hann son níu mœðra eða vörð goða, svá sem fyr er ritat, eða hvíta ás, Loka dólg, mensækir Freyju. Heimdalar höfuð heitir sverð; svá er sagt, at hann var lostinn mannhöfði í gögnum. Um þat [Mss TUW; hann, R] er kveðit í Heimdallargaldri, ok er síðan kallat höfuð mjötuðr Heimdalar; sverð heitir manns mjötuðr. Heimdallr er eigandi Gulltopps; hann er ok tilsækir Vágaskers ok Singasteins; þá deildi hann við Loka um Brisingamen; hann heitir ok Vindlér. Úlfr Uggason kvað í Húsdrápu langa stund eptir þeiri frásögu, ok er þess þar getit, at þeir váru í selalíkjum. Hann er ok sonr Óðins.

*Skáldskaparmál*, ch. 8

How shall a kenning be made for Heimdallr? By calling him the son of nine mothers or the watchman of the gods, as was written above, or the white god, the enemy of Loki, the retriever of Freyja's necklace. Heimdallr's head is the term for a sword; it is said that he was thrust through with a man's head. That is recited in *Heimdallargaldr*, and hence head is called 'Heimdallr's fate'; a sword is called a man's fate. Heimdallr is the owner of Gulltoppr; he is also the visitor of Vágasker and Singasteinn; then he contended with Loki over the Brisingamen; he is also called Vindlér. Úlfr Uggason composed a long passage about that story, and it is there mentioned that they were in seal shape. He is also the son of Óðinn.

The main source under discussion thus consists of a tiny fragment of verse, which is itself exceptional in nature, as being the only place a god declares his birth, within a poem whose title indicates it was a charm, a *galdr*. The god featured in the poem is one about whom information from other sources is scarce, and puzzling. His main mythical contender, the god Loki, is well represented in the myths, but is himself one of the most contentiously interpreted figures in the pantheon.

One question that cannot be settled is whether *Heimdallargaldr* contained myths about Heimdallr that are otherwise unknown, or rather involved versions of myths that are recognisable to us. As Snorri cites a passage from the poem in *Gylfaginning*, and then in *Skáldskaparmál* relates a myth, or at least a poetic expression, which he seems to indicate also came from it,<sup>4</sup> it

4 I take the majority reading of "þat" rather than the sole manuscript form "hann" as the more reliable; there would seem little reason, anyway, to make a bland observation that a poem called "Heimdallr's charm" talks about 'him', i.e. Heimdallr. Thus, it is most probable that *Heimdallargaldr* recounted a myth where Heimdallr was struck through by a man's head, assuming Snorri has understood his source correctly.

would seem he knew the text of the poem, or at least parts of it. In this case – assuming we read Snorri's extant text as indicating any specific intentionality at all on his part in this particular context – his reason for not citing any myths from it would be that he has already cited them from other sources, and hence that it did not have anything further to add, content-wise, to what we already know. It is also possible, however, that he may have wished to eschew the mention of certain myths which he found undesirable to recall, for whatever reason. Yet he could also have been familiar only with the line he cited, and possibly with some other obscure elements derived from the poem; the god's being thrust through with a man's head is not explained by Snorri and is not recorded elsewhere of the god, which may suggest he had only a passing knowledge of the poem. (See also Hopkins in this volume.)

Since it would take speculation into the realm of fantasy to discuss postulated myths of the god for which no evidence whatever survives elsewhere, I will frame my discussion on the basis of the supposition that *Heimdallargaldr* was primarily concerned with myths that are still extant. I would merely observe that, even if further myths did appear in the lost poem, they are likely to have been consistent in their purport with materials recorded elsewhere, which are sufficient to allow us to identify some of the main characteristics of the god. Hence, my lodestone in what follows is the goal of arriving at an interpretation which is consistent, internally and with other relevant mythology, and meaningful – but it is bound to remain as one among a number of potential readings.

Any determination of the potential meaning of *Heimdallargaldr* calls for a consideration of its wider context as a charm and specifically what sort of god its protagonist Heimdallr was. I will not attempt a full discussion of the many puzzling aspects of the figure of Heimdallr, but seek to outline some significant points of interpretation; these follow the lines of argument already presented in the chapter on Heimdallr in my book, *Shamanism in Norse Myth and Magic* (2009), but I will be adding some further considerations, especially as I barely touched there upon the poem as a *galdr*, or charm, a topic I concentrate on chiefly in the second part of this chapter.

Given that primary sources on Heimdallr are so meagre, any interpretation of the god is bound to rely on the approach and working parameters and assumptions of the investigator.<sup>5</sup> Heimdallr's one utterance, all that survives of *Heimdallargaldr*, is a riddle, nonsensical when read literally – and, as North notes (1997: 39, commenting on Þjóðólfr of Hvinir's complex

5 While we are fortunate to have the detailed investigation of Heimdallr by Cöllén (2015), my own approach differs fundamentally and in detail from his, and I feel it is worthwhile to reiterate and expand on some of my own perspectives on this enigmatic god.

poetics), “What is a kenning if not a riddle?” I take this as my starting point; Heimdallr’s own words are a declaration that any interpretation of him must relate to the traditions of Norse mythological poetry, and above all skaldic verse, which resorts to allusion, suggestion, and multiple meanings inherent in the choice of words, rather than following any mechanical (and prosaic) law of logical precision.<sup>6</sup> The current chapter offers an attempt to unravel some of this web of allusion.

## Heimdallr’s Name and the World Tree

Heimdallr’s name is ambiguous in its etymology and meaning. *Heimr* is ambivalent, denoting both ‘home’ and ‘world’; *dallr* is rather obscure, probably an old word which left little indication of widespread usage in extant Old Norse records. However, cognates have been suggested, relating to growth and flourishing, and sometimes to trees (as concrete examples of such thriving growth). I cite my conclusion on the name Heimdallr from an earlier work (cf. Dronke 1997: comm. *Vǫluspá*, st. 1/3–4),<sup>7</sup> where it is discussed in more detail.<sup>8</sup>

6 In contrast, Cöllén follows the ‘logical precision’ route, adopting an exclusionary position that a myth or poetic expression can only ever have one meaning; for example, he dismisses my arguments that the myth of the Brisingamen, particularly as related in *Húsdrápa*, may have operated on different levels, with reference both to the birth-protecting necklace of Freyja and to the primordial formation of the world from the waves (Cöllén 2015: 126n.). It is well beyond the scope of the present chapter to discuss the basic principles of Norse poetic composition, but I would merely point to a couple of examples to illustrate the complexities it involved. The use of *ofljós* in skaldic verse, whereby a kenning is made for a homophone of what is actually intended (for example, a kenning is made for *hár* (‘hair’) when the subject is actually *Hár* (‘Óðinn’), illustrates a penchant for seeing multiple meanings in words; this can be taken to great lengths, as when Þjóðólfr in *Haustlong*, st. 9, calls Iðunn *brunnakrs bekkjar goða dís* (‘lady of the gods of the brook of the well-spring cornfield’), where the burbling brook stands for an eddy (*iða*) and the cornfield perceived as a well-spring stands for a wave (*unnr*), relating to a folk etymology of Iðunn’s name; but at the same time the poem emphasises how fecundity accompanies Iðunn, so the cornfield relates to her essential being. The whole expression, as North notes in his commentary, is a riddle (*Haustlong*, ed. North, p. 39). Many other examples could be cited where scholars have argued for ambivalent or multivalent meanings; for example, see Dronke’s discussion of the term *heidvanr* in *Vǫluspá*, st. 27 (Dronke 1997: comm. *ad loc.*).

7 Eddic poetry (poems cited include *Baldrs draumar*; *Grímnismál*; *Guðrúnarkviða II*; *Hávamál*; *Helgakviða Hjorvarðssonar*; *Hymiskviða*; *Hyndluljóð*; *Lokasenna*; *Oddrúnargrátr*; *Reginismál*; *Rígsþula*; *Sigrdrífumál*; *Skírnismál*; *Prymskviða*; *Vafþrúðnismál*; *Vǫluspá*): for the text, I have primarily used Jón Helgason 1951–1952; I have also used Neckel & Kuhn 1983 and Dronke 1997.

8 Cöllén accepts that *Heimdallr* most probably means “Welt-Gedeihen” (‘world-flourishing’). Summarising some earlier scholarship, he concludes (2015: 254) that “Welt-Gedeihen sorgt aber Heimdallr nicht nur als Urheber der sozialen Ordnung, sondern auch als Beschützer der göttlichen Ordnung, als *ragna reinvár*” (‘Heimdallr takes care of the world’s flourishing not only as the originator of social order, but also as the protector

In Greek, *θαλλός* means a 'young shoot', 'young branch', which forms a direct parallel to *dallr* as recorded in the sense of 'arbor prolifera'; the related verb *θάλλω* means 'flourish', a word which moreover is recorded in the sense 'sumptuous' as applied to a feast (cf. Gothic *dulps*, 'feast') (Liddell and Scott 1968, s.v.). There was even a goddess of growth, one of the Hours, named *Θαλλώ*. Heimdallr can, as de Vries and his predecessors argued, be formed on this same root [...] Old English *deall* is probably derived from the same root (as Uhlenbeck and Holthausen argued), as well as Norse *Dellingr*: a sense of burgeoning life is apparent in all of these words.<sup>9</sup> It therefore emerges that 'one connected with the home's/world's burgeoning' is the most plausible interpretation of the name Heimdallr. Despite de Vries's objections that this would have had a wide sense, not confined to plants, this burgeoning would readily have been identified with the growth of trees, given the sense 'growing tree' which attached to the related word *dallr*, and perhaps echoes of the senses of exultance and festivity found in the Old English and Gothic cognates would also have influenced the basic concept of the god. Heimdallr thus appears as guardian of growth<sup>10</sup> in the world (*heimr*), seen as a macrocosm of the home (*heimr*).

Tolley 2009: I, 372–373

The thriving 'home tree' – as the god's name may be interpreted – is well recorded as a guardian of the farmstead's well-being in Scandinavian tradition (see below); as the 'world tree' – taking *heimr* in its macrocosmic sense – Heimdallr embodied the well-being of the whole cosmos.<sup>11</sup> As ensurer of

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of the divine order, as *ragna reinvári*). He does not, however, pursue the allusive implications of this interpretation; his discussion of the name therefore does not, I feel, supersede my own.

- 9 *Deall*, for example, is used of a bird proud of its feathers, "fugel feðrum deall" (Bosworth and Toller 1898, s.v.), where the sense tends towards 'resplendent'; the precise meaning of *deall* is, in any case, unclear owing to the lack of specificity in its occurrences: it is used, apart from birds distinguished by their feathers, of warriors *deall* with their weapons – the gloss 'proud' is merely a safe, lowest-common-denominator guess, and not necessarily correct.
- 10 As a slight revision to what I wrote here, it would, perhaps, be more accurate to see the 'growth', or more precisely 'thriving', sense of *dallr* as encompassing a somewhat more abstract sense of 'prosperity, success': it is this that characterises Heimdallr's guardianship of the *Brisingamen* and his overseeing of the establishment of the social orders (discussed below). It should be noted, however, that in view of its declension *dallr* cannot be interpreted as an abstract noun (from Germanic *\*dalþuz*), as Cöllén appears to do (even though, 2015: 258, he recognises that would yield *\*-döllr*); the base sense of thriving (*\*dal-*) is communicated through a concrete derivative formation (such as *\*dal-n*).
- 11 Apart from a few brief mentions of Pipping's research, which was the first to point out connections between Heimdallr and the world tree, Cöllén more or less ignores the scholarship on this topic. It is surprising, then, to find him suggesting that Heimdallr, as a world-ordering god, may have been associated with the notion of the 'world mountain' – and this immediately after he has pointed out that Heimdallr's residence, *Himinbjörg*, indicates through its plural form not a mountain but a mountain range (Cöllén 2015: 253). I have dealt with the notion of the 'world mountain' in some detail elsewhere, and

cosmic well-being, the god's essential role clearly coincides with that of the world tree Yggdrasill, even if, as a person, he takes a more obviously active role in defending that well-being.

The parallels with the world tree seem deep-rooted, but it must be conceded they are nowhere made explicit, and the word *dallr* may well have tended to be interpreted, perhaps as a folk etymology, as the base word from which the name Dellingr was formed; Dellingr was the father of Day (*Vafþrúðnismál*, st. 25), and hence personified the dawn (in *Hávamál*, st. 160, the dwarf Þjóðræir speaks wisdom before the doors of Dellingr, the wisdom presumably being for dwarfs to get out of the way of the approaching day; Tolkien 1960: 34), so a meaning of 'bright' may have been inferred for *dallr* (even though the declension is wrong for an adjective), which may in part explain why Heimdallr was called the white god.

Heimdallr nonetheless encompassed the cosmos, as the world tree did. He was born *í árdaga*, in ancient days, apparently without a father, which emphasises that he is a god of beginnings; he is mentioned at the very beginning of *Völuspá*, which covers the whole of cosmic history; he also marks the end of the world by blowing on his horn as the gods go on to perish in this poem's glimpse of the end of the world. His embrace of all cosmic history, as a defender of the cosmos's well-being, is reflected in his encompassing of all social order (though he is encapsulated in the class of *jarlar*, who best represent his noble qualities: Cöllén 2015: 104). He thus acts as a personalised parallel to the world tree, whose extent in space and time defines the cosmos, and in particular, Heimdallr is identified with the model of order *Völuspá* manifests in its presentation of cosmic history (Cöllén 2015: 175), as is the tree. Just as Óðinn's eye was hidden beneath the tree, so too was Heimdallr's *hljóð*, most probably meaning his hearing (but also his 'sound', made concrete in the Gjallarhorn, which remained 'hidden', unsounded, until the end of the world; Dronke 1997: comm. *Völuspá*, st. 27/2); the tree is a *mjötviðr*, tree of fate, according to *Völuspá*; the gods' fates are bound up with the tree, and dependent on it, as symbolised in their relinquishing their essential powers of sight and hearing to it. When the tree perishes at the end of the world in *Völuspá*, so too do the gods.

In *Rígsþula*, Heimdallr bears the name Rígr: the primary sense is 'king', borrowed from Irish, but the sense 'stiffness' is recorded in Icelandic (Cleasby & Vigfússon 1957, s. v.), so there is likely to be a pun on his sexuality, but also

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argued that the Norse records simply do not show any evidence for the concept (Tolley 2009: I, ch. 11). Cöllén, instead of pursuing the many characteristics of both Heimdallr and the world tree in Norse that point to a parallelism between them, prefers to view the world tree as associated with Þórr, a point he does not argue.

possibly on his being stiff like the world tree with which he might be identified (Dronke 1997: comm. *Rígsþula*, st. 1/6), and which, like him, appears to have given birth to mankind; the first man, Askr, and woman, Embla, appeared on the seashore – *á landi*, and lifeless, in *Völuspá*, st. 17–18, as if pieces of driftwood from the *askr* Yggdrasill, named and described immediately thereafter in st. 19 (see Dronke 1997: comm. st. 17/4–8).

## Heimdallr as Establisher of the Social Orders in *Rígsþula*

*Rígsþula* is an eddic poem preserved in a fragmentary (but largely complete) form on one leaf attached to the mid-fourteenth-century Codex Wormianus, surrounded by later blank paper sheets and hence without any context. The poem has been seen as a learned product of the thirteenth century, but Dronke has argued for the antiquity of the themes and concerns of the poem, and suggests that it existed, in an early form, already by the late tenth century (Dronke 1997: 204); in his recent study of Heimdallr, Cöllén assigns a similar date to the composition (2015: 71), and reiterates points already made by Dronke, that a strong connection with the British Isles, and in particular Ireland, is evident in the poem, most notably in the name of its protagonist, Rígr, which is clearly borrowed from Irish *rí* (*ríg-*) ('king'), even if it also has other connotations derived from Norse *rígr* ('stiff').

The poem presents the god Rígr, wandering among men and helping in the engendering of the three classes of mankind by positioning himself between a series of couples. The prose introduction, though not the poem itself, states that Rígr was a name for Heimdallr. Rígr's function as progenitor of the social estates of men matches the information in *Völuspá* that mankind is the offspring of Heimdallr. Cöllén argues strongly in favour of the identification of Rígr as Heimdallr; however, Dronke points out more convincingly that Rígr is rather a combination of Heimdallr and Óðinn, with aspects of both gods being pertinent to their engendering and guardianship of mankind (1997: 202).

The prose introduction states that Heimdallr was proceeding along a seashore when he came across a dwelling; the shore, of course, marks the place of his own birth (discussed below), and that of the original man, Askr, and hence signifies human origins even before the adventure of the poem begins. Some further motifs of Rígr may be exemplified by citing a couple of stanzas; the poem later repeats variants of these lines, reinforcing the image of the striding god, walking down the middle of the way:

Ár kváðu ganga  
grœnar brauter

Long ago, they said, walked  
on green ways

öflgan ok aldinn  
ás kunnigan,  
ramman ok røskvan  
Rígr stíganda.

a strong and aged  
sagacious god,  
robust and ripe-grown  
Rígr, striding.

Gekk hann meirr at þat  
miðrar brautar.  
Kom hann at húsi,  
hurð var á gætti,  
inn nam at ganga.

On he walked more then  
in the middle of the way.  
He came to a house,  
the door was in the side-niche,  
in he stepped.

*Rígsþula*, st. 1–2

He meets a couple, and then it is said:

Rígr kunnir þeim  
ráð at segja.  
Meirr settiz hann  
miðra fletia,  
en á hlið hvára  
hión salkynna.

Rígr was able  
to offer advice to them.  
More, he seated himself  
in the middle of the bench,  
and at either side of him  
the man and wife of the household

*Rígsþula*, st. 3

The *ráð* which Rígr is able to bestow on the human couples in fact encompasses a wide range of meanings: ‘counsel, plan, decision, marriage, sexual union, living conditions, household’ (Dronke 1997: comm. st. 3/2). Rígr repeats his actions, and hence engenders noblemen (*jarlar*), yeomen (*karlar*), and slaves (*þrælar*). The culmination of the poem is the rise of Konr ungr (‘Konr the young’). This is an obvious play on *konungr* (‘king’): the new king (and the status of the *konungr* as the pre-eminent social office in Scandinavia was relatively recent at the time of composition) as it were embodies all the power and *ráð*, good counsel and power, of the divine ‘king’, Rígr; there is probably a further play on Irish terms here too, as *conn* meant both ‘pre-eminent person’ and ‘good sense’.<sup>12</sup>

### ***Vorðr goða: The Testimony of Grímnismál and Lokasenna***

*Grímnismál*, st. 13, cited above (as quoted by Snorri), in a list of the gods’ dwellings, mentions the name of Heimdallr’s dwelling as Himinbjörg and characterises him as *vorðr goða* (‘watchman of the gods’). *Lokasenna* consists

<sup>12</sup> See *Dictionary of the Irish Language, s.v.*; *conn* is often spelled *cond* in the early Irish sources, but the *d* is an orthographic convention in this word and was not pronounced (this is not the case in all *nd* spellings, but in the case of *conn* the etymology points to the absence of any *d*).

mainly of a diatribe by Loki, who has been refused entry to the gods' festivities, but gatecrashes the event anyway; he rails against each of the gods and goddesses in turn, pointing out their weaknesses and immoral behaviour.<sup>13</sup> Loki lays into Heimdallr in st. 48, calling him, as does *Grímnismál*, *vǫrðr goða*:

Pegi þú, Heimdallr,  
þér var í árdaga  
it lióta líf um lagit:  
aurgo baki  
þú munt æ vara  
ok vaka vǫrðr goða.

Shut up, Heimdallr.  
For you in ancient days  
an ugly life was laid down:  
with dirty back  
you shall ever be,  
and stay awake as the gods'  
watchman.

*Lokasenna*, st. 48

The word *vǫrðr* normally means 'watchman'. As Cöllén points out (2015: 231), this low-status office is scarcely suited to a god, the founder of noble dynasties, who sips mead in a hall (and is therefore not keeping watch). Cöllén notes (2015: 241) the poetic usage of *vǫrðr* in kennings such as *vǫrðr foldar*, the 'watchman' of the land (*Skáldskaparmál*, verse 27, by Einarr Skálaglamm), for a prince, where the overall sense is (he argues) 'protector'. This would equate *vǫrðr* with *vári* in the *Húsdrápa* description of Heimdallr as *ragna reinar vári*, defender of the gods' realm.<sup>14</sup>

However, Loki mocks Heimdallr for leading a wretched life, having to *vaka* ('remain awake'), watchful, as *vǫrðr* of the gods, with an *aurugt bak*. This appears to support the normal usage of *vǫrðr* as 'watchman'. Loki intimates that Heimdallr's back(side) is 'dirty' because he can never leave his position and so has no alternative but to shit himself. This phenomenon was related by Pering (1941: 154–155) to the god's nature as a guardian spirit; he points out that the house spirit abhors human excrement, an idea found in relation to *álfar* already in *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 4 and 9. Thus Loki taunts

13 The date of the poem is a matter of debate; the level of knowledge of pagan religious notions, often unparalleled in Norse but consistent with pagan traditions elsewhere, makes the poem a valuable source for pagan traditions, whether these are derived from the poem being composed at a time close to or during paganism, or (perhaps more likely) as a result of garnering such information from earlier, often no longer extant, sources (which would still, however, allow for the date of composition to be as much as a couple of centuries before the Codex Regius).

14 Cöllén (2015: 107) notes the term *uiauari*, *véaværi*, 'protector of the sanctuaries', occurs on the Rök stone, probably in reference to Þórr. If it derives from *verja*, then *vári* should have a short vowel, but Úlfr has clearly modelled his expression, and adapted the vowel length accordingly, on that of *Haustlong*, st. 2, "Fárbauta mög Várar", where the long vowel on the (unrelated) *Vár* is etymologically correct (and necessary for the metre).

Heimdallr with having to stand immovable as a guardian spirit, and suffer the ignominy of excrement on him.

In his flying, of course, everything Loki says is a pejorative misrepresentation of the truth, a play on the potential meanings of words or motifs; he appeals both to the word *vǫrðr*'s denigratory sense rather than the more respectable sense of 'protector', and hints at a disgusting side to having a muddy back. Heimdallr's pursuit of Loki in *Húsdrápa* illustrates that he is in fact far from being bound to one spot like a normal watchman, and his quaffing mead in his hall in *Grímnismál* shows that he is not of lowly watchman status. Cöllen may well be right that Heimdallr was considered a *vǫrðr landsins* in the way a prince was in verse, yet the origin of this expression is not wholly clear. While it may be merely an elevation of 'watchman' to 'defender', a more likely explanation is that it encompasses a sense recorded in later folk practices: Axel Olrik and Hans Ellekilde (1926: 229–241) give a detailed picture of the *vårdträd* ('guardian tree') of the house, found throughout Scandinavia, but especially commonly in Norway (cf. also Palm 1948: 60 ff.). The tree typically grew on a grave mound close to the farm. In some areas, such as Værend, nearly every house had its *vårdträd*, usually ash, elm, or linden. It was regarded as animate and in control of the welfare of the household, and offerings of milk or ale would be made to it:

“O du Guds vætt” sagde man på gården Helle i Undalen, Vestagder, når man hældte en skål øl ud ved gårdens vættettræ. “Jeg under dig det, jeg giver dig, søster min” sagde de i Sætedalen, når de hældte koens første mælkedråber ud på vættettræet efter kælvningen.

Olrik & Ellekilde 1926: 231

“O God's spirit” they said at Helle farm in Undalen, Vestagder, when they held out a bowl of ale to the farm's guardian tree. “I grant you this, I give you this, my sister” they said in Sætedalen, when they held out the cow's first drops of milk to the guardian tree after calving.

To fell the tree brought calamity; thus a man who did so heard the tree sing one night how he too would suffer, and his whole establishment burnt down (Olrik & Ellekilde 1926: 234).

The prince as *vǫrðr landsins* would thus not merely be 'watchful', but would be seen as a powerfully defensive spirit guarding the whole realm, a *vård* writ large. Heimdallr would then be a *vård* for the whole realm of the gods, indeed of the whole world, the *heimr* that his name is derived from. It is like a wronged *vårdträd*, exacting a destructive vengeance on any wrongdoer, that Heimdallr acts when Loki steals the Brisingamen of the gods.

Heimdallr matches the world tree in function, as has been noted above,

and as *varðr goða* he appears furthermore to match the guardian *várdräd*. Loki's verbal attack on Heimdallr thus gains increased force if Heimdallr is thought of as an immobile tree (when in fact he was quite able to move, regardless of his arboreal connections), a guardian that by its nature cannot desert the realm (of the farmstead) that it watches over. The 'muddy' backside can then be explained as being a result of the libations poured upon him in his role as a *várdräd*; the implication here is of a libation of *aurr*, the fertile mud deposited along rivers – which is precisely what, according to *Völuspá*, st. 19, was libated (“ausinn”) on the world tree (cf. Dronke 1997: comm. *Völuspá*, st. 19/3–4; she suggests the libation was spontaneous, without any specific agency; Snorri imagines the Nornir, the Fates at the tree, to be making it).

A further characteristic of the farm guardian spirit as recorded for example in early-modern Norwegian folk tradition (as the *gardvord* or *nisse*) is that the spirit is commonly regarded as the continuing presence in spirit form of the farm's founder.<sup>15</sup> This underlines the progenitive function of the guardian spirit, which is a key component of Heimdallr's nature, as seen most clearly in his role, under the name Rígr, in *Rígsþula* as founder of the three social estates and hence social order.

### The Brísingamen and Úlfr Uggason's *Húsdrápa*

A full version of the theft of the goddess Freyja's necklace, the Brísingamen, is nowhere given in our extant sources; a garbled account, which cannot be relied on as conveying a form of the myth that would have been recognised in earlier centuries, is found in the fourteenth-century *Sqrla þátttr* (*Flatexjarbók* I, 275–283). Úlfr Uggason relates some parts of the story in his *Húsdrápa*, composed as a description of the depictions found in the Icelandic chieftain Óláfr pái's new hall, Hjarðarholt, in the late tenth century;<sup>16</sup> the section, as it stands, does not name the protagonist but identifies him firmly as Heimdallr by calling him 'the son of eight mothers and one' (only stanza 2 of the extant fragments of the poem concerns the Brísingamen myth). From the poetic citations and comments given by Snorri (see the citations above), as well as a judicious use of *Sqrla þátttr*, it is clear that the necklace was stolen

15 The ancestral cult as part of Norwegian folk belief is considered in detail by Birkeli, who notes that the guardian farm spirit is often conceived as the founder of the establishment (for example, 1938: 187).

16 The tale of the house-warming is told in *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 29. Schier (1994 [1976b]: 94–97) argues that Óláfr used the hall of Jarl Hákon of Hlaðir, the ruler of much of northern Norway, as a model; Hákon was a patron of poets whose skaldic verse, such as has survived to us, is one of the main sources for Norse mythology (see for example the editions of Davidson 1983).

by Loki, and was retrieved by Heimdallr, who contended with Loki, both of them transformed into seals, on an island crag, ‘Wave Skerry’ (Vágasker). Some of the information, such as the seal transformation, was contained in verses known to Snorri but no longer extant. Beyond this bare outline, interpretations diverge.<sup>17</sup>

I would read the text as follows (in standardised spelling):<sup>18</sup>

Ráðgegninn bregðr ragna  
reinar singasteini  
frægr við firna slægjan  
Fárbauta mǫg vári;  
móðqflugr ræðr mæðra  
mǫgr hafnýra fǫgru,  
kynník, áðr ok einnar  
átta, mæðar þóttum.

*Húsdrápa*, st. 2

The following prose ordering is suggested:

Ráðgegninn frægr ragna reinar vári bregðr singasteini við Fárbauta firna slægjan mǫg; móðqflugr mǫgr átta ok einnar mæðra ræðr áðr fǫgru hafnýra, kynník mæðar þóttum.

The ready in counsel, famous guardian of the territory of the gods seizes the treasure stone in opposition to the monstrously sly son of Fárbauti; the spirited son of eight mothers and one gains control of the fair sea-kidney first; I declare it in strands of praise.

A few observations follow on some of the poem’s words; these focus on issues of importance to the topic of this chapter, but do not amount to anything like a full discussion of all the ambiguities of interpretation the text raises.

***ráðgegninn***. Heimdallr is *ráðgegninn* primarily because he gains control (*ráð*) of the sea-kidney. In the one other place outside *Húsdrápa* where Heimdallr’s *ráð* is mentioned, the word bears its extra significances of ‘marriage; life conditions’ – *Rígsþula* tells us that, as he approached various hitherto childless couples, “Rígr kunní þeim ráð at segja” (‘Rígr knew how to offer

17 Cöllén analyses the poem in his study of Heimdallr, but my reading of the text differs from his, and his interpretation diverges considerably from mine. As Cöllén’s reading seems to me in general unpersuasive, and since the inadequate discussion of this stanza of *Húsdrápa* in SPSMA III, 402 ff., is far from being the last word on the subject, it is worth elaborating my own overall reading again here; this is based on my analysis in Tolley 2009 (I, ch. 14), but adds some further thoughts.

18 *Skj* A1136 gives the manuscript reading as: Raðgegnin | bregðr ragna rein at singa steini frægr við firna slægivm farþata mǫgr | vari móðqflvgr rædr mæðra mǫgr hafnýra fǫgrv kyni ec aðr en | einar átta mæðar þattvm.

them counsel/marriage'), after which each couple conceived a son: Heimdallr is thus presented as responsible for the engendering of the three classes of human society. It may be argued that, given how the Brisingamen acted as a talisman for successful birth, Úlfr too wished to imply Heimdallr's control over the conditions for conception and life in his term *ráðgegninn*.

*bregðr*. *Bregða* (transitive with dative object; it also has intransitive senses) means essentially 'to move swiftly'; its uses often relate to fighting, as 'to draw (a sword)', 'to ward off (with a shield)' (note how Heimdallr is identified as a defender [*vári*] in line 4). Clearly Heimdallr is making a quick move on the treasure before Loki manages to. *Við* + accusative of person indicates 'against, in opposition to', and again is typical of verbs of fighting.<sup>19</sup> The placing of *bregðr* after *ráð* suggests that the poet may also have had in mind the phrase *bregða á sitt ráð* ('to go one's own way'); Heimdallr here 'follows his counsel' in attacking Loki.

*reinar*. *Rein* means a grass-grown strip of earth between two fields which must not be broken up by plough or spade, but was to serve as a field or property boundary (Fritzner 1886–1972, s.v.); cf. Old English *rān* in the same sense (see Smith 1956, II, s.v.). It thus implies 'borderland' and by extension 'territory' (we may discount interpretations of it as 'bridge', i.e. the bridge to heaven that Heimdallr guarded). The manuscript form *rein* appears to be in tmesis with *vári*, forming a compound with the sense 'borderland guardian'. Tmesis does occur in skaldic poetry: compare, for example, "njarð-, ráð fyr sér, gjarðar" of *Pórsdrápa*, st. 7 (*Skj* B 1 141; SPSMA III, 68). However, the huge gap and general awkwardness of comprehension in this instance are problematic. The most satisfactory solution is that suggested by de Vries (1933: 127), that *rein at* should be read as *reinar*. The *at* is easily explained as a misreading of *-ar* before what appears to be a place name, *Singasteini* – as, indeed, Snorri has taken it to be (and his understanding could well have determined the reading *at*). The editors of SPSMA (III, 408–409), on the other hand, prefer not to amend, and regard "rein" as the dative object of "bregðr", in the sense that the 'defender of the gods', "ragna ... vári", 'takes away land' from Loki, the land being the island they are contending on. Such a usage of *bregða við* as 'take something from someone', however, is unparalleled when the object, land, is not something that is being moved (which is the basic sense of the verb) – indeed, the word *rein* specifically indicates a piece of sacrosanct land that must not be damaged, particularly by removal (and there is a standard word for taking land, *nema*); these may be some of the reasons for

19 SPSMA (III, 408) notes that the sense 'quarrel with' is not recorded for *bregða við*, but this is not the reading suggested here.

several generations of earlier scholars to have eschewed reading “rein” as the object of “bregðr”.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, the necklace is very much an object that can be moved. *Ragna vári* is, moreover, a mere description, not a kenning; *ragna rein(ar) vári* is an expression much more in keeping with the kenning-based diction that Úlfr is master of.

*singasteini*. *Singasteinn* remains obscure; several interpretations have been suggested, none of them without problems. The most likely suggestion is that of de Vries (1933: 140), that the name is an adaptation of Old English *sincstan* (‘treasure stone’; note how in *Beowulf* 1200 part of the *Brosinga mene* or its container is called a *sincfæt* [‘treasure setting’]). There is some evidence of an awareness of this sense of ‘what is sunken’ as ‘treasure’ in Norse in the names *Sökkvabekkr* and *Sökkdalir* (Davidson 1983: 79–80), but Úlfr was either unaware that the Old English element *sinc* corresponded to this Norse use of *sökk* (even if he was aware of a general evocation of treasure in *sincstan*), or else he chose to preserve a form closer to the Old English original rather than translating it, in order to play on \**Brisinga steinn*, a plausible (though non-extant) designation for the goddess’s jewelled necklace, which is surely what is designated by *singa steinn*. Snorri, however, apparently took *Singasteinn* as a place name, parallel to, or identical with, *Vágasker*, a transparent formation meaning ‘wave skerry’, which must be taken as the name of the site of the contest. The identification, I suggest, was mistaken, and probably based on the synonymy of *steinn* and *sker*.

*vári*. *Vári* is found only in this passage of *Húsdrápa*, and is to be derived from *verja* (‘defend’). The word *vári* is presumably Úlfr’s invention; the line is derived from Þjóðólfr of Hvinir’s *Haustlǫng*, st. 5 (ed. North, comm. st. 5/2, 5/4; cf. *Skj* B 1 15; SPSMA III, 431), “Fárbauta mǫg vára” (where *vára* is probably ‘of spring-times’). Cöllén points out (2015: 107) that we would expect a short vowel (*vari*), but Úlfr has lengthened it on the basis of his model in *Haustlǫng*. The subject of Þjóðólfr’s kenning is the ox, ploughing in springtime, which (as North points out) is consistent with the general seasonal interest of the poem, emphasising the potential for fecundity which is embodied in Iðunn, the poem’s subject. Possibly Úlfr wished to allude to this theme in his borrowing from Þjóðólfr: the return of the Brisingamen,

20 There are no instances of *bregða* as proposed by SPSMA listed in Fritzner, Cleasby & Vigfusson 1957, *DONP*, or *Lexicon Poeticum*. Fritzner (alone) separates out the sense ‘remove, take away’ (sense 6), the instances referring to tents and gang-planks. All instances of concrete objects of *bregða* (there are plenty of usages involving non-concrete objects) involve moveable items (other than in Snorri’s tale of the visit to Útgarða-Loki, where the word applies to a mountain – which very pointedly *is* moved). For a further critique of E. Marold’s interpretation (the SPSMA reading is very largely hers), see North (2006: 373–374).

Freyja's talisman, may be compared with the return of Iðunn as guarantor of the gods' well-being, and this, perhaps, is reflected in the play on words between 'spring' and 'defender (of the gods' realm)'.<sup>21</sup>

*hafnýra*. If Snorri's information is correct that the contest of *Húsdrápa*, st. 2, relates to the Brisingamen, then the 'sea-kidney' must surely be taken to refer to the necklace; if, however, the object of the contest in the first part of the stanza is the *rein* (as SPSMA argues), then the sea-kidney would refer to the island. Following the first of these interpretations, Pering (1941: 217–219) made the important identification of sea-kidneys as a type of bean washed up on the shores of Norway (and the British Isles), and later called *vette-nyrer*.<sup>22</sup> These were used, probably bound into a belt, as a talisman of birth (for example, they were bound round cows as a protective measure). The Gaelic term for them, *airne Moire*, links them to Mary, a heavenly protector; *Oddrúnargrátr*, st. 9, links the goddess Freyja with childbirth. It is reasonable to conclude that, in *Húsdrápa*, the goddess's necklace was pictured as made up of these talismanic birth-'stones'. It is Heimdallr who retrieves the necklace since he was the guardian of progeny (in his role of instigating and maintaining social order, as seen in *Rígsþula*) and of the ordered world of the gods, which Loki sought to destroy (his theft of the necklace reflects the destructive role he adopts in attempting to sell Freyja to the giants, and ransoming himself by promising Iðunn to the giant Þjazi: Snorri, *Skáldskaparmál*, ch. 656). (Cf. Cöllén 2015: 122–124, 127.) One of the reasons for the rivals to have taken the form of seals in the contest (as Snorri indicates, on the basis of now lost stanzas) is probably that seals come to land chiefly to mate: the males

21 I confess, nonetheless, to an unease with reading *vári* as an *ad hoc* lengthening of the expected form \**vári* for 'protector'. North (2006: 374) suggests *vári* derives from *værr* ('comfortable'), the word used to describe Heimdallr's hall in *Grimnismál*, st. 13, and that *ragna reinvári* means 'warmer of the gods' land', the return of the Brisingamen enabling Freyja to stave off winter cold and thus guarantee the gods' well-being. While this remains a possibility, *værr* does not relate to warmth, but rather to fondness between spouses, or snugness (but not necessarily with the connotations of warmth as such that the English word has) in a hall, so what Heimdallr would be bringing through the Brisingamen is the general comfort of life and amiable relations (contrasting with the antipathy with Loki). The *rein(ar) vári* could be a play on the *rann vært* of *Grimnismál*, which in turn may evoke the image of the world as a hall (see the citation below from *Völuspá*, st. 4) – called, by a later poet, Einarr Gilsson, *Selkolluvisur*, st. 21 (*Skj* B1 440), 'hall of mankind' (*aldar ran*) – of whose welfare and fecundity Heimdallr may be viewed as the guardian.

22 They are the seeds of the West Indian *Entada gigalobium* or *Pusaetha scandens*, reddish brown in colour and shaped like kidneys; they are swept huge distances by the Gulf Stream, but are incapable of germination in northern latitudes (as a matter of interest, I have germinated a seed in a greenhouse and observed it put on some stunning growth, but was unable to keep it alive above a few months). The Frenchman Carolus Clusius (1525–1609) records that the Norwegians call a type of bean "renes marinos" ('sea-kidneys').

fight over the females; hence the mythical contest over a talisman of birth is rooted in a natural phenomenon.<sup>23</sup>

### *Earth or Jewel?*

The SPSMA reading of *Húsdrápa*, st. 2, removes the Brisingamen from the picture, and makes the contest one over a strip of land (*rein*), realised as an island. Thus it chooses to ignore Snorri's statement that the contest was over the Brisingamen. My own reading, based on the work of many predecessors, works better if we assume a small emendation of "rein at" to "reinar", but it takes Snorri as a reliable witness in terms of the theme of the passage in the poem (even if it queries some small points in terms of his readings of individual words).

If the contest was purely over a strip of land, characterised as a rough skerry, the question arises: what was the point? The only way to see any significance in such a contest is to associate it with cosmogonic myths found clearly in Siberian analogues (discussed below). Yet we have no indication in other Norse sources that Heimdallr and Loki were ever conceived as cosmogonic demiurges. Moreover, the island is described by Snorri, probably quoting from a lost stanza of the poem, as *Vágasker* ('Wave Skerry'): it is a desolate and deathly place, that fails to evoke the image of new earth rising from the ocean, full of potential to grow into the fertile world we live in.

The cosmogonic interpretation of *Húsdrápa*, st. 2, is not, however, to be simply dismissed; my own reading places the Brisingamen at the heart of the myth, but it allows for *allusion* to the cosmogonic myth. I discuss this further below.

### *The Brisingamen*

That the Brisingamen was related to birth is the inference to be drawn from Pering's identification of 'sea-kidneys' as the ingredients for a birth talisman. While it is questionable how far we should place any reliance on the late *Sorla þáttur* account, it is interesting that Freyja procured the necklace from four dwarfs. These are named, but more interesting is their fourness: this recalls the four dwarfs, East, West, North, and South, who held up the firmament (Snorri, *Gylfaginning*, ch. 8). It suggests that the Brisingamen is the product of all spatial dimensions of the world, that it reaches to all quarters in its effect. In a challenging and perceptive article, Ármann Jakobsson (2005) has shown that dwarfs 'embody' absence; if we apply this principle to the

23 In addition, in the Old English *Nine Herbs Charm*, lines 27–28 (Storms 1948, 188–189), the seal appears as the bearer of a healing herb; hence the possibility exists of a Germanic concept of the animal as in some way life-giving, and of life coming from the sea.

Brisingamen myth, then the focus of the necklace's creation shifts from who made it (the dwarfs) to *how* it came into Freyja's hands, which is by having sex, the precursor to birth.

The talisman therefore contains within it the productive power of pro-geniture reaching to the four quarters of the world – the quarters that Loki seeks to encroach upon through his offspring, the world serpent in the ocean, Hel beneath the earth, and Fenrir above (*Gylfaginning*, ch. 33). Loki's theft of the necklace, involving him squeezing into a chamber that was tight shut and running away with it, surely refers to birth: the imagery recalls that used, for example, in Karelian birth charms, where the baby has to be freed from a bone cage, an otherworld that is kept shut tight and slams to as soon as the baby is delivered (see below). Loki therefore acts in a female role, as a sort of perverted midwife, just as, in another episode, he himself becomes pregnant and gives birth to various monsters, which *Hyndluljóð* alludes to. In stealing the Brisingamen, then, Loki has stolen the power over birth itself.<sup>24</sup> This merely confirms the connections of the necklace with procreative powers.<sup>25</sup>

### *The Earth-out-of-Ocean Motif*

In terms of structure, the *singasteinn* of the first *helmingr* of *Húsdrápa*, st. 2, is parallel to the sea-kidney of the second; indeed, it seems clear that Úlfr identifies the two (cf. Schier 1976: 581). An intriguing interpretational possibility arises if 'sea-kidney' is taken not merely literally as a term for the component of the goddess's necklace, but as a poetic designation, a *heiti*, for 'island', which Kurt Schier (1976: 583) argues for – it is parallel to various other *heiti* used in this sense, such as *lagar hjarta* ('sea heart'), in *Ynglingatal*, st. 25 (*Skj* B 1 11; SPSMA I, 3). As seals, the gods were clearly diving, as is confirmed by the site of the contest being a 'wave skerry'; hence, the Brisingamen was raised from the depths, like primordial mud being raised to form the earth, and, if we accept that 'sea-kidney' points both to the necklace and to an island (of sorts), then the poet would be suggesting a symbolic

24 Freyja may moreover have rewarded Heimdallr for the return of the necklace by having sex with him, as North argues (North 1997: 221–226); in *Lokasenna*, st. 20, Loki accuses Gefjun of laying her leg over the 'white lad' when he gave her the jewel; whiteness is a distinguishing characteristic of Heimdallr. This version of the myth would, on this interpretation, have named the goddess of the necklace as Gefjun, a functional variant of Freyja.

25 *Sǫrla þátr* has a strange addendum to the Brisingamen tale, linking it with the *Hjaðnirgavig*, an eternal battle that takes place between two warriors, involving daily slaughter and resurrection. The necklace, as a talisman of birth, is thus associated with Freyja's powers as mistress of death in battle, and of subsequent resurrection (see Dronke 1997: 43). We do not have any indication elsewhere that the Brisingamen expressed powers of slaughter, but it could conceivably be an ancient feature.

identification between the necklace of birth and an island rising from the waves.<sup>26</sup> The contest over the necklace would allude to one over earth itself. The choice of setting would then not be an incidental detail irrelevant to the interpretation of the myth, but one central to its meaning.

Schier (1994 [1963]) traced a widespread mythic motif, found across the world but in particular in Siberia, with variants existing as close to Scandinavia as Finland, in which the earth was formed by being drawn from the ocean beds.<sup>27</sup> This may take place with no deity involved, or by a deity acting on his own, but the versions found in Siberia tend to involve two rivals, who may be pictured as either diving birds, or personified, often as God and Satan. Schier notes that various creation myths are to be found in Norse sources (he lists seven, including the creation of both the earth and mankind), but that the myth found in *Völuspá* is of the earth-out-of-ocean type (1994 [1963]: 15–18). *Völuspá*, st. 4, indicates that the sons of Burr, which means Óðinn, Vili, and Vé, “biððom upp ypðo” (‘lifted up beds’) (see Dronke 1997: comm. *Völuspá*, st. 4/2); while this does not indicate they were raised from ocean (which in the previous stanza is not said to exist yet in the succinct cosmographic presentation of the poem), in st. 59, when the new world begins, it is said of the *völva* that “sér hon upp koma ðöru sinni jörð ór ægi” (‘she sees come up a second time earth from ocean’), which indicates that the first rising must have been out of the primeval waters.<sup>28</sup>

The formation of earth out of ocean may, if Dronke is correct, be indicated in the name of the primordial giant, Aurgelmir (*Vafþrúðnismál*, st. 30–31), which she takes as meaning “‘ocean that roars’ round, over, the ‘fertile, damp

26 The island in question might most obviously be identified with the ‘wave skerry’ (*Vágasker*), but the symbolism here is, I suggest, different and negative, unlike the fertile new earth; I discuss this below, but ‘wave skerry’ essentially seems to indicate the site of the contest, rather than being its object, and to belong to the deathly realm of ocean from which the new world emerges. The sea-kidney, in contrast to a skerry, is specifically described as beautiful or bright (*fágr*) – a word that is found elsewhere applied both to good land and to bright objects (recalling the *Brisingamen*’s etymology in *brísa* [‘gleam’]). de Vries (1933: 140) takes *Vágasker* as equivalent to the ‘sea-kidney’ which he regards as amber (1933: 129).

27 Napol’skikh (2012) supplements Schier’s study with a greater array of examples. The motif exists in records recorded from Finland in the nineteenth century only in a fragmentary form. Creation took place for example from the eggs laid by a bird which flew over the primeval ocean, but in some variants (e.g. SKVR IV 2, no. 1821) the creative process involved the bird raking up a broken egg from the sea bottom. In other creation narratives, the primordial seer Väinämöinen scrapes up earth from the depths of the sea (e.g. SKVR II, no. 305).

28 Schier (1994 [1963]: 25) suggests that the *Ginnunga gap* that is said in the preceding stanza to be all that existed at the beginning was, like an ocean, a source of all futures (*Künftigen*); cf. Dronke (1997: comm. *Völuspá*, st. 3/7), who interprets *Ginnunga gap* as a yawning primordial emptiness, “from whose unimaginable magnitude the ‘magic’ of the supernatural powers would emerge” (reading an allusion to the word *ginna* [‘bewitch’]).

soil”, i.e. the submarine soil that will emerge as the earth’ (1997: comm. *Vǫluspá*, st. 3/2).<sup>29</sup>

The notion of establishing bounteous land by dragging or fixing it in the midst of ocean is found elsewhere in Norse, though not as a motif of earth’s primordial creation: Gefjun (‘Giver’; a goddess parallel to Freyja) drew the isle of Sjøælland from the water (*Heimskringla* I, 15–16; Snorri cites a verse of Bragi in support); Gotland used to sink every day and emerge only at night, until the dynastic founder, Þieluar (*þel* is ‘foundation’, hence ‘the founder’), came to the island and stopped it sinking by bringing fire (a traditional mode of making a land claim) – some allusion to fire may be discerned in the base sense of ‘gleam’ in *brísa*, from which *Brisingamen* is derived (*Guta saga*, ch. 1; see pp. xvii–xxii for analogues to the saga’s foundation motifs).

Whilst Schier is surely correct that typologically speaking the *Vǫluspá* version of earth’s creation belongs among the earth-out-of-ocean myths, there are some difficulties. The poem’s variant appears closest to the form in which a deity acts alone as creator, which has the closest analogues in India rather than Siberia (Schier 1994 [1963]: 27). We do not have any indication of rivalry, and if we wished to surmise its presence (between the sons of Burr), we are confronted with the problem that there were *three* sons of Burr, not two, as in all the postulated analogues. There is also no indication that they were in animal form, though the analogues show examples where the ‘ideal’ participants, diving birds, are replaced with divine personages.

In a later publication (Schier 1976), Schier turned to the interpretation of *Húsdrápa*, st. 2. Here, he sees the same essential mythologem at work, but in this case we clearly have two rivals, Heimdallr and Loki, and they take the form of diving animals, seals. Schier sees their contest as being not over the *Brisingamen*, but over the creation of the earth, represented by the ‘sea-kidney’, by which is meant the island, created out of the ocean depths. There are various difficulties with this reading. The first is that to see the myth of *Húsdrápa* as an example of the earth-out-of-ocean creation motif probably calls for us to reject Snorri’s testimony that Úlfr’s verse recounted the myth of the *Brisingamen*, unless we see the necklace as having existed in primordial time before the earth’s creation (which the sources do not support). The second is that the earth-out-of-ocean motif appears to exist in two

29 The fact that *Vafþrúðnismál* depicts Aurgelmir as being formed from the droplets that coalesced from the primeval waters, *Élivágar*, may seem to speak against this interpretation, but the droplets are part of the waters, and hence Aurgelmir may be seen as a concrete metonym for the waters as a whole, viewed, now that he has attained personhood, as potentially fertile (*aurr*) as opposed to being icy (*él*) and poisonous (*eitrdropan*). *Vafþrúðnismál* presents a chronography of the cosmos, and is hence concerned to emphasise change and development, as opposed to (timeless) metonymy.

quite different forms in *Völuspá* and *Húsdrápa*; as *Völuspá* is very widely seen as having been created very close to the millennium and the conversion to Christianity, both poems were composed within a few years of each other, so the discrepancy in the mythologem does not immediately seem credible. The third is that, while Heimdallr and Loki were clearly rivals (a sort of mythological set-piece, indeed), there is no indication elsewhere that Loki (in particular) could be envisaged as a primordial demiurge. The fourth is that the island of the newly formed world is equated in this reading with what Úlfr calls Vágasker (or more probably just *vága sker*; Snorri appears to have interpreted this as a place-name), which indicates a barren rock rather than a bounteous new earth (which by contrast is adequately indicated by *bjǫð* in *Völuspá*, a word used to designate land rising up beside water, and hence comparable to fertile *aurr* beside rivers).

I nonetheless believe Schier is, in essence, correct to see the earth-out-of-ocean mythologem as present in both *Völuspá* and *Húsdrápa*, but a more sophisticated poetic interpretation is called for.<sup>30</sup> We must start by accepting Snorri's testimony that *Húsdrápa*, st. 2, relates the myth of the Brisingamen. It follows that the stanza is therefore not, primarily, about the creation of the earth out of the ocean depths. There is nothing, however, that precludes an interpretation of Úlfr's verse as *alluding* to this myth. Once we allow for allusion, a whole array of symbolic connections may be discerned between the Brisingamen myth and its protagonists and the myths of the creation of earth out of ocean. As for the difficulties with *Völuspá*, allusiveness may again explain much. The poet mentions Ymir – but fails to recount the world-forming slaughter of the giant (cf. *Vafþrúðnismál*, st. 21), since this was not to his purpose; he mentions the drawing of the earth from ocean – but, knowing that the demiurges responsible for the earth's formation were the sons of Burr (almost certainly in earlier tradition the slayers of Ymir: see Dronke 1997: comm. *Völuspá*, st. 3/2, 4/1), he brings these as protagonists into this gentler myth, which deliberately avoids the notion of primordial slaughter. Similarly, he avoids any mention of rivalry in the earth's formation (or indeed of diving to the depths of the sea: with the Christian influence already apparent in the poem, the poet was surely more attracted to the notion of simple divine *fiat* to create the earth). Hence, I suggest, *Völuspá* presents us with a subtle *manipulation* of tradition, not a bland regurgitation of it.

30 Both Schier and Cöllén, however, regard the one myth as excluding the other; Cöllén appears to reject, as a matter of principle, the concept that a poetic text can bear one primary meaning while at the same time alluding to other meanings (an extraordinary position to adopt in respect of poetry); Schier feels that Snorri has misunderstood the reference in *Húsdrápa*.

Schier (1994 [1963]: 41) makes the significant point that the various cosmographic details recorded by Snorri from sources such as *Grimnismál* and *Vafþrúðnismál* are not just random, but must originally have formed parts of a cosmogony (even if, as it appears, there may have been more than one cosmogony in circulation). He notes, in particular, that the image of Yggdrasill in *Völuspá* (and other poems) identifies it as a world tree of the type found widely in Siberia, in the same areas as the diving motif for the earth's creation occurs. The tree encompasses the whole entity of the cosmos, and typically stands in the midst of an ocean, or else all rivers of the world spring from it. Yggdrasill is first mentioned, of course, in *Völuspá* immediately following the raising of the earth from the depths, suggesting it belongs to the same cosmogony. Schier cites a southern Altaic tale, which illustrates how the mythic elements in question were united. God and a man were the first beings, and they flew as black geese over the primordial ocean. God ordered the man to dive down after a stone, and he brought up earth from the ocean bed, which God caused to grow into the earth. A great tree grew upon it, but without branches; finding this not to be pleasing, he caused nine branches to grow on it, and nine men to appear at the foot, who would give rise to nine peoples. The world tree as a sort of vessel for peoples (or for souls that will become members of the races of the world) is, in fact, fairly widespread.

If, then, we approach *Húsdrápa* as engaging in allusion in its telling of the Brisingamen myth, we may see the jewel, 'the sunken treasure stone' (*singasteinn*), emerging from its watery sojourn at Wave Skerry – just as the talisman sea-kidney beans were found in Norway, washed up on the coast – as being likened to the fresh new world drawn out of the ocean. To reinforce this point, the rivals are said to have taken the forms of seals; seals are diving animals: this strongly suggests that the Brisingamen had ended up in the water and had to be dived for – the core actions of the mythological feat precisely recall those of the primordial formation of the earth lifted from the ocean. The Brisingamen, as a talisman of birth emerging from the sea, acts as a metonym of the birth of earth itself. We might go further: the salvaging of the necklace functions as a *re-enactment* of the primordial saving of the earth from ocean's depths, and, by as it were partaking in it, derives power from it.<sup>31</sup>

31 The religious principle at work here is not uncommon; a well-known example is the Christian (Orthodox and Catholic) understanding of the Eucharist as being a re-enactment, and participation in, the Last Supper; moreover, that supper was elevated to the status of a primordial act by the divinity himself (Christ) when he identified the victim of the imminent world-saving sacrifice (himself) with the physical means of worshippers' participation in that sacrifice, in the form of the bread and wine as his body and blood. A similar understanding could be argued for in the case of Heimdallr: by proclaiming his birth from the waves, he identifies himself with the primordial emergence of the earth itself out of the ocean depths. None of this is to suggest Christian influence here, merely

As in charms, discussed below, where the recounting of the first, primordial occurrence of the action that the charmer is carrying out (such as staunching a wound) establishes the effectiveness of the action in the present, so too here the allusion to the primordial creative act lends power to the action recounted, the saving of the goddess's necklace.<sup>32</sup>

The 'fair/bright sea-kidney', envisaged as the goddess's necklace of stones, but alluding also to the newly emerged earth, recalls the lines of the probably contemporary *Völuspá*, st. 4, picturing the new world that has risen from the sea as a stone hall, one that then burgeons with vegetation:

Sól skein sunnan	Sun shone from the south
á salar steina –	on the hall's stones –
þá var grund gróin	then the ground was overgrown
grœnom lauki.	by the green leek.

*Völuspá*, st. 4

Adopting such an allusion-based interpretation of the sea-kidney also helps to deal with one slight weakness in terms of skaldic diction. 'Sea-kidney' is readily interpretable as a kenning for 'island' in full accordance with skaldic methods, but if the reference is to the Brisingamen, it would appear to be just a description. However, if the necklace is imagined as emerging from the waters – which is surely the implication of the whole mythological scene – then it forms a sort of island in its emergence, and the term remains a kenning, while at the same time pointing to the raw materials of birth charm girdles.

I suggest we may apply the same allusion-based approach to mythological motifs to Heimdallr. In his emergence from the waters, which we may infer to have taken place in the struggle, we may also see an allusion to his own birth from his mothers, the waves (the daughters of the sea god Ægir) – a birth which, according to *Hyndluljóð*, rendered him *aukinn megni*, magically empowered by earth and sea.<sup>33</sup> In the Brisingamen contest, Heimdallr is *ráðgegninn*, endowed with power, as he re-enacts his own powerful birth.

Furthermore, we cannot fail to observe that Heimdallr's birth from the ocean onto the rim of the earth seems to re-enact the very creation of earth itself, drawn from the ocean depths. His birth is presented as a riddle, as

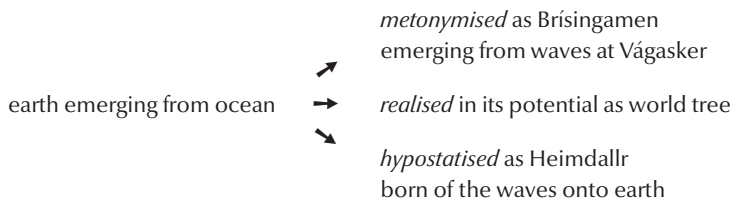
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that the Christian instance illustrates a religious understanding which is widespread elsewhere too, and which, apart from dating from Antiquity, forms the basis of many rituals observed for example in anthropological literature.

32 This is not to suggest that *Húsdrápa* is a charm, but that it may be employing one of the fundamental workings of charms, encapsulated in the *historiola* principle (discussed below).

33 The allusion to birth is reinforced in that seals come to land chiefly to mate: the males fight over the females.

no-one is born of nine mothers in reality; but this extends to the solution of the riddle too: what is it that the sea 'bears', in a cosmogonic sense? Surely nothing other than the earth that emerges from it. It is no wonder, then, that his primordality is emphasised: he is a hypostatisation of the primeval formation of the earth itself. His fierce guardianship of the *rein* of the gods follows naturally from this. That he also appears to embody the core meanings of the world tree is similarly explicable, in light of the Altaic analogue that Schier cites: the tree is the realisation of the potential within the earth that was raised from ocean, including its cosmic dimension in space and time, and its production and guardianship of the classes or races of mankind.



The difficulties arising from squaring the differences between the elements in the suggested network of allusions must nonetheless be confronted. The skerry on which the contest over the necklace takes place may suggest the newly emerged island which became the earth in primordial time, but, on the pattern of symbolic connections proposed here, Vágasker cannot itself symbolise that primordial island – it is the Brisingamen that is symbolically equivalent (but the skerry does function to reinforce this equivalence, in that it is an actual island rather than a necklace). The barrenness of a skerry is inappropriate to act as a direct symbol of the new, burgeoning earth, but the skerry does have a symbolic connection elsewhere, as I discuss below.

There would also appear to be three variants of the earth-out-of-ocean motif at play. When *Völuspá* depicts the new earth arising after the end of this world, it appears to simply arise on its own; this is the essential image also implied in the symbolic equivalence between Heimdallr's birth and that of the present earth. *Völuspá* presents this present earth as having been raised by Burr's sons, however; but this may, as noted, have been a manipulation of the imagery, taking account of these gods' active role in the traditional story of the creative slaying of the primordial giant (a different creation motif). The contest of *Húsdrápa*, if we take it as alluding to the creative raising of earth out of ocean, points to the type in which two rivals contend over the act of creation; the assumption of seal forms points to this version as having animals as its protagonists.

There is, in fact, no need to assume that different versions of the creation story cannot have co-existed; in the neighbouring Finnish and Karelian traditions, for example, we find various birds (scaup duck, goose, swallow, eagle) as the creative protagonists, sometimes involving diving into the sea, sometimes not, and in other variants the demiurge Väinämöinen is the protagonist of the creation, sometimes for example shaping the form of the seabed (e.g. SKVR II, no. 305.84–87; cf. raising mud from the depths), and usually in rivalry with a Laplander;<sup>34</sup> the degree to which “creation” in these myths refers to cosmic creation also varies – the point at issue may, for example, be to explain the rockiness of one area as opposed to another through some act of primordial earth-moulding.

### *Loki as the Contestant*

Why is it Loki that is Heimdallr’s opponent? Loki is the bringer of destruction, the one who consistently threatens the welfare of the gods: he was responsible for the death of Baldr (*Gylfaginning*, ch. 49), and it was he who engineered the abduction of Iðunn, guardian of the apples of youth (*Skáldskaparmál*, ch. 656). He engenders the three monstrous offspring (*Gylfaginning*, ch. 33): the world serpent, Miðgarðsormr; the mistress of the underworld, Hel; and the wolf Fenrir. These mark the bounds of existence on sea, land, and air (Fenrir destroys the sun, *Vafþrúðnismál*, st. 46–47), and also on a geographical plane (the sea at the edge of the world), a ‘vertical’ one (Hel, the bottom level of the cosmos – but the plane is better characterised as being one of life, ending in Hel), and a temporal one (Fenrir’s swallowing of Óðinn signifies the end of this cycle of the world’s existence); as guardian of the *rein* of the gods, Heimdallr defends the world against the encroachment of these chaotic forces on its borders, and the contest of *Húsdrápa* takes place, it would seem, at the edge

34 The earth-out-of-ocean motif in Finnish-Karelian creation tales presents challenges in terms of detailed analysis. The motif does not appear to be directly connected in verse with Väinämöinen, though there are arguably vestiges of it to be found; for example in SKVR VIII, no. 18 Väinämöinen wanders on the sea after being shot by an enemy – “käänty kämmenin merehen” (‘he turned in the water with his palms’), which is followed almost immediately by the emergence of an island – “Tuo kasvoi lmandran soari vanhan Väinön polven päähän” (‘the island of lmantra grew on the top of Väinö’s knee’). The island then acts as a site for a bird to nest; the present cosmos is formed from the fragments of the resulting egg when it is shattered. The island here, however, seems to be part of Väinämöinen’s body (his knee), so the closest resemblance in Norse is to the formation of the world from the body-parts of the slain giant, Ymir. As Frog points out (pers. comm., and forthcoming study), the occurrence of the earth-out-of-ocean motif in Finnish-Karelian tradition is chiefly in prose tales, which present a dualistic pair (God and the devil, for example) which may be said to represent the forces of order and chaos (or good and evil, in Christianised terms); the devil may, for example, dive down for mud and spit this out, forming parts of the world with this (see for example Krohn 1886: 291, example 321). The presence of different creation motifs within one cultural area parallels the similar multiplicity found in Norse sources.

of the world in primordial time over the talisman of birth and life. At *ragna røk*, Loki pilots a ship, leading his forces of chaos against the gods (*Völuspá*, st. 48) and contends with Heimdallr – whose primordial birth from the ocean waves Loki mimics in his eschatological arrival on a ship. In the myth of the Brisingamen he thus appears fittingly as the thief of the symbol of the gods' fecundity, acting out a scene in a setting which alludes to the bounds of the world in time (the primordial emergence from ocean) and place (in its remoteness and deathliness).

The skerry – a desolate rocky outcrop in the ocean – differs categorically from the earth-out-of-ocean analogues cited above with their emphasis on the fertile new earth (though this motif is still present, transferred to the divine necklace). The skerry, indeed, suggests a more immediate motif, found in the myth of the mead of poetry (as recorded by Snorri, *Skáldskaparmál*, ch. 647–48): here, a skerry is a threatened site of destruction for two contentious and treacherous dwarfs who have stolen the mead, for they are stranded there and initially left to drown. In a similar way, Loki has slyly stolen the necklace and been chased, it would seem, onto a desolate skerry in the waves, whence the treasure he has thieved is saved and Loki is vanquished. Following this line of comparison, the skerry emerges as a place of (threatened) death, as the last refuge of Loki, lord of death and destruction. The bounteous mead, originating among the gods, then stolen, and saved from a skerry amidst the sea, directly parallels the necklace, stolen from Freyja and saved from a skerry among the waves by Heimdallr. In the case of the Brisingamen, the motif of the life-giving necklace juxtaposed with the deathly skerry fittingly recalls the goddess herself, the mistress of both life and death.<sup>35</sup>

### *Concluding Remarks on Húsdrápa*

Úlfr's version of the myth of the Brisingamen emerges as a multivalent work of poetic allusion. The primary sense is clear: Loki and Heimdallr contend over the necklace of Freyja on a skerry, and Heimdallr wins. The necklace is characterised as a talisman of birth by calling it a 'sea-kidney', as this is an allusion to folk practices of binding these beans into a birth-aiding girdle. Freyja, as a leading *ásynja*,<sup>36</sup> is responsible for the continued fecundity of

35 Liquid is a recurrent motif of *Húsdrápa*. The opening stanza presents poetry as a liquid, and the concluding stanza talks of a river flowing at the end of its course into the sea, as a metaphor for the poem coming to an end; besides the contest at Wave Skerry, the other preserved myths of the poem are the fishing of the world serpent by Þórr, and the funeral of Baldr, culminating in the launching of his ship. Hence an allusion to the mead of poetry and its watery salvation seems more than likely.

36 Her relative significance is indicated not only by the number of myths in which she features, but also by her role in these myths, such as her sharing half the slain with

the gods, but Heimdallr is the active guardian of ordered society which is able to replicate itself through successful progeny, as seen in *Rígsþula*. He is the natural person to retrieve the necklace, which Loki, the giant-descended perturbator of the godly order, has stolen. It seems likely that this mythical event also alludes to the primordial birth of the earth out of ocean, referred to in *Völuspá*. Heimdallr himself is a primordial god – *aldinn*, as *Rígsþula* calls him – born before there was a father to engender him, it seems, and born, moreover, from the ocean waves, just as the necklace is brought from the depths. The god's primordality confirms the likelihood of the allusion in the Brisingamen myth to the primal emergence of earth from ocean, and even Heimdallr's own birth in ancient times out of the ocean waves alludes to this primal creative event. Úlfr's version of the myth at the same time may arguably be making a different allusion, to the salvation of the mead of poetry from the deathly skerry, where it had ended up after being lost to the gods (they created Kvasir, who wandered the world and was murdered, the mead being brewed from his blood), and its subsequent retrieval by Óðinn.

## Heimdallr and the Ram

The information Snorri gives about Heimdallr being struck by a man's head, which he indicates was a myth recounted in *Heimdallargaldr*, may be summarised as follows:

- Heimdallr is struck through by a man's head
- 'Heimdallr's head' is a term for sword
- 'Heimdallr's sword' is a term for head (*Gylfaginning*)
- 'Heimdallr's fate' is a term for head
- 'A man's fate' is a term for sword

This set of points may be simplified somewhat. Snorri mentions that 'a man's fate' means a sword – a commonplace expression requiring no mythological knowledge – merely as a foil to the more unusual 'Heimdallr's fate', meaning a head. 'Heimdallr's head' as a term for 'sword' is a terminological inversion of 'Heimdallr's sword' as a term for 'head'. However, the expression 'Heimdallr's head' used in reference to a head other than Heimdallr's own is, at best, distinctly odd.

What appears at first to be a further complication to the expression 'Heimdallr's head' in fact, I believe, holds the key to a solution. A piece of poetic lore is recorded in *þula* IV aa (*Skj* A 1 676, B 1 670; SPSMA III, 890), that *heimdali* was a poetic term (*heiti*) for a ram (*hrútr*). This *heiti* appears to be found in a

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Óðinn (*Grímnismál*, st. 14), or her prospective loss constituting a calamity for the gods in *Völuspá*.

*lausavísa* in *Grettis saga*, ch. 63 (but given in full in *Landnámabók*, H214), where *heimdala hjǫrr* ('ram's sword'), means 'head' (*Skj* A1 312: 'heimdala [...] hior'): the speaker is declaring he is going to make a get-away up into the woods rather than meeting with a dangerous group of men, and declares "verðk heimdala hirða hjǫr" ('I will save my head'). The reading is not entirely clear: the manuscript "heimdala at" suggests a misreading of "heimdalar", and both Finnur Jónsson and Jakob Benediktsson emend to "Heimdalar hjǫr" (*Skj* B1 289, st. 7; *Landnámabók*, H214), but the verse works better with a meaning of 'ram' for "heimdala", which the speaker will 'herd' (*hirða*).

The explanation of *heimdali* as 'ram' occurs only in a *þula*. It was therefore not a commonplace term; rather, it almost certainly had a poetic origin and was confined to poetic usage. Its etymology is not wholly clear, but *-dali* is most probably a weak form of *dalr* ('stag') – a term that occurs just once (in Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál*, ch. 58; the similar formation *dalarr* also occurs here with the same meaning, the sense possibly being 'with curved antlers', according to Anthony Faulkes [1996: 256]). The ram was therefore a 'home stag'. This verges on being a kenning: just as a giant may be characterised as, for example, a *hraunhvalr* ('lavafield whale') (*Hymiskviða*, st. 36), so the ram is a (wild) 'stag' which lives at home; just as a giant was large like a whale, but did not live in water, but rather in the rocks, so too with the ram there is a point of connection and a point of divergence – it was notably horned, but did not live in the wild, but on the farm. The expression thus has all the marks of being a poetic creation, one that occurs infrequently (indeed, it is scarcely evident in sources at all, and hence all occurrences may have derived from a single earlier poetic usage), and that employs exceedingly rare terms like *dalr*. It is questionable, indeed, whether *heimdali* could exist outside the kenning *heimdala hjǫrr*; the *þula* compiler has simply extracted one half of the wider expression to come up with a *heiti* for 'ram'. I would see the most likely explanation for the term *heimdala hjǫrr* as being that a skald created it to express the notion 'head' – 'the sword of the home-stag' that the animal may be imagined as wielding in its characteristic head-butting (cf. Hellquist 1891: 172).

The reasons for the particular choice of words to form the kenning must in part have been scansion (which we cannot comment on as we do not have the poetic context, unless we take the *Grettis saga* instance to be the original source) and alliteration, which is evident in the initial *h*'s of the words. Yet it is a characteristic of at least the more skilled skaldic poets to aspire furthermore to relate the expression of kennings to the overall context, often through mythological allusion. The word *hjǫrr* is a rare term for 'sword' – many others could have been chosen – suggesting that the poet specifically

wanted a word beginning with *h*, in order to alliterate with the rest of the kenning. By inference, the term *heimdali* was coined deliberately: surely the only reason, within a poetic tradition that relied on mythological allusion, was to point, through word-play, to the god *Heimdallr*.<sup>37</sup> The implication is that a myth is being alluded to involving Heimdallr in which a head functioned as a weapon – which is what Snorri in fact tells us (but which Cöllen, for example, dismisses). In terms of poetic expression, the meaning of the newly coined, and perhaps challenging, expression ‘sword of a home-stag’ is reinforced through allusion to a myth in which Heimdallr had an encounter with a head as a weapon.

It was, I suggest, only after the creation of this kenning that Heimdallr began to be associated with sheep, and the association is only likely to have been a poetic fiction in origin (though it may subsequently have become part of the tradition about the god). It would also only be after the creation of the kenning *heimdala hjorr* that the name of the god began to creep into variants of the expression such as that found in a verse of the probably twelfth-century Bjarni, who calls a head *Heimdalls hjorr* (*Skj* B 1 523; SPSMA III, 21); as noted above, the expression is semantically difficult, since, unlike in the ram’s case, the ‘sword’ in question (i.e. the head) does not belong to the subject of the expression. Thus the expression ‘sword of the home-stag’ works perfectly well in itself; the additional allusion to Heimdallr suggested by the use of the word *heimdali* invokes the myth of Heimdallr’s being struck by a head (I suggest). As soon as *heimdali* becomes *Heimdallr* in the kenning, this careful balance between formal semantic resolution of the kenning and its mythological allusion breaks down, and we are left with the oddity of ‘Heimdallr’s head’ belonging to someone other than Heimdallr.

The alteration of *heimdali* to *Heimdallr* may indeed be a late feature: Cöllen notes (2015: 268) that most of the instances of the god’s name being spelled with single *l* occur in relation to the complex of kennings relating to ‘Heimdallr’s head’. However, Cöllen’s inference, that we can therefore explain away Heimdallr’s association with sheep and heads entirely, as arising from a misinterpretation of ‘ram’, *heimdali*, as ‘Heimdallr’, is, in my view, simplistic and unconvincing, for reasons just argued. Cöllen moreover sees the terms *hallinskiði*, *vindlér*, and *gullintanni*, which Snorri indicates were names for Heimdallr, as in fact descriptions of sheep, meaning ‘with

37 Possibly, the change of *dalr* to the weak form *dali* was also deliberate, to give a genitive *dala*, which more closely resembles the genitive *Heimdallar*, rather than *dals*. This cannot be stated with great conviction, however, since the genitive of *dalr* in the sense of ‘bow’ rather than ‘valley’ can have a genitive *dalar*, and the genitive form of Heimdallr as *Heimdalls* also occurs rarely. The form *dala*, being disyllabic, may also have been favoured for metrical reasons.

a stony skull', 'with curved shanks', and 'with golden teeth' (Cöllén 2015: 264–270).<sup>38</sup> Some of these terms could, indeed, have originated as descriptions of sheep – though their etymologies are far from clear<sup>39</sup> – but even if this is the case, it does not follow that Snorri was wrong to view them as terms for or names of the god: once the association was made with sheep through the deliberately allusive poetic *heiti* of *heimdali* for 'ram', the god would have taken on ovine characteristics as part of his nature, so it becomes meaningless to decry such terms as 'unoriginal' (unless they are regarded, as Cöllén does, as essentially clerical errors).<sup>40</sup>

## Heimdallr and the Head

The core mythological expression relating ostensibly to Heimdallr's demise that Snorri gives us, based on his reading of *Heimdallargaldr*, is that 'Heimdallr's fate' means a head; the poetic trope alludes to how Heimdallr was killed (if 'fate' necessarily means death) by a head being thrust through him. Cöllén objects (2015: 270–271) that such a myth of Heimdallr's end is inconsistent with what is related elsewhere; yet all we are told – and only by Snorri, for the event is not outlined in *Völuspá* – is that Heimdallr and Loki fought at the final confrontation of *ragna rök*, and each slew the other: this does not exclude the use of a head. Alternatively, it may simply have been a different myth; there is no reason to believe that Norse myths were entirely consistent with each other, until the levelling tendencies already apparent in the Christianised *Völuspá*, and even more in Snorri's *Edda*, became prevalent. If the myth did not fit in with Snorri's narrative mythological scheme, he may have felt it better not to relay too much of it from his source; yet he tells us so little that we may suspect that *Heimdallargaldr* did not say much either, possibly referring to the tale only allusively, in much the same way as it proclaimed the riddle of the god's birth without, as far as we can discern from Snorri's comments, elaborating on it in any narrative fashion. Heimdallr's death, then,

38 It was noted by Much (1930: 64 ff.) that some sheep develop a golden sheen on their teeth as a result of bacterial activity.

39 In particular, the association of *vindlér* with sheep seems unlikely; Snorri's summary of *Húsdrápa* implies the term was found there, applied to the god. I have suggested (Tolley 2009: I, 386) an interpretation as *vind-Hlér* ('wind Hlér [the sea-deity Ægir]'), as a kenning for Heimdallr.

40 Additionally, we might well see the ram's belligerent defence of its mating rights as parallel to Heimdallr's active pursuit of Loki for stealing the Brisingamen, which appears to have been a talisman of birth and hence of the gods' (and humans') means of self-perpetuation (see below). Yet there is nothing in the shape of the myth as preserved that resembles the thrusting action of rams butting each other; it is rather a matter of quick action to seize a *men* (necklace/girdle), so any parallels between the natures of rams and Heimdallr must have been a secondary factor in the linking of the two.

may have been a riddle like his birth, with the ‘myth’ of his piercing by a head being wholly figurative – that the man’s head, being struck through, and even Heimdallr as a person were not meant literally.<sup>41</sup> No-one, however, has so far been able to solve this riddle, so I will proceed on the basis that the myth was ‘literally’ what it claimed to be.

Cöllén objects that we do not have any other Norse myths about heads as weapons, and the one analogue that has been noted (originally by Young 1933: 103–105; see Dronke 1997: comm. *Vǫluspá*, st. 28/10, for a full discussion of the head as weapon), from the Irish Rennes *Dindshenchas*, is from outside the ambit of Norse culture and is anyway too vague to pay any heed to. His objections are weak, and they are, moreover, raised after he has devoted a good deal of his study to reiterating points already established by earlier scholarship, in my view persuasively, that the poetic sources relating to Heimdallr, in particular *Rígsþula*, are closely linked to Britain and Ireland of, approximately, the late tenth to early eleventh century (Cöllén 2015: 54–64, 81). It seems eminently likely that motifs would pass between Irish and Norse sources at this period, and the *Dindshenchas* even make a point of stressing that the strange motif of the head as weapon arose in an interaction between an Irish prince, Rúad, and the king of Lochlann, in other words Norway or Norse-settled areas. The text for the entry on Inber n-Aillbine is as follows:

Rúad mac Rigduind meic rig Fer Muirigh tarclam lucht .iii. noad do techt tar muir do acallaim a comaltæ [.i.] meic rig Lochlainne. [Feb] amluidset co leth lenna feimidset. imram nach leth amal nos-fastad ingir. Imluid iarum Rúadh tar luing amach ar co fesad cid dia mbói aní nos-mert & nomsáoi fáí. Atchí iarum .ix. mna cóimiu do mnáib [domain] ’ga fostad, triar fo cach nóadh. Rucsat leo Ruad dono co fáoi .ix. n-oidhci la cach mnoi for tir tartha nó for longaib credumai. Cor[o] toirrei áon díb úaidhib, & rogeall afrithisi a tiachtain andochum ma roised a set.

Luid dono Rúad co tech a comalta & fáí lais .iii. mbliadna, & luid forcúla, & ní rofir a dáil, co toracht Magh Muirigh. Luidset [didiu] na nóí mná cusin mac & ros-fucsat léo dia [te]tarracht, & ní mon-airmic doib. Marbaid dono a máthair a mac fein annsin, & æn mac Rúaid, & focerd urchur [dó] dia chind, conid and asbert cách amail bid o oengen: “Is ollbine, is oillbine!” Unde dicitur Inber n-Oillbine.

Stokes 1894: 294–295

41 On a simple level, a riddle of what is struck through by a man’s head might call for a solution such as a coat of mail (when it is put on), or possibly a keyhole (as in the *double entendre* Exeter Book riddle 44, where the owner of a stiff object dangling by his thighs – meaning, of course, a key – greets with its pierced head a familiar hole). This is scarcely a level of interpretation appropriate to a cosmogonic or eschatological myth, but illustrates the sort of figurative thinking that may well underlie the ‘piercing by a man’s head’.

Rúad son of Rígdonn, son of the king of Fir Muirig, mustered the crews of three ships to go over sea to have speech with his foster-brother the son of the king of Lochlann. When they had got half way across they were unable to voyage in any direction, just as if an anchor was holding them. So then Rúad went out over the ship's side that he might know what it was that was stopping them, and he turned under the vessel. Then he sees nine women, the loveliest of the world's women, detaining them, three under each ship. So they carried Ruad off with them and he slept for nine nights, [one] with each of the women, on dry (?) ground or on beds of bronze. And one of them became with child by him, and he promised that he would come again to them if he should perform his journey.

Then Rúad went to his foster-brother's house and stayed with him for seven years, after which he returned and did not keep his tryst truly, but fared on to Mag Muirig. So the nine women took the son (that had been born among them), and set out (singing, in a boat of bronze,) to overtake Rúad, and they did not succeed. So the mother then kills her own son and Rúad's only son, and she hurled the child's head after him; and then said every one as if with one mouth, "It is an awful crime! It is an awful crime!" Hence *Inber n-Oillbine*.

The tale thus includes the motif of a royal prince (cf. Rígr, a name borrowed from the Irish *ríg-* ['king']) sleeping with nine women, who would appear to personify the billows, and engendering one son by them, his only son moreover (and apparently theirs too): we seem to encounter here both the motifs of the son born of nine sea mothers (the Irish are clearly merrows, mermaids, who follow type in seeking vengeance when wronged; their charm-like singing was aimed at lulling their victim into a trance), and the regal visitant who courts several women on successive nights, ensuring successful progeny, as in *Rígsþula*. Rígr, of course, does not return, just as Rúad too fails to; the Irish tale then develops a motif of the scorned lover that is not pursued in the Norse poem (it reflects the abandoned mermaid motif).

It is difficult to educe prominent points of importance in the tradition that produced the *Dindsenchas* text, but the destruction of the prince's progeny, his only son, must surely have been among them. Whether intentionally or not, we have here an inversion, or travesty, of Rígr's role as establisher of order and progeny; clearly, the line of succession, having passed from the Fir Muirig, the 'leadership people', through Rígdonn, 'the fair/princely king',<sup>42</sup> to Rúad, 'the red' (an approbatory term), should then be maintained through further royal progeny, but instead the wayward prince squanders

42 The word *donn* actually refers to a brownish hue ('light brown inclining to yellow or red', according to *Dictionary of the Irish Language*), but has connotations of comeliness (see entries in *DIL*, esp. under 1 *donn*, 'of hair, complexion'; the connotation is commonplace in traditional Gaelic folksongs, for example). However, it has a second meaning in poetry, as a substantive, of 'chief, noble, ruler' (s.v. 2 *donn*).

the succession on mermaids, and the destruction of the offspring reflects the breaking of the social order of royal succession. Rúad's unnamed son, following on after three generations of royalty have been mentioned, is thus an inversion of *Rígsþula*'s Konr ungr. The *Dindsenchas* text implies a concern with social order in its terminology relating to the three kings, and it even shares with *Rígsþula* a concern with colour symbolism, with the 'red' prince Rúad and the 'fair brown prince' Rígdonn, whose very name recalls that of Rígr;<sup>43</sup> this may be seen, perhaps, as deriving from a shared Norse–Irish tradition of the Viking period. The mention of the Norse king can also be read not merely as a coincidence, but as an indication of some awareness that the story was part of this shared tradition (the *Dindsenchas* were, of course, like the Norse texts, written down considerably later than the Viking period, but contain many ancient traditions).

The Irish tale is not, of course, anything like the Norse myths of Heimdallr in narrative terms, but it uses some of the same elements, even if they serve different purposes. It seems reasonable to suppose that the head-as-weapon motif was also associated with Heimdallr, as indeed Snorri indicates. However, I suggest that, if the motif was indeed part of the Heimdallr tradition, it derived in large part from Celtic motifs; as Anne Ross, who devotes an extensive chapter in her *Pagan Celtic Britain* to the cult of the head, notes:

Because of its link with all other cults, its symbolic use over the entire Celtic area, insular and continental, and the longevity with which it was imbued with significance, the human head is given first place as being the most typical Celtic religious symbol.

Ross 1992: 94

While heads functioned as war trophies, both as recorded by ancient writers (such as Diodorus Siculus, 5.29.4–5, and Strabo, 4.4.5) and frequently in early Irish literature (Cormac's glossary speaks of the *mesradh Machae* ['the nut-harvest of Macha (the war goddess)']), one of the most striking literary occurrences is in the Welsh tale of Bran in the *Mabinogi*, which also exhibits strong Irish influence. The head of Bran serves essentially two purposes: to afford wisdom and guard against ills for the warrior band of followers that kept and honoured it. This matches *Húsdrápa*'s proclamation of Heimdallr as *rúðgegninn* ('provided with counsel') and *ragna reinar vári* ('defender of the gods' realm'); it also matches Mímr's head, offering Óðinn wisdom and through this, by implication, assisting in warding off evil from the gods.

43 In *Rígsþula*, Rígr's whiteness is contrasted with the black of the thrall class; the Irish uses different colours, but they are nonetheless ones that characterise their bearers as noble.

It is impossible to determine the narrative context of Heimdallr's piercing by a head, but, if it is an eschatological event, it surely marks the demise of his special powers of *ráð* and guardianship of the realm: he is disabled by means of the quintessential bearer of these powers, the head. His overseeing of progeny must also have ended; the same is implied in the *Dindshenchas* text, where this function of the head slaying seems apparent (it is not wholly clear that Rúad dies, but he is not heard of again; the portrayal of the death of his only son implies the end of his line). In the Norse case, we do not know whose head it was that slew Heimdallr, so we cannot discern its decapitation as symbolising the end of progeny, even if this was seen as a concomitant of Heimdallr's own death.

I would like to return to the notion raised at the beginning of this section, that 'Heimdallr's fate' as a head may be figurative. There is, I believe, only one detached head in Norse myth that does anything after its dismemberment: that of Mímir/Mímr. In *Völuspá*, st. 28, Mímir is said to drink mead every day, since his head lies in the mead spring beneath Yggdrasill, and Óðinn speaks with Mímr's head in st. 46 as the end of the world approaches.<sup>44</sup> We are not told explicitly how Mímir lost his head in the first place, but *Sigrdrífumál*, st. 13–14 (see below), may be read as suggesting that Óðinn either decapitated him, or stood on a rock over his decapitated head to retrieve it; this was when the head first uttered its wisdom. A rather different story is told in *Ynglinga saga*, ch. 4 and 7, which relates how, at the cessation of hostilities between the two parties of gods, the Æsir and Vanir, the Æsir sent Hœnir as hostage to the Vanir, commending him as suitable to be a prince, and along with him they sent the wise Mímir. However, whenever Hœnir in the assembly was asked to decide on anything, he could only retort "Let others decide", since he was deprived of the presence of Mímir. The Vanir decided they had been duped, and decapitated Mímir, sending his head back to the Æsir. Óðinn embalmed it and would consult it for its wise advice, and to gather information from all worlds.

Mímr/Mímir of *Völuspá* and Mímir of *Ynglinga saga* must surely be one, and the Heiðdraupnir of *Sigrdrífumál* is also likely to be the same person. The embalming probably alters an older notion of the head preserved in the well, as found in *Völuspá* and implied in *Sigrdrífumál*. The strange response of decapitating not the useless Hœnir but the wise Mímir can be explained if we think of the two as constituting one being: Hœnir's mental powers, which the name Mímir evokes (being related to words such as Latin *memor*), are dissociated from him (like the giant's heart in fairy tales). This also explains

44 The form *Mímr* does not in fact occur; it is found only in the genitive in the term *Míms hofuð* ('Mímr's head'); elsewhere, the form *Mímir* occurs.

why the Æsir commend Hœnir as a fit prince: it is not because of any qualities he has as Hœnir, but because his mental powers are those of Mímir the wise. As Hœnir is unable to put his mental powers to any use, however, the Vanir deprive him of them, and send them back in scorn to the Æsir in the form of Mímir's head. The head is thus not precisely a concrete weapon, but it is certainly 'weaponised' in the Vanir–Æsir exchange. It ends up in the well of mead (the site of Mímir's head in *Völuspá*) and is able to dispense its wisdom from there. Here, I suggest, we see the same pattern as Óðinn's sight (his eye) being pledged away and, it seems, placed in this same well, and Heimdallr's hearing or sound also residing under the tree. The tree is the *mjǫtviðr* ('fate tree'), in which the fate of all the gods is bound up, symbolised by having their vital faculties concealed there.

Mímir appears as a transgressively powerful figure: his skills are only made apparent when crossing boundaries. He provides the wherewithal for Hœnir to become a prince among the Vanir when crossing over from the Æsir. When that skill disappears, he again becomes powerful (at least, in the form of his head) in Óðinn's hands after crossing back over that same boundary. *Sigrdrífumál* appears to contrast the victorious warrior Óðinn with the skull of a defeated enemy; Heiðdraupnir has passed over the boundary of death, which yet enables him to utter his wisdom. Óðinn gains news from all worlds from Mímir; the head in the well is at the focal point between worlds, with the world tree's roots reaching down to the realms below and its branches up to those above. Óðinn's consultation with the head at the end of *Völuspá* marks the passage from the old world to the new.

Mímir's head may be irrelevant to the solution of 'Heimdallr's fate (*mjǫtuðr*)' being a head. Yet the points of contact are tantalising. The head, 'weaponised' by the Vanir and sent back to the Æsir, is found in a spring or well, which might be described as 'piercing' the ground in which Yggdrasill grows; as noted earlier, Heimdallr appears to be a hypostatised form of the world tree. The tree is fateful, and fate is expressed not just through the three female characters that emerge from the waters beside it and dispense fates to humans, but also through the utterings of Mímir's head, drawing on all worlds just as the tree itself encompasses all worlds; Mímir's proclamations perhaps match the *ráð* of Heimdallr. Was Mímir's head Heimdallr's *mjǫtuðr* because it acted as a mouthpiece for the *mjǫtviðr* Yggdrasill, which Heimdallr represented in personified form? In the end, these evanescent wisps of mythological lore with their hints of threads between them seem faint, little better than thin air, when we try to grasp them and form them into a coherent picture of what may lie behind the image of Heimdallr and the doleful head.

## Hyndluljóð

*Hyndluljóð*, preserved in the fourteenth-century Flateyjarbók, presents a heated dialogue between Freyja and the giantess Hyndla ('Bitch') concerning the goddess's protégé Óttarr and his genealogy, the establishment of which will lend him greater power (to overcome his rival Angantýr for the kingship, it seems); the goddess calls on Hyndla to provide the necessary genealogical information. The poem's structure is represented by:

- A narrative frame (st. 1–11, 45–50)
- A genealogy (st. 12–28)
- A mythological section mentioning in particular Heimdallr and Loki (st. 29–44)

Heimdallr is not explicitly named – as if the mention of his actual name were tabu; yet his identity is clear, as the subject of the verse is said to be the son of nine mothers, which distinguishes Heimdallr. *Hyndluljóð*'s dependence on *Völuspá* is clear (Cöllen 2015: 181–182),<sup>45</sup> but this does not mean the information it contains does not draw on a wider tradition. The way Heimdallr is presented may reflect how he appeared elsewhere, including in the lost *Heimdallargaldur*, which could, of course, have been a source for the *Hyndluljóð* poet. The relevant stanzas, differing considerably in style and pace from the framework and genealogical verses relating to Óttarr, declare Heimdallr's birth and emphasise his power, and also juxtapose him with Loki, whose monstrous, trans-sexual birth-giving skills are highlighted. We are then given a scene of the ocean rising in the lead-up (it seems) to *ragna røk*, and a further declaration of Heimdallr's power exceeding everything.<sup>46</sup>

Varð einn borinn	One was born
í árdaga	in ancient days,
rammaukinn mjök	great in magic power,
rögna kindar;	of the race of gods;
níu báru þann	nine bore him,
náðgöfgan <sup>47</sup> mann	yielder of protection,

45 In terms of vocabulary, for instance, Hyndla is called by the rare term *íviðja* ('giantess'), which occurs in *Völuspá*; "rögna kindar" is clearly borrowed from the "helgar kindir" of *Völuspá*. The structure of *Hyndluljóð* is also reminiscent of *Völuspá*: a female being is sought out by a deity and asked about past and future, which she responds to, but unwillingly, with her utterances leading up to the end of all things.

46 I omit the refrain, repeated after the first and third stanzas as laid out here: "Mart segjum þér / ok munum fleira, / vörumz at viti svá; viltu enn lengra?" ('We are telling you much and will tell more; we have the knowledge: do you want more?').

47 The manuscript form, "nadbauðgan", is not easily interpreted; *náðgöfgan* (acc.), 'resplendent/generous in protection', is an uncontentious reading, consistent with the image of Heimdallr as a god who guards the divine realm and the welfare of mankind,

jötna meyjar  
við jarðar þróm.

Hann Gjálp um bar,  
hann Greip um bar,  
bar hann Eistla  
ok Eyrgjafa,  
hann bar Úlfrún  
ok Angeyja,  
Imðr ok Atla  
ok Járnsaxa.

Sá var aukinn  
jarðar megni,  
svalköldum sæ  
ok sonardreyra.

Ól úlf Loki  
við Angrboðu,  
en Sleipni gat  
við Svaðilfara;  
eitt þótti skars  
allra feiknast,  
þat var bróður frá  
Býleiszt komit.

Loki át hjarta  
lindi brendu,  
fann hann hálfsviðinn  
hugstein konu;  
varð Loptr kviðugr  
af konu illri;  
þaðan er á foldu  
flagð hvert komit.

Haf gengr hríðum  
við himin sjálfan,  
líðr lqnd yfir,  
en lopt bilar;  
þaðan koma snjóvar  
ok snarir vindar;

giant maidens  
at earth's edge.

Gjálp bore him,  
Greip bore him,  
Eistla bore him  
and Eyrgjafa,  
Úlfrún bore him  
and Angeyja,  
Imðr and Atla  
and Járnsaxa.

He was made mighty  
with the earth's power,  
the cool, fresh sea  
and blood of sacrifice.

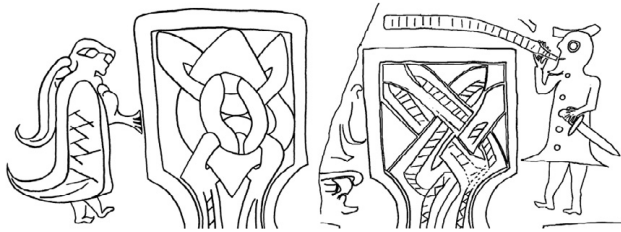
Loki begat the wolf  
on Angrboða,  
and to Sleipnir he gave birth  
with Svaðilfari;  
one monster was thought  
most evil of all,  
one that came  
from Býleistr's brother.

Loki ate the heart,  
cooked on linden;  
he found half-roasted  
a woman's thought-stone;  
Loptr was made pregnant  
by an evil woman;  
from there on earth  
every ogress has come.

The ocean raises storms  
against the very sky,  
passes over the lands  
and the air trembles;  
thence come snow-storms  
and biting winds;

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whose social orders he established. Another reading is *naddgqfgan* (or *naddhqfgan*), with reference to a 'spike' or sword; but there is nothing distinctive in characterising Heimdallr as a gifted warrior.



Detail showing the top part of a rune stone from Jurby, Isle of Man, late tenth century (MM 127). The craftsmanship is crude – little more than rough etching into the stone – and in addition much of the surface decoration has disappeared, in addition to more serious damage: much of one side had disappeared before the earliest depictions, and the top of the stone was damaged in the late nineteenth century (after drawings were taken). The stylistic drawing is therefore based both on the stone as it is now and on earlier depictions of it, but is partially conjectural. Below are given the outlines of the figures as they currently appear on the stone; as well as the man with trumpet, the female figure from the obverse of the stone is shown. Kermode (1994 [1907], no. 99) argues that the figure with a horn is Heimdallr (with Óðinn's raven above), shown here at *ragna røk*, while the female figure, supposedly with a dog-like face, represents Hyndla (this seems considerably more questionable); the cross – the Tree of Life in Christian theology – he interprets as taking the place of Yggdrasill. All the depictions could also be interpreted from a purely Christian perspective, but other carvings indicate that the Isle of Man during the Viking period was a site of considerable religious syncretism, with traditional pagan mythic beings and events being given a Christian interpretation (hence Heimdallr's horn at *ragna røk* might be seen as a depiction of the last trumpet at Doomsday, and the bird as the eagle that announces the last three Doomsday trumpets in the Apocalypse).

þá er í ráði,  
at rogn of þrjóti.

then it is decreed  
for deities to perish.

Varð einn borinn  
öllum meiri,  
sá var aukinn  
jarðar megni;  
þann kveða stilli  
stórauðgastan  
sif sífjaðan  
sjötum giörvöllum.

One was born  
greater than all;  
he was made mighty  
with the earth's power;  
him they call a prince,  
the richest of all,  
related by affinity  
to all families.

*Hyndluljóð*, st. 35–43

Three primary points are made about Heimdallr: his birth from nine mothers, his magical empowerment, his relationship to all households.

The women who give birth to Heimdallr are the daughters of Ægir, god of the sea, and represent the waves; Snorri, in *Skáldskaparmál*, ch. 25, says the sea can be called “fáðir Ægis dœtra” (‘the father of Ægir’s daughters’); in the *Heiðreksgátur* (*Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, ch. 10), the waves are the maidens that go together at their father’s bidding.<sup>48</sup> His birth took place “við jarðar þröm” (‘at the rim of earth’). While this may be intended to evoke a remote, peripheral position at the edge of the world, the primary sense is probably ‘strand’: the rim of earth is where land meets ocean. The event took place *í árdaga* (‘in ancient days’), and Heimdallr is an *aldinn áss* (‘aged god’): the event seems to be primordial, as his birth from the waves emphasises – like the primordial giant Ymir, he is born of the (watery) elements, not of other persons (Cöllén 2015: 148), and without a father, a characteristic that emphasises his originator status as the founder of all dynasties. Cöllén (2015: 148) also compares the origin of Scyld Scefing in *Beowulf*, a baby orphan of unknown parentage or origin, who arrives from the ocean; there appears to have been a distinct motif in Germanic tradition of founding leaders’ origins being from the waters. The passage onto land (‘við jarðar þröm’) marks the start of the princely career and the establishment of social order, both of which are emphasised in the cases of Heimdallr (the *stillir stórauðgast*) and Scyld. It is on the seashore that the first human couple, Askr and Embla, are found as pieces of wood (implicitly derived from

48 Dumézil (1973: 128–130) compares Heimdallr with the Indian Dyaus, who, as the sky, was born of a great aquatic goddess, the last and sole survivor of a series of eight brothers, of whom all, as soon as they were born, vanished before him, drowning at once in the maternal waters. In another version, the final survivor is the ninth born, and is formed from portions of the preceding eight. Allowing for the shift from one mother with eight or nine sons to nine mothers with one son, this may be compared with Heimdallr’s birth from nine sisters, the waves. Dyaus is incarnate as Bhīṣma, the firstborn of his race, and the last to die.

the world tree that bears the same name, *askr Yggdrasills*); it is also along the seashore that, under the name Rígr, Heimdallr strides (in the introductory prose to *Rígsþula*) before procreating the classes of men.

Heimdallr's magical empowerment (indicated in the terms *rammaukinn* and *aukinn megni*) appears to be directly consequent upon his birth. There is nothing to suggest we should see this in any formal sense as an 'initiation' (a notion Cöllén entertains, 2015: 149), though something like a 'baptism' might be an apposite characterisation; Cöllén notes (2015: 170 ff.) an interesting observation by the first-century-AD medic Soranus, in his *Gynaecia* II.6, of the Germanic custom of dipping a new-born child in cold water to harden it. Heimdallr's empowerment took place through the might of earth (*jarðar magn*), the cold sea (*svalkaldr sær*), and blood of sacrifice (*sonardreyri*). A similar phrase occurs in *Guðrúnarkviða II*, st. 21, "þat var um aukit urðar magni, svalköldum sæ ok sonardreyra" ('that was increased in magical force with Urðr's power, the cold sea and blood of sacrifice'). Both are probably variants of a traditional formula, rather than one being borrowed from the other, but there is no means of demonstrating this.

The term *sonardreyri* – which occurs only in this magic formula – is problematic. It is most commonly taken to mean 'blood of swine sacrifice' (as by Cöllén 2015: 135, who rejects other interpretations), but this implies that *sonar*, a rare word for a swine herd, stands for *sonargoltr* (thus *\*sonargaltar dreyri*, 'blood of the herd-boar', i.e. of the leading member of the herd selected for sacrifice). A similar word occurs in *Ynglinga saga*, ch. 18, where it is reported of King Dagr that "gék hann þá til sonarblóts til fréttar" ('he went to sacrifice to get answers' about what had happened to his pet sparrow). The word *sonargoltr* occurs, with explicit reference to the sacrificial boar, in a prose interlude in *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*; the sacrificial boar in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, ch. 10, is called simply *goltr*. The word *sonar* never occurs in a non-sacrificial context as a term for a herd of boar (its sense in other Germanic languages, such as English *sounder*); all instances could, in fact, represent the genitive of *són*, an archaic word for atonement or expiatory sacrifice, which is probably related (or perceived to be related) to *sóa* ('sacrifice') and *Són*, the vessel containing the mead of poetry (see Tolley 2009: I, 439–440), as well as being the basis of the term for Óðinn used by Kormakr Qgmundarson in *Sigurðardrápa* (*Skj* B 1 69; SPSMA III, 272), *haptæenir* (probably 'one who effects atonement for the gods', presumably through sacrificial offerings). The *sónar goltr* would be the boar offered in this expiatory sacrifice, the *sónar blót* a name for the sacrifice itself, and *sónar dreyri* the term for the blood of sacrifice, all of them archaic terms preserved in the context of remnants of pagan worship.

The ‘blood of boar sacrifice’ seems problematic in the case of Heimdallr’s primordial birth; who could be offering up a boar? Taking the term in a less specific sense, and reading *sónar dreyri* as ‘sacrificial blood’, is perhaps better, as pointing simply to Heimdallr’s divinity, defined by being the recipient of sacrificial offerings (without reference to when or how they are made). Heimdallr is thus blessed as a divine being at his birth, the distillation (one might say ‘offering’) of water and earth, the elements from which and onto which he was born.<sup>49</sup> Earth and sea also come together in *Húsdrápa*, st. 2, where the contest between the gods is presented as one that takes place at sea and on a skerry; as Heimdallr has been empowered by these elements, he would have mastery over them in the contest. In *Hyndluljóð*, st. 42, we appear to be presented with a picture of *ragna rök* in which the sea rises up and engulfs the land, a premonition of the victory of the forces of chaos represented by Loki, but this is followed by an invocation of Heimdallr, ‘greater than all’, who was born with the power of sea and earth – he has within him the strength to overcome the rising chaos caused by these elements.

*Hyndluljóð* juxtaposes Heimdallr with Loki, a traditional pairing of opponents (as found in *Húsdrápa* onwards). As Cöllén notes (2015: 212–213), Heimdallr’s progenitive powers are implicitly contrasted with those of Loki, who begat monsters and himself became pregnant, while Heimdallr was the father of mankind in general (he is related to all races, and humans are his offspring in the opening of *Völuspá*).<sup>50</sup> To this it might be added that

49 Cöllén notes that in Norwegian folk traditions, earth was seen as removing evil. The power of earth is found in *Hávamál*, st. 137, “hvars þú ǫl drekkir, kjós þú jarðar megin” (‘when you drink ale, pick the power of earth’), as part of a list of healing substances, here apparently for a hangover. A different interpretation could be envisaged if we read *sónar dreyri* as *Sónar dreyri* (‘blood of Són’); Són was one of the vessels of poetic mead (itself made from the blood of Kvasir): this would then be a kenning meaning ‘mead’ (cf. *Kvasis dreyri*, used by Einarr Skálaglamm for ‘poetry’, cited in Snorri, *Skáldskaparmál*, verse 27). If, moreover, we favour the *Guðrúnarkviða II* reading (the *Hávamál* line, or others mentioning the power of earth, could easily have displaced the presumably more unusual ‘power of Urðr’ in an antecedent of the *Hyndluljóð* lines), then personified fate, Urðr appears. We would then have fate, Urðr, and a cool *sær* (‘sea’ or ‘lake’), alongside mead. In *Völuspá*, the world tree stands above a well of mead, and Urðr (here accompanied by two other female characters personifying different aspects of fate) comes from a *sær* that lies nearby; the tree itself is laved with white earth (*aurr*). Heimdallr, the guardian of social order, is blessed by the elements that were concomitants of that other symbol of cosmic order, the world tree, whose origins *Völuspá* may hint lay with nine giantesses, *íviðjur*, just as Heimdallr’s did. (As both Urðr and white earth are associated with the tree, the parallel with *Hyndluljóð* remains, whether we accept the reading of *jarðar* or see this as having displaced *Urðar*, as found in *Guðrúnarkviða II*.) However, such an overall reading of the magical phrase in *Hyndluljóð* appears strained, not least in that *Sónar dreyri* would be used as a kenning outside a skaldic context.

50 Dronke (1997: comm. *Völuspá*, st. 1/1–2, 3–4) shows that the “helgar kindir, meiri ok minni mögu Heimdallar” (‘the holy offspring, the greater and lesser sons of Heimdallar’) cannot be the gods, but the orders of men; cf. Cöllén’s similar conclusion (2015: 93).

Heimdallr's birth is also 'unnatural', born as he is without a father from not one, but nine mothers, and these virgins to boot. The greatest point of contrast between Heimdallr and Loki may be that whereas Heimdallr was born of giantesses, marking a passage, as with Burr's sons (Snorri, *Gylfaginning*, ch. 6; cf. *Vafþrúðnismál*, st. 28), from gianthood to divinity and order in primordial times, Loki gave birth to giants, signifying a dissolution of the order of godhead into the chaos of gianthood and its victory at *ragna røk*. In this context, the theft of the Brisingamen may be interpreted as marking the loss of the gods' powers of 'normal' procreation (and consequent social order), and hence an empowerment of the monstrous and perverted progeniture of the giants, exemplified by Loki.

The mythological sections of *Hyndluljóð* have much that suggests a connection with charms. Cöllen, regarding *Hyndluljóð* as a well-crafted and coherent composition that has probably not directly used earlier sources in the form of citations (Cöllen 2015: ch. 6, esp. 183–184),<sup>51</sup> is forced to see the whole mythological section as essentially genealogical (the theme of the poem as a whole). Yet the verses, or rather those that deal with the 'genealogical' motif at all, are not focused on genealogy, which implies an explicit link to a named individual, but rather on *origins* – and more specifically the beginnings of magical power, and of the practitioners of these powers. These include Loki and Heimdallr, but also, in stanza 33, we are told explicitly of the origins of four classes of magician: *vǫlur* ('seeresses'), *vitkar* ('wizards'), *seiðberendr* ('practitioners of *seiðr*'), and *jötnar*, 'giants' (who were renowned magicians), originating respectively from Viðólftr, Vilmeiðr, Svarthöfði, and Ymir.<sup>52</sup> Origins

51 Cöllen (2015: 178): "Es gibt aber gute Gründe zu glauben, dass die *Hyndluljóð* nicht erst nach der *Snorra-Edda*, etwa im Kontext der *Flateyjarbók* aus zwei ursprünglich selbständigen Liedern kompiliert, sondern dass sie also eine sinnvolle Einheit gedichtet wurden" ("There are good grounds for believing that *Hyndluljóð* was not first compiled post-*Snorra-Edda* from two originally independent poems, for example in the context of *Flateyjarbók*, but rather that it was composed as a meaningful unit").

52 Stanza 33 is cited by Snorri as coming from a poem he calls *Vǫluspá in skamma* ('the short *Vǫluspá*'). The title has often been applied to the entire mythological section of *Hyndluljóð*, regarded as a separate poem incorporated into the larger structure. The section does not, however, form a cohesive whole that could have stood as a separate poem, and there is little justification for assuming it ever did. The stanza cited by Snorri is itself distinct from its context (it is preceded by a couple of genealogical stanzas relating to gods, giants and heroes, and followed by the Heimdallr stanzas cited above), focusing specifically and explicitly on the origins of magical practitioners; it is quite possible this is the only extant stanza of *Vǫluspá in skamma*, incorporated into *Hyndluljóð* along with various other fragments of verse of diverse origin (see the introduction §4 to the poem in von See et al. 1997–2019); equally, *Vǫluspá in skamma* could simply be the title Snorri knew *Hyndluljóð* by. The overall poem certainly had a specific purpose, the demonstration of Óttarr's regal superiority through genealogical prowess (Cöllen 2015: 192–197), which may be discerned in the framework and genealogical sections above all, but the mythological section reads much more as a cobbled-together collection of verses which happen to mention origins (the overall point of the poem, in genealogical

constitute a theme of many charms across many traditions, as might be evidenced for example by the many charms in Finnish-Karelian tradition with *synty* ('birth, origin') in their title; the purpose is to give the charm practitioner power over something by demonstrating knowledge of its origin.<sup>53</sup>

As a giantess endowed with special powers – the reason Freyja visits her, as Óðinn had visited the *völva* of *Völuspá* – Hyndla reels off verses which give the origins of these powers she holds, and this acts as a guarantee of the value of the information she is giving. Hyndla is thus *invoking* these powers: she is using the verses as charms. The invocation of Heimdallr, who is *sif sifjaðr* ('related by affinity') to all households, is a declaration of Hyndla's power over what Heimdallr was master of, the establishment and maintenance of social order, realised in this instance through the establishment of the correct regal genealogy of Óttarr.<sup>54</sup> The affirmation of a magical practitioner's power through invocations or charms of origins invariably relies on their use of traditional formulae, or formulae extemporised on the basis of a clearly understood tradition; it therefore seems most likely that the origins stanzas are indeed citations or adaptations of previously existing compositions associated with invocation, put to a purpose specific in *Hyndluþjóð*, and adapted to the overall genealogical theme of the poem.

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terms), and present Heimdallr (along with his opponent, Loki), as he is the god related to all families, the divine establisher of genealogical lines.

- 53 Origins, in the sense of the first appearances of things in the cosmos (as opposed to primordial exemplar events or more immediate causes of something that a charm seeks to alleviate or deal with), appear to be rare within charm traditions across the world. The Norse focus on cosmogonic origins (alongside endings, i.e. eschatology) might be viewed as paralleling the exceptional interest in origins found in the North Finnic tradition; this topic calls for further research (I thank Frog for offering these observations).
- 54 The evocation of *ragna røk* in the middle of the section may perhaps be intended as a declaration by Hyndla that her side, the giants, are nonetheless going to win in the end. Cöllen (2015: 209) sees a further reference to *ragna røk* at the beginning of the poem, when Freyja declares "nú er røkr røkra" ('now is the twilight of twilights'), but this can only be interpreted eschatologically if we take the *Hyndluþjóð* poet to have been influenced by Snorri, who is alone in talking of the 'twilight' (*røkr*) of the gods, rather than their 'fate' (*røk*, which probably means '[culmination of] a course of events'). The eschatological references are otherwise all Hyndla's, and are part of her emphasis on the origins of all from giants, and their final victory: Baldr's father (Óðinn) was the son of the giant Burr; Freyr's spouse was the giantess Gerðr; Skaði was daughter of the giant Þjazi; Loki, the destructive force among the gods, was half-giant. Even Heimdallr, guardian of the gods' order, was the son of nine women with giantess names. Only one, whom Hyndla refrains from naming, is greater than Heimdallr, and he will come at the very end of the world; the implication, for a Christian audience, is that this is Christ, but by keeping his identity unclear, from the giantess's point of view this may be some giant, such as Surtr, who will achieve final victory for the forces of chaos.

## Section Conclusion: Heimdallr as a Fitting Charm Subject

Heimdallr's special powers, such as would make him the suitable protagonist of a charm, are, then, highlighted in several sources: in *Rígsþula* he is *kunnigr* ('sagacious') and knows runes (and hence wisdom); he gives *ráð* ('counsel'), and is *ráðgegninn* ('provided with counsel') in *Húsdrápa*; he changes into seal form in *Húsdrápa* (according to Snorri), implying magical shape-shifting ability; in *Þrymskviða* he "vissi vel fram" ('had good foreknowledge'); in *Rígsþula* he is *rammr* ('powerful'), and in *Hyndluljóð* he is *rammaukinn* ('magically empowered') (the traits are pointed out by Cöllen 2015: 96–100). He moreover has a surprisingly good presence in charms.

Apart from *Heimdallargaldr* itself, of all preserved eddic poems, that which comes closest to presenting an actual charm in action is *Skírnismál*; moreover, in the central passage where Skírnir achieves his aims of securing Gerðr's acquiescence in Freyr's proposal through the power of his words, he threatens Gerðr with the prospect of being as well known as the watchman of the gods – Heimdallr, sat at the edge of heaven, looking out for giants attacking the realm of the gods. Heimdallr may be the 'hoard-sacker' (*Hoddrofnir*) of the charm in *Sigrdrífumál*. The long passage concerning Heimdallr in *Hyndluljóð* appears to be part of an invocation by the magician giantess Hyndla to establish the genealogy of her client Freyja's protégé, Óttarr.

Moreover, Heimdallr has recently turned up in a runic charm, or perhaps more accurately a prayer, from around 1000, found in Lincolnshire; the runes are carved on a spindlewhorl:

Side: þeir oþen ok einmtalr ok þalfa

Face: þeruolftok kiriuesfialba

LIN-D92A22

Þeir Óðinn ok Heimdallr ok Þjalfi þér Úlfjót ok Geir-... hjalpa.

May Óðinn and Heimdallr and Þjalfi, may Úlfjót(r) and Geir- help you.

Of the names, Úlfjót(r)<sup>55</sup> and Geir- are unknown, and probably topical to the carver; Óðinn is presumably invoked as head of the gods; "Þalfa" (if this is what þalfa stands for) is again ostensibly feminine, but may stand for masculine Þjalfi (acc. Þjalfa; cf. also Old English forms of the same declension ending in *-a* in the nominative), who is known only from the story of Þórr's journey to the giant Útgardaloki as a stupendously fast runner (but not fast enough to outrun thought in a race) (Snorri, *Gylfaginning*, ch. 46–47). He

55 The ostensibly feminine form may have omitted a masculine *-r*, or represent a masc. acc. Úlfjót may perhaps be the female owner of the spindlewhorl, but as it stands appears to be someone, whether female or male, invoked to help rather than the recipient of help.

may possibly be invoked here to assist in speeding the spindlewhorl's spin. The reason for Heimdallr's invocation is far from clear. If he had by this time become associated with sheep, as discussed above, he could act as a guardian of the wool used to spin yarn, using the spindlewhorl in question; however, he might also be seen as a guardian of this object which women used to control their production of yarn because of his salvation of the Brisingamen, the object which encapsulated the goddess Freyja's special powers.

Heimdallr is therefore invoked by women, as in the spindlewhorl prayer and in *Hyndluljóð* (which outdoes *Völuspá* in its feminine orientation by having both protagonist and antagonist female), or in a feminine sphere, as when he is mentioned by Skírnir in his threat against a recalcitrant bride; the myth of the Brisingamen, of course, concerns the theft of a goddess's necklace. The god's association with women is even parodied in *Þrymskviða*, where he takes on the role of dressing up Þórr as a woman. This context of invocation or reference perhaps suggests that *Heimdallargaldr* related to a field of activity of particular concern to women.

Heimdallr may, on the basis of the discussion so far, be characterised as:

- Establisher and protector of social order, as manifested in the settled orders/classes of society
- Guardian of progeny (and birth), as this propagates social order
- Guardian of the boundary and defender of the realm of the gods, as the realisation of the realm where social order operates (as opposed to that of giants), and opponent of Loki, who seeks to dissolve this order, for example by giving goddesses to giants or stealing their most precious attributes
- A personified form of the world tree: this represents cosmic structure and hence the order of the societies that live in it
- Possibly, in his birth, a hypostasis of the earth itself born from the ocean
- A guardian spirit, *vörðr*, of the homestead of the world

As *Heimdallargaldr* was definitely concerned with birth – Heimdallr's own – it would seem likely that this was the core focus of the charm. Heimdallr's birth from the waves may then be seen as representing birth in general out of the waters of the womb; possibly the nine waves may also have suggested nine months. His birth would therefore be the archetypal birth which could act as a *historiola* in a charm for childbirth, particularly if, as suggested, it was a mirroring of the birth of the world itself, and, more directly, a prefiguration of the origin of mankind on the shore (as *Völuspá* indicates); Heimdallr's progenerative powers are also highlighted at the outset of *Völuspá* in its address to mankind as the 'greater and lesser sons of Heimdallr' (which also emphasises his role in overseeing the establishment of different classes of men, as in *Rígsþula*).

## II. The Charm Context

The analysis of *Heimdallargaldr* as a charm would be facilitated by further examples of charms in Old Norse. Unfortunately, we do not have any examples from this period of actual working charms containing the panoply of ritual actions and conjuration, along with expression in broadly *galdr*lag verse.<sup>56</sup> Yet we do have some mentions of charms and their purposes, and some passages in eddic poems make use of charm techniques. There are, indeed, plenty of charms recorded later from mainland Scandinavia, particularly from the sixteenth century on, after the demise of the alliterative metre of Old Norse (and wider Germanic) verse. These later charms differ in many respects in their modes of expression from the charms we do have from the wider Germanic world of the early-medieval period, from England and Germany. These give some idea of what charms may have been like in the earlier period in the Germanic, alliterative-verse world, but of course do not tell us specifically about Scandinavian forms (and in the main, with a few exceptions, do not relate to the traditional Germanic pantheon). The charms of neighbouring cultures may also be enlightening; in particular, a rich array of charms has been recorded among the Norsemen's neighbours the Finns and Karelians. These are recorded much later, largely in the nineteenth century, but are often archaic in form, preserved in often remote and conservative areas. I will first, however, look into the issue of 'charm metre', before moving on to consider these other traditions.

### *Galdr*lag ('Charm Metre')

The title *Heimdallargaldr* explicitly identifies the poem as a *galdr* or charm. *Galdr* derives from *gala* ('to chant'),<sup>57</sup> a word which is used both of animals such as crows,<sup>58</sup> and to indicate chanting in the sense of casting a

56 We do have some brief texts, particularly runic, from the early medieval period onwards that may to varying degrees be regarded as charms; the Heimdallr spindlewhorl discussed above is one such example (see Mitchell in this volume for a few further examples). More generally, see McKinnell, Simek & Düwel 2004 for runic magical inscriptions.

57 Lindquist (1923: 5) suggests *gala* was distinguished from plain 'singing' in being falsetto, and compares the Sámi oiking, used in magical contexts. The heightened rhetorical delivery of charms often results in a raised pitch (not necessarily falsetto). Consideration of falsetto is self-evidently relevant only to male chanters.

58 In eddic verse, *gala* is used of animals at *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, st. 6, *Hávamál*, st. 85, *Völuspá*, st. 42, 43, *Baldur's draumar*, st. 3.

spell.<sup>59</sup> *Galdr* is cognate with Old English *gealdor*, a word which is regularly used to describe charms, including within their texts.<sup>60</sup> A charm could well include non-verbal ritual elements (notably those described in *Sigrdrífumál*),<sup>61</sup> but clearly *galdr* referred primarily to the spoken or sung aspect. Other words, such as *ljóð*, were also used with apparently identical meaning (as in *Hávamál*).

But in what sense was *Heimdallargaldr* a *galdr*? Was it called this:

1. Simply because it contained passages, including the extant line, in charm-metre, *galdralag*? (Or, as a variant of this, because its recitation method resembled that of a charm.)<sup>62</sup>
2. Because Heimdallr utters a *galdr* (including the extant line)?
3. Because it could be used as a practical charm?

Let us start with charm metre, *galdralag*. A full analysis of the metrical and other characteristics of *galdralag* would need a study to itself; the following remarks are intended to outline a few peculiarities and difficulties that are nonetheless pertinent to the topic of *Heimdallargaldr* as a charm, and no more than this.

The term *galdralag* is Snorri's; the first point to emphasise is that its very existence as a discrete metrical form, outside the schematisation of poetic metres that concerns Snorri in *Háttatal*, is open to question. No other instance of poetry that precisely matches Snorri's example exists in either Norse or other Germanic languages, though there are many passages that match it in part; the only reasonable approach to establishing some parameters for material suitable for consideration is that adopted by Ivar Lindquist in his study from 1923; he viewed anything approximating to any one of the three sections of Snorri's example as worthy of consideration as some form of *galdralag* (on this, see also Roper 2011: 119–120). Such examples do at least invoke

59 As found in *Odrúnargrátr*, st. 7, *Sigrdrífumál*, st. 5, *Hávamál*, st. 120, 152, *Balds draumar*, st. 3, 4. For a fuller presentation of instances of *gala* and derivatives, see Lindquist (1923: ch. 1).

60 For example, “wið wæterælfadle”, “wið dweorh”, and the Nine Herbs Charm (Storms 1948, nos. 5, 7, 9) refer to themselves as *gealdor*.

61 *English Dialect Dictionary* (sb 1) defines charm as “an action, sentence, or material thing supposed to possess the power of curing disease or preserving from evil”. Roper (2005: 15) notes that a verbal charm is distinguished as the verbal part of what may be a wider performance, which may not include words at all (non-verbal charm). There are both oral and written verbal charms (e.g. as used in amulets). On the verbal charm as iconic of a full ritual, see Frog 2019.

62 Titles of Norse poems largely fall into a few groups, with the poem being designated *mál* (‘speech, sayings’), *kviða* (‘saying, declamation’), *ljóð* (‘song’), or *grátr* (‘lament’); *galdr* could form another category. The different designations could conceivably relate to modes of recitation, though we have no information on this. Whether the titles are contemporaneous with the extant texts of the poems is also uncertain.

various rhetorical devices (indicated below) in a more concentrated form than 'average' verse, even if it may be doubted these add up to any systematic verse form as such, in the way Snorri categorised the form.

Snorri's own example of what he means by *galdralag* is notably a purely metrical exercise, with no magical purpose whatsoever; it is found at the end of *Háttatal*.<sup>63</sup>

Sóttak fremð,	I sought honour,
sóttak fund konungs,	I sought meeting with a king,
sóttak ítran jarl,	I sought a splendid earl
þá's ek reist,	when I cut,
þá's ek renna gat	when I was able to make run
kaldan straum kili,	cold current with the keel,
kaldan sjá kili.	cold sea with the keel.

*Háttatal*, st. 101; Faulkes's translation

I sought honour, I sought meeting with a king, I sought a splendid earl when I cut cold current with keel, when I was able to make keel run over the cold sea.

While the most basic form of Germanic metre, known in Norse as *fornyrðislag*, is defined very largely by adherence to just one set of principles, namely the distribution of stressed words across two half-lines linked by alliteration (alongside a less easily defined attention to the distribution of unstressed syllables), it is immediately clear that *galdralag* involves or may potentially involve multiple sets of principles, working on different levels, including (but not limited to):

- PHONEMIC/PHONEMIC-CLUSTER LEVEL:
  - alliteration
  - assonance (repetition of vowels between words) or consonance (repetition of consonants between words)
  - rhyme (including or excluding stressed syllables)
- LEXICAL LEVEL:
  - anaphora (repetition of the beginnings of lines)
  - epiphora (repetition of the endings of lines)
  - symploce (repetition of the beginnings and endings of lines)
  - antimetabole (a form of chiasmic expression: 'I eat what I like, and I like what I eat', for example)
- SEMANTIC LEVEL:
  - interplay of synonyms and antonyms

63 The text is based on the edition of Faulkes but elisions are closed ("sottak" for "sotta ek" etc.); the translation is adapted from that of Faulkes.

- SYNTACTIC LEVEL:
  - marked phrasing, for example fronted and stressed verbs (which are generally not stressed or placed at phrase onsets in normal diction).

Snorri's stanza has three sets of anaphoric lines, the first anaphora being triple ("sóttak"), the succeeding one double ("þá's ek"), and the last, also double, being also symploce ("kaldan ... kili"). The first anaphora is also syntactically marked, with initial verb. The first anaphoric group contains a dual semantic structure consisting of a single item ("fremð") balanced against a dual-item synonymic pair ("konungs" and "ítran jarl"); it therefore contains a triplicity within the duality. The two parts of the dual structure are united by the alliteration on "fremð" and "fund", the latter word therefore forming the pivot of the section, and the focus of the marked verb, *sóttak*: hence a further dual semantic structure exists between the first-person subject along with his action (seeking out) and the object (the meeting with the king, which brings honour). Yet another contrast exists between the two synonyms, "konungs" and "ítran jarl", in that the latter presents a self-contained alliteration (moreover, a vocalic one, in contrast to all the others in the stanza), without linking alliteratively to any other word in the stanza (while "konungs" alliterates with "kaldan ... kili" of the last group, which is also linked to the first anaphoric group through alliteration between the non-symplocic element "straum ... sjá" and "sóttak"); hence the 'splendid earl' is also made to stand out.

The second anaphoric group again contains a dual structure of subject (again, 'I') and action (voyaging), the latter being realised in two alliterating synonyms (*reist* and *renna gat*). This central anaphoric group acts as a bridge between the two framing groups, being linked to the first as a temporal qualifier ("þá") and to the last as this is the grammatical object of the whole second group; hence, within the overall triple anaphoric structure, there is a dual structure marked by the two verbs, "sóttak" and the synonymous pair "reist" and "renna gat".

The last anaphoric group is marked out in that it is also symploce, with just the central word framed by the symploce being varied: and this word presents a pair of alliterating synonyms ("straum" and "sjá"), which also alliterate with the marked anaphora of the opening ("sóttak"). The first and second anaphoric groups contrast their first with their second lines in length, ending respectively with one and two words, so the first two anaphoric groups contrast with the last, where both lines are identical in count of syllables and differ from the earlier groups.

The many-layered interweaving of these structural elements in Snorri's stanza may be represented thus:



## B

*Double.* **ek – reist, renna gat** (subject ‘I’ — verb ‘voyage’ in two synonyms)

*Pivot.* whole of B, links to A through adverb **þá**, to C as governing object

## AB

*Double.* **sóttak – reist, renna gat** (A and B each verbal; C nominal)

## C

*Double.* **straum – sjá** (synonyms)

## SYNTACTIC AND OTHER MARKING

*Marked.* **sóttak** (verb stressed and self-alliterating in anaphora)

**reist – renna** (verbs stressed and alliterating, though not syntactically marked)

There can be no doubt, I think, that all this was intentional on Snorri’s part – but he appears to be applying the sort of complex interplay, where every feature is significant, that characterises (some) skaldic verse to a verse form that, if it really was used in charms, must have been employed chiefly by incantation practitioners who cannot have been skilled in skaldic methods; unsurprisingly, no other comparable example of what might be viewed as *galdralag* comes close to Snorri’s efforts in these respects. Nonetheless, it is notable that much of the apparatus of Snorri’s verse is rhetorical rather than metrical: it presents an interweaving of synonyms and contrasts, and of triplicities and dualities, working on several levels (alliterative, semantic, and so forth). Jonathan Roper (2011: 120) supports the observation of Ferdinand Ohrt (1923; 1938) in his response to Lindquist’s monograph, *Galdrar*, that *galdrar* are distinguished not so much by the technicalities of metrical form as by principles of magical formulae, which are marked out in many traditions by threefold repetition, rhetorical reiteration, repetition with variation of one element, and so forth.

Metrically, Snorri’s example is essentially a form of *ljóðahátt*, with an additional line added at the end (*ljóðahátt* is basically two half-lines of *fornyrðislag*, followed by a single, longer line, with three instead of two stresses; this pattern is then repeated); the additional line, however, alters the pattern to one of 3 + 2 + 2 (counting half-lines and extended three-stress lines as units), in so far as the last two lines are repetitious and balance each other, and in that the anaphora is triple–double–double. Faulkes (*Háttatal*, comm. to st. 101) argues that a distinguishing feature of *galdralag* is the seventh line, acting as a reinforcing repetition or echo of the sixth line, but Roper (2011: 118) opines rather that the distinguishing feature is the seven-line structure (unique among the different verse types in *Háttatal*). Other examples of what are viewed as *galdralag*, however, such as *Skírnismál* (see below), do not adhere closely to

Snorri's structure, and do not suggest that *galdralag* need have been strictly *ljóðaháttir* in its metrical form – a series of lines of *fornyrðislag*, culminating in one or several three-stress extended lines is a possible, looser structure. Snorri may well have presented what he regarded as an idealised form of *galdralag*, and made it conform closely to *ljóðaháttir*; after all, a *ljóð* ('song') could sometimes be specifically a *galdr* 'charm', so making *galdralag* a refined form of *ljóðaháttir* metrically speaking, to mirror the links in the connotations of the terms for the verse types, may well have appealed to Snorri.

Roper, focusing on metrical charms in Old English, makes several significant observations (2011). The alliterative pattern is almost always irregular, with alliteration occurring for example on the fourth stressed syllable of a line (pair of half-lines), or occurring between lines and not necessarily on the main alliterating syllables. There is little enjambment, with sense units largely corresponding to metrical units, unlike in non-charm verse, but there is also little sign of caesura (the break between half-lines). Roper also notes that units of two short plus one long line are commonplace in many traditions, and tend to mark the ends of sections (but do not act as culminations to whole texts).

No poem exists entirely in *galdralag*, such as we might imagine from Snorri's example, and it is unlikely that one ever did: examples occur within other verse, and contrast with it at moments of heightened tension – a *galdralag* passage is a nugget of poetic power. The fact that, where passages of verse similar to Snorri's example occur, they never match it exactly in metrical or other terms caused difficulties for Lindquist in his long study on *galdrar*. He suggested that there was a general charm metre, and a more specific *galdralag* which developed out of it (1923: 12). More likely is that Snorri merely formalised what was actually a somewhat variable form of metrical marking, characterised by formulaic-type repetition and strong alliteration, and perhaps (in some forms) marked by a terse pair of extended lines that acted as a resolution.

A notable and powerful instance of *galdralag* occurs in *Skírnismál*, in Freyr's servant Skírnir's curse against the giant maid Gerðr:

Heyri jötvar,  
heyri hrímþursar,  
synir Suttunga,  
sjálfir áslíðar –  
hvé ek fyrirbýð,  
hvé ek fyrirbanna  
manna glaum mani,  
manna nyt mani!

Let giants hear,  
let frost ogres hear,  
the sons of the Suttungar,  
and the hosts of *æsir*,  
how I forbid,  
how I forban  
joy of men to the maid,  
use of men to the maid.

*Skírnismál*, st. 34

This shows dual anaphora on the opening, which uses marked verbs in first position, much like Snorri's example, but there is surely greater rhetorical force in the hortative *heyri*, appealing to giants, beings renowned for their magical powers. The giants are invoked three times in synonyms ("jǫtnar ... hrímpursar ... synir Suttungs"), the first two contrasting with the third in that the last is a phrasal expression; the giants are contrasted with the forces of the gods (*ásliðar*). The second anaphoric group ("hvé ek"), where the anaphora is again marked through the stress on an adverb (*hvé*), shifts the subject to 'I', the performer of the spell, and the two half-lines are linked through alliteration on both stressed ("býð ... -banna") and unstressed ("fyrir-") syllables, the latter being also arguably part of the opening anaphora within the lines. Alliteration occurs, be it noted, on the fourth stress of the half-line pair, contrary to the norms of *fornyrðislag*. This second anaphoric group is linked to the third by chiasmic rhyme ("X banna – manna X"), and also through the third group being the object of the second, as in Snorri's example.

The stanza is in *fornyrðislag*, but the last anaphoric group is arguably in the extended lines of *ljóðaháttir* – though it could be argued that "glaum" and "nyt" are unstressed, or alternatively that "mani" is unstressed, so that the lines remain *fornyrðislag*. In any case, they follow the same pattern as the concluding anaphoric group of Snorri's example, with a powerful conjunction of three nouns in each line, with the line-pair being not just anaphoric, but showing symploce. As with Snorri's example, the nouns framed by the symploce are synonyms, though they do not alliterate here; on the other hand, unlike in Snorri's example, the two halves of the symploce may represent a semantic opposition between men and the girl (though, given that *maðr* means 'person' rather than 'male', it is more probable that the contrast is between the general joy of society along with marriage and the isolation with which Skirnir is threatening Gerðr).

Some passages that share features with *galdralag* may be found in Scandinavian runic inscriptions. I mention just one here, the Stentoften stone from southern Sweden, probably of the seventh century (DR 357). The text, as is commonly the case with runic inscriptions, is somewhat obscure, but appears to read:<sup>64</sup>

64 I arrange the lines in quasi-verse form to ease comparison with other charm texts quoted. The more precise reading of the runes is as follows: "AP <niuha>borumz <niuha>gestumz Hapuwulfz gaf j[lar], Hariwulfz . . . . haidiz runono, felh eka hedra | AQ niu habrumz, niu hangistumz Hapuwulfz gaf j[lar], Hariwulfz . . . . haidiz runono, felh eka hedra | B ginnurunoz. | C hermalausaz argiu, weladaups, sa þat | D briutip". The inscription is discussed in Lindquist (1923: ch. 9).

Niuhaborumr,	To the new dwellers,
niuhestumr	to the new settlers
Haðuwulfr gaf jar,	Haðuwulfr has given a good year,
Hariwulfr gaf jar.	Hariwulfr has given a good year.
Hið er rünō rünü.	Here is a secret of secrets (rune of runes).
Falah eka heðera	I have hidden here
ginnōr rünōr,	powerful runes,
harmlausar argiu.	unscathed by <i>ergi</i> . <sup>65</sup>
Wela dauþr	Completely dead,
sa þat briutiþ.	whoever smashes it.

DR 357

Metrically, this appears to be *fornyrðislag*, but it lacks systematic alliteration. Anaphora occurs in the first two lines, and epiphora in the second two, but both sets of lines additionally have a weak form of symploce (“niuha – umr” and “ha – gaf jar”). The fifth line arguably has three stresses, like an extended line of *ljóðaháttur*, functioning as a concluding line to that section of the proclamation; the eighth line could possibly be viewed similarly by emphasising the secondary stress on “laus”. The passage culminates in a couple of half-lines with the usual two stresses each. This is consistent with Roper’s observation that the extended lines mark section conclusions, but not culminations of whole spells.

Passages reminiscent of *galdralag* are found in other Germanic traditions in charm contexts. For example, lines 2–3 of the Old High German First Merseburg Charm, arranged in half-lines to match the Norse examples, read:

Suma hapt heptidun,	Some fastened fetters,
suma heri lezidun,	some hindered the army,
suma clubodun	some undid the bonds
umbi cuonio uuidi.	from the brave man.

This clearly has threefold anaphora (arguably on a marked word, *suma*, though how much weight the word is intended to bear is unclear), but the first two lines have some form of symploce, in that the final words have weak rhyme (on unstressed syllables) and full assonance; the words framed by the symploce (*hapt, heri*) alliterate. The third anaphoric line differs, but still has partial rhyme with the first two lines; it alliterates with the following line

65 I have discussed the complex topic of *ergi* elsewhere (Tolley 2009: 1, 155–164). The essential quality that seems to be of concern here is effeminate weakness, which might undermine the power of the invocation, particularly as *ergi* was something that was associated with the form of magic known as *seiðr* – the mention of *ergi* here may therefore be apotropaic, an act of counter-magic.

(*clubodun – cuonio*). There is a balance between the ‘some’ (supernatural beings) and the brave man, and also within the actions of these ‘some’, since they appear both to impose bonds in the first two lines, then free them in the third. Again, we primarily see rhetorical balances and contrasts, which are affirmed through phonic means such as alliteration and rhyme, rather than any discrete metrical form. The rhetorical power is surely enhanced through the extreme succinctness of expression.

The Second Merseberg Charm reads:

Phol ende uuodan	Fol and Wodan
uuorun zi holza.	were riding to the woods,
du uuart demo balderes	and the foot of the lord [Fol]’s
uolon sin uuoz birenkit.	foal was sprained
thu biguol en sinthgunt,	So Sinthgunt conjured it,
sunna era suister;	Sunna’s sister.
thu biguol en friia,	and Frija conjured it,
uolla era suister;	Volla’s sister.
thu biguol en uuodan,	and Wodan conjured it,
so he uuola conda:	as well he could:
sose benrenki,	like bone-sprain,
sose bluotrenki,	so blood-sprain,
sose lidirenki:	so joint-sprain:
ben zi bena,	bone to bone,
bluot zi bluoda,	blood to blood,
lid zi geliden,	joints to joints,
sose gelimida sin.	so may they be glued.

Leaving aside the introductory two lines, we have triple anaphora of *thu biguol* on the half-line pairs, along with double epiphora of *era suister* (this could not be used a third time as the subject is male). Then there is triple anaphora of *sose* on half-lines along with epiphora of *renki*, i.e. symploce, with the framed words alliterating in the first two (*ben* and *bluot*). The next two half-lines display total alliteration on *b*, and are linked to the next half-line both semantically (bone, blood, joints) and formally (*X zi Y*). The last half-line is linked to the previous line through alliteration (and assonance on the stressed syllables), and to the triple *sose* anaphora through repetition of *sose*. Thus, some of the same rhetorical devices are employed as in other charm examples, but there is no parity of metrical or rhetorical elements in any formal sense.

The First Metrical Charm in Old English has the following (again arranged in half-lines to match the Norse examples):

Eastward ic stande,	Eastward I stand,
arena ic me bidde,	favours I entreat.

bidde ic þone mæran domine,	I entreat the glorious Lord,
bidde ðone miclan drihten,	I entreat the great Lord,
bidde ic ðone haligan	I entreat the holy
heofonrices weard,	guardian of heaven,
eorðan ic bidde	Earth I entreat
and upheofon	and heaven above
and ða soþan	and the steadfast,
sancta Marian	saintly Mary
and heofones meaht	and heaven's might
and heahreced	and high hall.

This has triple anaphora on *bidde*, but this is led into by a chiasma, also on *bidde* (“ic me bidde – bidde ic”), and a further displaced chiasma between “bidde ic ðone haligan” and “eorðan ic bidde”. Although the piece is in typical alliterative metre (the equivalent of *fornyrðislag*), the third and fourth lines arguably have three stresses, resembling the extended lines of *ljóðaháttir*. There is some semblance of a triple structure in the anaphora on *bidde* and the verb's three immediate objects (the glorious Lord, the great Lord, the holy guardian of heaven); the second group, Earth, heaven, and Mary, is supplemented by heaven's might and the high hall, rather spoiling the rhetorical effect of a simple triplicity. Thus, while there is some resemblance to examples of charms (or imitations of them) from elsewhere, the structure is much weaker.

This brief survey of a few examples of charms or charm evocations illustrates that verse charms in the Germanic world essentially followed the basic alliterative metre, but, as Roper (2011) notes, departed from it in essentials such as the distribution of alliteration, and the coincidence of metrical and syntactic units. All of the examples display widespread use of rhetorical devices such as anaphora and semantic correspondences and contrasts, with an interplay of dual and triple structures being common, but none of this amounts to a set of formal characteristics as part of a metrical structure.

The most significant point about the use of ‘charm meter’, then, is not its precise metrical form, but that it demonstrates a faith in the power of specially arranged words to achieve some physical or mental effect. In formal terms, the lines of *Heimdallargaldr* that Snorri cites appear to be a pair of *ljóðaháttir* extended lines with three stresses; hence they form a parallel to the concluding lines of Snorri's example, though the structure is a little different: they show anaphora (“nú em ek”) and semantic, but not lexical, symploce (“Of nine mothers/sisters I am the son”, son being represented by two synonyms in Norse, *sonr* and *mōgr*), and, although alliteration occurs in the repetition of “nú” (if anaphora can be said to alliterate), the second alliteration occurs within each of the extended line (“mæðr mōgr” and “systra sonr”), not

across lines – though we cannot know how the extant passage related to surrounding verses. As noted, such double extended lines appear to have marked out the endings of sections (not of whole texts) in charm-like contexts, so it is likely that Heimdallr's statement was a culminating proclamation of a 'stanza' of *Heimdallargaldr*, but more was to follow.

## The *Historiola* Principle

It is thus reasonable to conclude that *Heimdallargaldr* was either an actual charm, intended to bring about a magical effect, or was a poem which evoked the characteristics of a charm without having any practical magical purpose itself. Heimdallr's utterance, as part of a charm, either uses or evokes the *historiola* principle, whereby an event is recounted as taking place in a pseudo-historical setting within a short narrative, which illustrates the desired effect of the charm, such as healing, taking place; this is repeated in order to achieve the same effect in the present when spoken by the charm practitioner. It is found, for instance, in the Old High German Second Merseburg Charm, where Wodan and other gods heal the lame horse of one of their group, but it is commonplace too in other charm traditions (at least in Europe).

A useful summary survey of the characteristics of the *historiola* is that of David Frankfurter (1995). Magical power derives from the enunciation of the *historiola*, which may identify the charm practitioner with the subject of the *historiola*; the *historiola* establishes precedent or paradigm. Thus the practitioner may enter the narrative, identifying himself as a god: the boundaries between human existence and the mythic world are collapsed. The *historiola* may itself contain an account of the first ritual usage of a specific incantation within it, which the ritualist then makes use of. The *historiola* may also account for some substance used in the ritual. A link may be made with the details of the specific problem to be solved; for example, the lance that pierced Jesus is identified with the sharp object in a patient's eye. A link may be made by mentioning the patient within the narrative of the *historiola*, for example with a patient's breasts being identified as those of the goddess Isis. The *historiola* narrative is not primarily merely a fragment of a pre-existing myth; rather, the event recounted is situated in a familiar mythic world but may itself be a narrative innovation of the charm itself.<sup>66</sup> Frankfurter notes:

66 This point is important for attempts to reconstruct pre-Christian myth or ritual practice from the occasional appearance of traditional pagan gods such as Woden in charms. Essentially, the charmer appeals to the power of whatever divine/primordial magnates were held in esteem in the culture in which he or she works, and lends authority to the *historiola* by ascribing it to one of these magnates. When the magnates change, so do the names in the ascriptions of power in the charms; the charm itself, and how it

*historiolae* are deliberate acts of *blending* that tradition – the symbols and motifs that constitute local authority and power – with both ‘the specific human circumstances’ and broader, more abstracts concepts of power, cosmology, transformation, and identity. Indeed, they represent a hypostatization, a coming into being, of the very world-view of a culture, particularly as this world-view might pertain to the resolution of human misfortune.

Frankfurter 1995: 473–474

How far any of this may be seen to apply to *Heimdallargaldr* is a matter for consideration, but, as an initial obstacle, we cannot demonstrate that *Heimdallargaldr* was ever actually used; the most that we can do is to postulate some practical use for it, on the basis of other charm traditions (I discuss this further below, with respect particularly to the conceptual difficulties of the postulated originator of the charm, Heimdallr, himself uttering it as a charm in mythic time).

## Old Norse Evidence on Charms

Evidence of charms can be found in Scandinavia in some runic inscriptions. One example is the Stentofte stone, the text of which was presented above; a few observations may be made on it. While the inscription is not exactly a charm, but rather a declaration of power and apotropaic curse, it has certain charm features as a verbal incantation with secret power, evoked with the word *rún*. As has been seen, something like *galdralag* is used, which itself lends power to the statement. There is a strong idea of the power being hidden, secret, and in subsisting in the words (which will disappear if the monument is broken). The element of secrecy in fact renders the charm a riddle, in which respect it differs from most more recent charms, where the purpose is abundantly clear, but resembles *Heimdallargaldr*, the only extant line of which presents a riddle of someone born of nine mothers. As with *Heimdallargaldr*, the secret power is invoked in the first person (which is rare in later charms). The inscription is a statement of (magically) powerful acts by two rulers and

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works, may change very little. (On this topic, see further Mitchell in this volume.) In the case of Heimdallr in *Heimdallargaldr*, the declaration of his mysterious birth is wholly consistent with what is recorded elsewhere (particularly in *Hynduljóð* and by Snorri), and in fact relates to an important part of his mythological make-up, but, in terms of charm method, this relative centrality of the motif to the over-all mythology of the deity is incidental rather than fundamental to the god's appearance in a *historiola*. In contrast, from a *ritual* perspective, Heimdallr's association with birth, and his guardianship of it, could in principle be vital to the explanation of why he should appear in a birth charm – with the proviso that we are, of course, close to entering the territory of the circular argument here, in that the only grounds for suggesting that *Heimdallargaldr* may have been, or may have evoked, a birth charm is the fact that it dealt with Heimdallr's birth.

the runic scribe; it does not involve a *historiola* as many charms do, unless we take the rulers' achievement of a good year as such.

Turning to Old Norse literature, rather than attempting to offer any general survey of evidence for charms in general here, I will focus on just a few instances of charm use in the immediate context of *Heimdallargaldr*, namely other eddic poems.

Charms are mentioned from time to time, but are not presented in any detail. An example is in *Oddrúnargrátr*, where Oddrún comes and sings a charm over the barren Borgný, who, in the following stanza, has given birth to a girl and boy; the means of achieving this are mentioned very briefly, by way of what seems to be a spell (note its use of epiphora, and alliteration on the opening synonyms *rikt* and *rammt*):

rikt gól Oddrún,	powerfully chanted Oddrún,
rammt gól Oddrún	mightily chanted Oddrún
bitra galdra at Borgnýjo	bitter spells at Borgný

*Oddrúnargrátr*, st. 7

There are two major lists of charms (though the charms themselves are not given) in eddic poems. The first, in *Hávamál*, lists eighteen charms that Óðinn knows:

1. To help against accusations and sorrows, and every sort of anxiety
2. To act as a healer (or a charm used by healers)
3. To fetter enemies (cf. the First Merseburg Charm), blunt swords
4. To release fetters from oneself
5. To stop an arrow in flight
6. To turn plant poison against the poisoner and away from oneself
7. To put out a hall fire
8. To bring about settlement between arguing warriors
9. To lull wind on the sea
10. To stop witches up in the air getting back to their bodies
11. To protect warriors in battle
12. To revive the hanged and speak with them
13. To stop a warrior falling in battle by pouring water on him
14. I know the difference between divinities, elves
15. The wisdom sung by the dwarf Þjóðrærir before Dellingr's doors
16. To turn the affections of women
17. To attract girls
18. Something he won't tell to women, except his lover or sister.

His knowledge of these charms stems from his acquisition of runes: hence, as in the Stentofte inscription, runes are embodiments of charm power. Þjóðrærir's singing of wisdom before Dellingr's doors constitutes a short narrative – it implies an incident, something once carried out; we cannot determine what the purpose may have been, but the evocation of such an event suggests it may have functioned as a *historiola*, the only indication of the presence of this common charm feature in this list.

The second list is found in the late *Grógaldr*, when the dead *vǫlva* is raised to produce charms to protect her son:

1. To shake from his shoulders whatever irks him
2. To guard him when travelling
3. To protect him from threatening rivers
4. To turn the minds of enemies coming at him on the gallows' way
5. To loosen fetters binding his limbs
6. To protect against storms at sea
7. To protect against frost
8. To protect against the curse of a Christian woman as he travels by night
9. To provide wits against an armed giant in a wisdom contest.

The third list is in *Sigrdrífumál*; here, the charms are not merely verbal, but involve ritual activities. This is consistent with what is found in Old English charms, which tend to contain fairly detailed instructions of the acts to accompany the recitation of the actual words of the charms.

1. Victory runes must be cut
2. Ale runes against being beguiled by another's wife (and also garlic thrown in cup etc.)
3. Helping runes for childbirth, cut on palms, clasped on joints, *disir* asked for help
4. Sea runes cut on prow
5. Limb runes for healing, cut on bark, on trees bending east
5. Speech runes
6. Mind runes: this is the only fully explicated charm, and here too we appear to have an example of a *historiola*, which warrants quotation:

Hugrúnar skaltu kunna,

You must know mind runes

...

þær um hugði Hropr,  
af þeim legi  
er lekit hafði  
ór hausi Heiðdraupnis  
ok ór horni Hoddrofnis.

those that Hropr thought up  
from the liquid  
that had leaked  
from the skull of Bright-dripper  
and from the horn of Hoard-sacker.

Á bjargi stóð	On a rock he stood
með brimis eggjar,	with the edges of a sword;
hafði sér á hofði hjálm;	a helm he had upon him;
þá mælti Míms hofuð	then Mímr's head spoke
fróðlíkt it fyrsta orð	the first wise word
ok sagði sanna stafi.	and uttered true lore.

*Sigrdrífumál*, st. 13–14

Hroptr is Óðinn, who, as in *Hávamál*, appears as master of incantation. The skull of Heiðdraupnir ('Bright/Mead-dripper')<sup>67</sup> must surely be the head of Mímr, dripping mead in the well, situated, in *Völuspá*, at the foot of the world tree. It seems the mead drips also from the horn of Hoddrofnir; the horn must be the Gjallarhorn, which belonged to Heimdallr, and Hoddrofnir ('Hoard-sacker') can reasonably be taken therefore to be Heimdallr (the 'hoard' he sacked probably being the Brisingamen, taken back from Loki).<sup>68</sup> We are presented with a *historiola* to establish the primordial value of these 'mind runes' from the skull and horn in the form of Óðinn, standing armed, when Mímr's head (clearly to be identified with the skull of Heiðdraupnir) first spoke its wisdom.

To call the episodes of Þjóðrærir and Hroptr *historiolae* presupposes that the second part of the postulated charms, the conjuration, is missing within the literary contexts where the episodes occur.<sup>69</sup> The conjuration is the means by which the charmer collapses the distance between the present and the primordial time of the first occurrence of the healing or, in this case, the securing of wisdom, and channels the power invoked through the *historiola* to achieve something in the present. *Heimdallargaldr* similarly presents us with a potential *historiola*, of Heimdallr's birth (and possibly of his death through a man's head), divorced – as far as we know – from any conjuration. The lists of charms with efficatory purposes in *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál* indicate that some element of conjuration was recognised as existing in 'working' charms, but for literary purposes this was omitted, leaving such *historiolae* as we have

67 On the sense of 'mead' for *heiðr*, derived from the basic sense of 'bright', see Dronke 1997: comm. *Völuspá*, st. 22/1, 27/3.

68 Hoddrofnir could also, of course, be an alternative name for Mímr; cf. Hoddmímir ('hoard-Mímir') of *Vafþrúðnismál*, st. 45, in whose *holt* (probably 'tree') a man and woman shelter at the end of the world, to become the first human couple of the new cosmos. However, the horn is an attribute of Heimdallr and is associated with Mímir merely by proximity in the mead spring. I would not go as far as Dronke (1997: comm. *Völuspá*, st. 28/10), who identifies Mímir with Heimdallr.

69 Cf. Frog's discussion of 'para-incantations', i.e. things used as incantations within the narrative world of a genre (Frog 2021).

as mere mythological fragments;<sup>70</sup> the charm curse Skírnir threatens against Gerðr in *Skírnismál* also shows a charm in action, with rudimentary elements of *historiola* (Skírnir declares how he got his wand from a wood).

A charm shorn of its contemporary performer and of the conjuration element no longer has the dynamic balance between the primordial event carried out by an authoritative being (a god, for example) and a practitioner who arrogates that power to himself to effect change by re-enacting the primordial event of the *historiola* (allowing for the fact that not all charms are, in fact, characterised by such a dynamic balance). The focus shifts solely to the original, primordial event; hence, if any efficatory magic takes place at all, as in *Skírnismál*, the practitioner is identified with the primordial actor, and a declaration of the *historiola* is naturally expressed in the first person, exemplified in Skírnir's curse. Heimdallr's first-person declaration of his birth points to a similar conclusion: that he also acts as the magical practitioner of the charm, if we assume the *galdr* was not merely a literary device here to recount some myths about the god.

*Hyndluljóð* presents us with a case where a magical practitioner, Hyndla, does exist in the present of the narrative and invokes primordial events (the birth of Heimdallr), so we might expect not merely the *historiola*, but also the conjuration, an explicit use of the *historiola* to assert her own power to achieve her (or rather her client Freyja's) ends, the enunciation of the *fræði*, the learning, of Óttarr's ancestry. Yet this can only be inferred, as no explicit conjuration is given. It would seem that conjurations, which are certainly found in early-medieval Germanic texts (such as the Second Merseburg Charm, calling the bones and joints to adhere together), were regarded as unsuited to the sort of mythological poetry that is preserved from early Iceland, even when charms were the topic of this verse. It is therefore probable that *Heimdallargaldr* consisted (in part) of a '*historiola*' shorn of any explicit conjuration, but, as a *galdr*, was presented as a fictional charm with an implicit charm purpose, in the manner of the presumably much shorter Hropr passage of *Sigrdrífumál*, or indeed of the Heimdallr passages of *Hyndluljóð*.

70 Such fragments need to be treated with caution in attempts to reconstruct aspects of Norse myth from them: it is in the nature of a *historiola* to present an *ad hoc* scene featuring a divine or primordial personage, without the specifics of the scene having any precedent in the corpus of a society's myths (but this is not to suggest that such fragments cannot be used at all).

## Gods in Charms

In such attenuated forms of conjurationless charms, the focus is upon gods as primordial effectors. Divine beings commonly appear elsewhere as protagonists in *historiolae* of charms of a more genuine sort that include conjurations. Thus the Second Merseburg Charm, quoted above, is famous as one of the few narrative appearances of Germanic gods outside the Norse corpus, yet it belongs to one of the commonest of charm types, the ‘bone to bone’ type (analogues have been found as far afield as ancient India in the *Atharva Veda*, and hundreds of examples have been recorded in Europe almost up to the present time: Storms 1948: 109–111), aimed at healing broken bones or lameness.<sup>71</sup>

Most more recent European variants involve Christ or one of the saints as the active healer in ‘bone to bone’ type (and other) charms. As indicated above, gods are powerful, and they are primordial: hence the charmer is able to invoke divine powers from the beginning of time. To reiterate some points made above, the primary consideration is merely that some powerful divinity can fulfil the role of primordial enactor of the charm; the particular identity of the divinity is usually not important, at least within charms recorded in Christian societies. It is also not necessary for the pseudo-historical event to exist beforehand in tradition: thus in Christian versions of the ‘bone to bone’ type, Christ may be pictured as riding to Jerusalem when his horse becomes lame, an event which is certainly non-canonical (Storms 1948: 113).

We have little to go on in determining whether a similar nonchalance was applied to references to divinities in pre-Christian charms. Heimdallr was a primordial being; his appearance in a charm therefore emphasises the primordality of the *historiola* described, and hence also the charmer’s power. Moreover, the connection between the divine *historiola* in a charm and the wider mythology to which it is implicitly linked need not be wholly superficial. With respect to the Second Merseburg Charm, Frog has shown (forthcoming) that while “*balderes*” probably does not in itself refer to the equivalent of the Norse god Baldr, this god is present under the name Phol, and it is his steed that becomes lame: moreover, *balder*, signifying ‘lord’, came to be confined in its reference within recorded Germanic sources to lords who were about to die. Hence the charm is ostensibly about healing lameness, but it has a web of reference to Germanic myth which can scarcely be described as superficial. It seems reasonable to suppose that a similarly profound layer of reference may lie behind Heimdallr’s presence in the *Heimdallargaldr*.

71 To be clear, ‘bone to bone’ technically describes the type of conjuration, rather than the type of *historiola*.

## The Topics and Forms of Charms

The 'literary' nature of eddic charms, removed from the general concerns of folk materials, is further suggested when the lists of charms in *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál* are compared topic-wise with actual charms, recorded from Anglo-Saxon England and Scandinavia (in later centuries): there is not a strong correspondence with the eddic topics reflecting a heroic world, while actual charms are mainly concerned with ensuring agricultural welfare, or curing toothache, for example. The poet of *Hávamál* may well have felt it would lower the tone somewhat for Óðinn to declare that, as a result of his nine-night deathly sojourn on the gallows tree, he had managed to learn a charm to ease toothache – but this just shows the discrepancy that must have existed between the poetic image of charms, as presented in these eddic poems, and the reality of everyday life. The world of daily life, where matters such as animals' lameness were pressing concerns, could certainly be elevated to a mythological level, as the Second Merseburg Charm illustrates, yet this apotheosis of the mundane is not something that seems to have occurred in the charm contexts of our extant eddic verse. That said, there are, nonetheless, topics that were apposite for treatment in both 'heroic' verse and more everyday charm rituals; one of these is childbirth (as in *Oddrúnargrátr*, st. 7), a subject that, while not the most frequent, does occur in actual charms, and is mentioned in eddic verse – and, in a broad sense, is the foundation of *Rígsþula* and (probably) the myth of the Brisingamen. An Old English example, MS Harley 585, c. 1000, for difficult childbirth is typical of many charms in calling not just for recitation of a formula, but also ritual actions:

Se man se ne mæge bearn afedan, nime þonne anes bleos cu meoluc on hyre handæ, and gesupe þonne mid hyre muþe, and gange þonne to yrnendum wætere and spiwe þær in þa meolc. And hlade þonne mid þære ylcan hand þæs wæteres muð fulne and forswelge. Cweþe þonne þas word:

Gehwer ferde ic me þone mæran maga þihtan,  
mid þysse mæran mete þihtan,  
þone ic me wille habban and ham gan.

Þonne heo to þan broce ga þonne ne beseo heo, no ne eft þonne heo þanan ga, and þonne ga heo in oþer hus oþer heo ut ofeode, and þær gebyrge metes.

Storms 1948: no. 10

The woman who cannot bring her child to maturity must take the milk of a cow of one colour in her hand, sip up a little with her mouth, and then go to running water and spit the milk into it. And then with the same hand she must take a mouthful of water and swallow it. Let her then say these words:

Everywhere I carried with me this great powerful strong one,  
 strong because of this great food;  
 such a one I want to have and go home with.

When she goes to the stream she must not look round, nor again when she goes  
 away from there, and let her go into another house than the one from which she  
 started, and there take food.

We cannot tell how long the charms mentioned in *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál*  
 may have been conceived to be. At least some of the Old English charms are  
 both fairly long – the Nine Herbs Charm, for example, has 63 lines of verse,  
 along with prose passages – and have an involved narrative which presents  
 more than a single, simple *historiola*. A shorter example than the Nine Herbs  
 Charm is that against a sudden pain, “Wið færsticce”:

Hlude wæran hy la hlude ða hy ofer þone hlæw ridan  
 wæran anmode ða hy ofer land ridan  
 scyld ðu ðe nu þu ðysne nið genesan mote  
 ut lytel spere gif her inne sie  
 stod under linde under leohtum scylde  
 þær ða mihtigan wif hyra mægen beræddon  
 hygyllende garas sændan  
 ic him oðerne eft wille sændan  
 fleogende flane forane togeanes  
 ut lytel spere gif hit her inne sy  
 sæt smið sloh seax  
 lytel iserna wund swiðe  
 ut lytel spere gif her inne sy  
 syx smiðas sætan wælspera worhtan  
 ut spere næs in spere  
 gif her inne sy isenes dæl  
 hægtessan geweorc hit sceal gemyltan  
 gif ðu wære on fell scoten oððe wære on flæsc scoten  
 oððe wære on blod scoten  
 oððe wære on lið scoten næfre ne sy ðin lif atæsed  
 gif hit wære esa gescot oððe hit wære ylfa gescot  
 oððe hit wære hægtessan gescot nu ic wille ðin helpan  
 þis ðe to bote esa gescotes ðis ðe to bote ylfa gescotes  
 ðis ðe to bote hægtessan gescotes ic ðin wille helpan  
 fleo [?MS fled] þær on fyrghenhæfde  
 hal westu helpe ðin drihten  
 nim þonne þæt seax ado on wætan

Hall 2007: 2; cf. Storms 1948: no. 2

They were loud, yes, loud, when they rode over the (burial) mound; they were fierce when they rode across the land. Shield yourself now, you can survive this strife. Out, little spear, if there is one here within. It stood under/behind lime-wood (i.e. a shield), under a light-coloured/light-weight shield, where those mighty women marshalled their powers, and ?they sent shrieking spears. I will send another back, a flying arrow ahead in opposition. Out, little spear, if it is here within. A craftsman sat, forged a knife/knives; ?small as swords go, violent the wound. Out, little spear, if it should be here within. Six craftsmen sat, wrought slaughter-spears. Be out, spear, not in, spear. If there is here within a share of iron/swords, the work/deed of *hægtessan*, it must melt. If you were *scoten* in the skin or were *scoten* in the flesh, or were *scoten* in the blood, or were *scoten* in the limb (?joint), may your life never be harmed. If it was the *gescot* of *ese* or it was the *gescot* of *ælf*e or it was the *gescot* of *hægtessan*, now I want to (?will) help you. This for you as a remedy for the *gescot* of *ese*; this for you as a remedy for the *gescot* of *ælf*e, this for you as a remedy for the *gescot* of *hægtessan*; I will help you. Fly around there on the mountain top. Be healthy, may the Lord help you.

Hall 2007: 2

Hall's translation here illustrates the level of obscurity in interpretation of some charm texts from the early-medieval period; the stories informing the *historiola* elements here are now largely lost to us. In Old Norse, we know nothing of the tale of Þjóðrærir uttering wisdom before the door of Dellingr, and the myth of Hroprtr (i.e. Óðinn) and Mímr is similarly opaque – though the opaqueness may, perhaps, derive from the lack of the conjuration part of the charms, which would enable us to understand what the purpose of the *historiola* was (assuming these narratives were *historiolae* at all, of course). Even the 'charm' sequences of *Hyndluljóð* concerning familiar gods, Heimdallr and Loki, contain many obscurities. If *Heimdallargaldr* followed suit, making use of ancient narrative elements and references that may have originated as topical performative charm features, it is possible that Snorri, even if he had access to a complete text of the poem, may not have understood it all; this could help to explain why he tells us so little of what it contained, and why one of the two elements he does mention, that Heimdallr's fate was a head, is so impenetrable (he could, of course, simply have found the information irrelevant to his purposes in the contexts where he mentions the god – though this itself could be seen as pointing to some oddity as compared to other mythological sources; we can but speculate).

## Later Scandinavian Charms

An interesting example of a ‘transitional’ charm was edited by K. Kålund (1907) and noted by L. F. Löffler (1911), then discussed in detail by Lindquist (1923: 50–51). This is from the Codex Arnamagnaeus 434a 12<sup>mo</sup>, from no earlier than the second quarter of the fifteenth century (Kålund 1907: 360). The purpose is to ward off the anger of powerful men when someone realises they have offended them. The text, in normalised and slightly edited form, runs:<sup>72</sup>

Þvá þik í vatni iiii sinnum ok les Pater noster í millum ok kveð þetta iiii tíma:

Fjón þvær ek af mér fjánda minna,  
 rán ok reiði ríkra manna,  
 svá at þeir glaðliga mér gangi á móti  
 ok hlæjandi mik augum líti.  
 Ást drep ek hendi,  
 ...  
 Lýk ek fésakir, lýk ek fjørsakir,  
 lýk ek enu mestu manna sakir.  
 Guð líti mik ok góðir menn,  
 sjái hverr á mik sældaraugum!

(Ægishjálms, er ek berr í millum brúna, þó vá tignarmanna öll sé mér veröld fjón[menn] at vinum. Haf vatnit millum gaupna þér.

Kålund 1907: 368, orthography standardised

Wash in water three times and read the Lord’s Prayer in between, and say this three times:

I wash from me the hatred of my enemies,  
 the plunder and wrath of powerful men,  
 so that they gladly come to meet me  
 and laughing look me in the eye.  
 I strike love with my hand,  
 [towards those who are against me].

72 The diplomatic rendering is as follows (Kålund 1907: 368): “Þvo þik í vatni iiii sinnum ok les pater noster í millum ok kved þetta iiii tíma: Fion þvær ec af mier fiande minna, ran ok reidi ríkra manna, sva at þeir gladlīga mier gangi á moti ok hlæandi mic augum líti. Ast drep ec hendi, lyk ec fe sækir, lyk ec fíor sækir, lyk ec enu mestu manna sakir. Gud líti mic ok godir menn, siae hverr á mic sælldar augum, ægis-hialm er ec berr í millum bruna, þo vo tignar manna aull se mier veraulld þíon at vinum. Haf vatnit millum gaupna þíer.” Kålund notes that the text is corrupt, and the last (prose) section in particular all but incomprehensible. I follow Lindquist’s reading, but he does not attempt to translate the last section. I take “þíon” to stand for “fíon”, for which I read *fjón[menn]*, but the passage remains unyielding of a satisfactory sense.

I pay fines, I pay life-saving fines,  
 I pay men's greatest fines.  
 God look upon me and good men,  
 let everyone gaze at me with good-luck eyes!

[Let each see] the helm of terror that I bear between my brows: though the woe of men of honour may be all the world to me, [let] men of hatred [turn] to friends. Put water between your hands.

The charm is interesting as using a loosely, but not strictly, alliterative metre, much as the Old English charms do; it also employs a form of *galdralag* in the “Lýk ek” section. A reasonable inference therefore is that what might be called metrical prose, recalling but not adhering strictly to the norms of alliterative verse, was a shared and hence probably archaic feature of charms in the Germanic world, though what its specific characteristics were would be difficult to define (cf. Roper 2011). Yet there are signs of a move away from this alliterative tradition; the ‘helm of terror’ verse is recorded later in a rhyming form – “Ægishjálmr, er eg ber / milli brúna mér” – in Jón Árnason’s *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur* (I, 452), which also contains parts of the other verses from the fifteenth-century manuscript, preserved in folk tradition.<sup>73</sup>

The many charms recorded from early-modern mainland Scandinavia, as collected in the editions of A. C. Bang, Ferdinand Ohrt, and Emanuel Linderholm, illustrate the further development of charm forms. They are almost invariably very short, and involve no complexity of narrative. Typical is this Norwegian example to charm sand out of the eye:

Af det sorte paa det blaa,  
 af det blaa paa det graa,  
 af det graa paa det hvide  
 af det hvide paa det røde,  
 af det røde i en Sving  
 hen i Ver og Vind.  
 I 3 H. N.  
 3 G. Pater noster. Amen

From the black onto the blue,  
 from the blue onto the grey,  
 from the grey onto the white  
 from the white onto the red,  
 from the red into a turn  
 from here to storm and wind.  
 In the name of the holy trinity  
 Lord’s Prayer three times. Amen

Bang 1901: no. 96

Rygge, 1780; Hallingdal, 1800; Gbdl., 1830; Ringerike, 1885

73 Jón Árnason notes that in his time, the ‘helm of terror’ was a mere magic talismanic design, drawn onto the forehead; it was aimed at producing a ‘look of terror’ in the eyes against foes, i.e. something akin to the evil eye (see Cleasby and Vigfusson, *s.v.* *hjálmr* 3); the prose following *Reginismál*, st. 14, relates that Sigurðr, about to face the dragon Fáfnir, had the *ægishjálmr*, “er öll kvikvendi hræddoz við” (‘that all living things were terrified by’), which implies an actual helmet of some sort.

The principle of banishment of ills that this charm illustrates is often found, sometimes with absolute directness, as in these short examples:

Jeg stevner dig under Stokke och Stene. Du skal herud paa et saare højt Bjerg.	I banish you under stock and stone. You shall go from here to a terribly high mountain.
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Bang 1901: nos. 72, 76

A divine personage may appear in a *historiola* in Scandinavian charms, but usually in an undeveloped manner:

Frälsaren stod på ett berg: der fick han se trollen stå med oppspända bågar: 'Hvad skuter du?' 'Jag skuter folk och få och allt hvad i verlden är' 'Skjut i en skog, der ingen bor, skjut i en sjö, der ingen rör, och skjut i röda havet!'	The Saviour stood on a mountain: there he saw the trolls stand with tensioned bows: 'What are you shooting?' 'I am shooting people and sheep and everything in the world.' 'Shoot in a forest where no-one lives, shoot in a lake where no-one is rowing, and shoot in the Red Sea!'
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Linderholm 1940: no. 808

Mot trollskott, 1870s, Småland

It is questionable, given their nature, how enlightening it would be to analyse in any depth the later Scandinavian charm traditions, from which these few examples are drawn, in terms of elucidating the nature of Old Norse charms; the extent of continuity from Old Norse times in these much later and clearly markedly different traditions, which work on the basis of a less complex, and less mythologically based, foundation and narrative method would seem limited.<sup>74</sup> It may, then, be equally or more rewarding to consider a wider pool of charm traditions, in particular that of the neighbouring Finns and Karelians.

## Karelian Charms

There are two Finnish-Karelian charm traditions, a western (mainly Finnish) and eastern (mainly Karelian), corresponding roughly to the areas under Catholic then Protestant control, and the Orthodox areas of eastern

<sup>74</sup> This stance may seem incompatible with that adopted towards the traditions of the *vårdträd*, which, it is argued, derive from a very long-standing tradition, but the discontinuity suggested in the case of charms is primarily one of form, of narrative and allusive expression, rather than religious intent (the purpose of charms would not have shifted greatly).

Finland and Karelia.<sup>75</sup> The western Finnish charms belong to the same basic western European charm tradition as Scandinavian charms; such charms are typically characterised (e.g. by Piela 1989: 104) as short and fragmentary, with a tendency simply to order something to happen: they are direct and strive for a specific concrete end through word magic. They are formulaic, taking more or less fixed forms which are memorised, and their effectiveness relies on the correct performance of a magical ritual and the recitation of the accompanying words (in other words, they might more appropriately be described as spells). Karelian (and eastern Finnish, e.g. Savo) charms tend to have far greater variation within each type, they are much longer (several hundred lines in many cases), and the narrative is more complex, involving, for example, the description at some length of supernatural beings; the charms aim, not to effect the desired outcome mechanically, but to secure direct contact with malevolent or benevolent otherworldly beings that were causing illnesses or other problems. Many of these characteristics correspond more closely to what can be surmised about the nature of at least some Old Norse charms, as discussed above, than do those of later more westerly traditions.<sup>76</sup>

Karelian charms were particularly the stock in trade of the *tietäjä*, a professional seer (lit. 'knower') who was able to use the power of words and improvise verses to make contact with the spirit world and deal with problems emanating from there. The *tietäjä* would internalise a cosmography of the otherworld in order to be able to deal with its denizens. The effectiveness of the charm therefore depended on the skills of the particular performer, not so much on the precise ritual repetition, without recourse to a professional, of formulaic words and actions. (The *tietäjä* differed also from the Siberian shaman, who was not limited in his contact with the spirit world by the need to perform metrical incantations, though the shaman, like the *tietäjä*, relied on an internalised cosmography of the otherworld.) (Siikala 2002: 84; Frog 2019: 238–239)

The dichotomy between the western and eastern charm traditions may, nonetheless, have been somewhat exaggerated through an emphasis on the

75 The border shifted greatly over the centuries, and there were many large-scale migrations; the details are not relevant to the present general discussion. The main issue is simply the over-all abundance, richness, and conservatism of the eastern Finnish and Karelian traditions, as opposed to the suppletive and fragmentary traditions which managed to survive further west.

76 Nonetheless, the early examples of magical inscriptions gathered in McKinnell, Simek & Düwel 2004 largely point to forms of short spells more like those of the later western tradition. The potential existence of different types of incantatory practice within one area needs further investigation.

distinguishing features of each; there was certainly variation and improvisation in many western traditions, as Jonathan Roper notes in his study of *English Verbal Charms* (2005: 158–163), and conversely the *tietäjä*'s improvisation took place within a well-established cosmographic and narrative framework. Yet the products of the *tietäjä* tradition are certainly richer and weightier than most western charms. This tradition managed to survive until relatively recent times owing to the lateness of conversion of many remote areas of eastern Finland and Karelia, and because of the markedly lower concern or organisational effort expended by the Orthodox Church in eliminating it. It is likely, but cannot I think be demonstrated, that similarly rich traditions once existed further west in Finland, in areas that were in more direct contact with Norsemen. Even if this were not the case, the eastern Finnish-Karelian tradition illustrates the sort of richness, in terms of extended and varied symbolic engagement with the mythic spirit world (see next subsection), that is once likely to have existed elsewhere, which is hinted at, I suggest, for example in some of the longer Old English charms. The cultural spheres that may have existed in the late pagan period await further investigation, but Roper (2005: 158–163) argues that the commonality of later charm traditions across the North Sea area indicates a shared cultural region; the Baltic is likely to offer another such area (note, for example, motifs such as the theft of the thunder god's weapon as a shared mythological feature in this region, and narratives such as the myth of Baldr appear to be shared with Finland in the form of the Lemminkäinen myths: see Frog 2011, 2104).

### *Karelian Charms and Origins*

One of the distinctive features of the charms of the *tietäjä* tradition is a recurrent reference to origins (in the sense of the 'births' of primordial or cosmogonic forces, rather than mere aetiologies within the present world). On the one hand the origins or births of illnesses or other troubles, which are personified, are established and proclaimed by the *tietäjä*: the origin is placed in a mythical primordial world. Knowing the origin of something is to have power over it; once this power is established, the practitioner is able to exorcise the illness and banish it to some deathly place such as the mountain of pains, away from people (Brummer 1908; cf. Viljakainen 2010: 225). A similar principle applies to the *tietäjä* himself: at moments where he needed to emphasise his power, he would declare his own origin, and his power in that origin; for example, in one 134-line long poem, the charmer calls on Jesus for help in ploughing, then invokes his own strength to banish all witches and evil spirits – he has power over them, as he is kin to them:

Mie oun noian nuorin poika,  
Vaskiseppien valama,  
Mie syön noiat nuolinensa,  
Velhot veitsi rautonensa . . .

I am the witch's youngest son,  
moulded by copper smiths,  
I eat witches with their arrows,  
sorcerers with their knives of iron . . .

SKVR VII 4, no. 52

Recorded by R. Polén, Suistamo, 1847

In a contest between two *tietäjät*, the mythical Väinämöinen and Joukahainen, the old seer evokes the primordial time of the world's formation, and declares himself not only to have been present, but to have accomplished this feat himself; the poem ends:<sup>77</sup>

Sanoi vanha Väinämöinen  
Nuorelle Joukamaiselle:  
"Muistatko sitä ajutta,  
Kuin meroa kynnettihin,  
Meroin pohja poltettiin,  
Kivet luotihin kokohon?"  
Sanoi nuori Joukamoinen:  
"Vaka vanha Väinämöinen,  
Kenen on meret kyntämät?"  
Sanoi vanha Väinämöinen:  
"Minun on meret kyntämäni."

Old Väinämöinen said  
to young Joukamoinen:  
"Do you remember the time  
when the sea was ploughed,  
the bottom of the sea swithened,  
the stones piled up?"  
Young Joukamoinen said:  
"Old doughty Väinämöinen,  
whose was the ploughing of the seas?"  
Old Väinämöinen said,  
"Mine was the ploughing of the seas."

SKVR IV 1, no. 572

Recorded by D. E. D. Europaeus, Tyrö, Yhinmäki, 1853

Karelian charms (among several forms of traditional verse)<sup>78</sup> exhibit a common cosmography with epic poems concerning mythical themes and heroes, and the imagery is shared too; as Lotte Tarkka notes (247), "the song theme of epic acts as a sort of metatext to the charm tradition: it provides a foundation, justification, and background".<sup>79</sup> The use of the *historiola* is a

77 The text was recorded with a large number of easily expanded abbreviations; I omit the brackets indicating expansions (full details may be found on the SKVR website), which means the language is rendered into standard Finnish (but not altered lexically).

78 For example, in wooing verses, the courting takes place over a boundary between worlds, each party being otherworldly to the other; the girl is wooed from the otherworld, and the groom presents himself to her as a representative of the otherworld (Tarkka 1990: 242). We may compare the Norse *Skírnismál*, where the giantess Gerðr is wooed, through the intermediary Skírnir (compare the Karelian *patvaska*, the official charged with wooing), by the god Freyr, who has viewed her through Hliðskjálf, a sort of viewing platform to peer into other worlds.

79 Original: "Epiikan lauteema toimii eräänlaisena metatekstinä loitsutraditiolle: se perustelee, oikeuttaa ja asettaa sen taustansa."

means of merging epic verse with charm verse through the presentation of a heroic scene. The relationship of the *tietäjä* to the supranormal world corresponds to that of the adventurer to the goal of his journey. The heroic protagonist of epic verse is always on a journey, and hence the journey becomes an image of the song itself; verse, such as the charm, acts as the means to communicate with the supranormal, just as the hero's journey takes him to the otherworld, and the vocabulary used becomes intertwined, with travel taking place for example on a 'song sledge', or 'mouth rivers' flow from the singer's mouth (Tarkka 1990: 244–245). The journey generally takes place over water, which thus becomes an image of liminality, and the deathly otherworld that lies beyond is dark, northern, windy, with windowless houses (i.e. graves, which in Karelia were constructed to resemble small houses). The imagery is fluid, and hence an array of symbols is built up which may serve as equivalents of each other; for example, the maw of Vipunen, a long dead seer into which Väinämöinen falls in his quest for otherworldly knowledge, may coalesce with the river of Tuonela (the otherworld) (SKVR I 1, no. 92.121–122). (Tarkka 1990: 245.)

These brief comments on Karelian charms offer some provocative ideas for the interpretation of any charm focused on Heimdallr. The inference to draw from the mythological elements of charm texts such as the Old English Nine Herbs Charm or the German Second Merseburg Charm is that an underlying 'epic' (or, in the Germanic examples, rather 'mythic') cosmography exists, on which the charms draw for their imagery and *historiolae*, which, as in Karelia, merge the charm world with that of myth.

Germanic charms with a mythic element at least sometimes involve a journey, notably the Second Merseburg Charm, and the same is implied in the struggle over the Brisingamen, which must have involved a journey to Vágasker. We cannot, I think, demonstrate the sort of intertwining of vocabulary between charm and myth that the Karelian tradition exploited, but a similar coincidence of imagery between the journey to an otherworld and a magical encounter with otherworld beings could be inferred. The journey over water is implicit in the Brisingamen myth, which takes the necklace to 'Wave Skerry', and this must act as an otherworld, an antithesis to the world of the gods whence the necklace has been stolen; a skerry is, of course, a lifeless rock.

The fluidity of imagery in Karelian verse is a feature that warrants particular emphasis: it demonstrates that a complexity of imagery, with images serving as equivalents of one another, can be characteristic of archaic and conservative verse imbued with traditional myth, such as we also find in the Germanic arena.

### *Birth Charms and the Appeal to Cosmic Origins*

Placing the origin (or birth) of an illness during the creative phase of the cosmos not only enables the *tietäjä* to situate the event within the traditional mythical cosmography and cosmogony which he has internalised, and which he shares with his community, but it also de-emphasises the significance of the origin of the illness (and hence increases the *tietäjä*'s power over it) by placing it against the backdrop of the creation of the cosmos (Piela 1989: 84). Some origin myths also afford an opportunity to explain the ambiguity and risk inherent in parts of the physical world: this is represented mythically through contests between benevolent and malevolent rivals, a world-view which reflects the dualistic creation contests between a demiurge constructing the world and a demonic figure carrying out destructive tasks (Piela 1989: 85). An example is the origin of iron: three girls drip milk from their breasts onto the earth, giving rise to types of iron and steel, but a wicked ant or hornet steals some of the metal and makes it dangerous as it is being forged in the smithy of the primordial smith Ilmarinen (SKVR VII3, no. 400a): hence while steel may be useful, it can also cause serious wounds, which would call for a charm to deal with them. A charm against burns related the origin of fire. Fire is good, and was born in heaven, but it fell to earth, where it burnt people, and then ended up in the sea and was swallowed by a fish, which the hero of the *historiola* has to catch (SKVR VII3, no. 751). Thus the charm traces a passage from good to bad and a return to good through the actions of a primordial hero.

A similar pattern may be discerned in the charm passage of *Hyndluljóð*. This features birth: the miraculous birth of Heimdallr in primordial time, and the monstrous birth-giving on Loki's part, a perversion of what is found with Heimdallr. Heimdallr finally defeats Loki at the end of the world, but he also salvaged the power of progeniture by saving its talisman, the Brisingamen. *Heimdallargaldr* similarly featured Heimdallr's birth, and probably his death (which must also have involved Loki's death, as each defeated the other).

Heimdallr appears to have been a guardian not of birth *per se*, but of birth as a means to the continuance of social order. In Sweden, according to folk custom, women in childbirth would grasp the *vårdräd* for protection (Hyltén-Cavallius 1864–1868: I, 356–357); as the guardian tree's strong connection with Heimdallr has been noted, it is reasonable to suppose that Heimdallr might have been invoked in similar circumstances. As the *vårdräd* acted as guardian of a farmstead, its protective function would have been over the 'social order' of the farmstead, rather than over individuals as such, so the guardianship matches that of Heimdallr with respect to birth.

*Karelian Birth Charms in Use*

Charms focused on childbirth were used in Karelian tradition both by midwives and *tietäjät*, the latter being resorted to in difficult births (Tarkka 1990: 249); charms for more problematic births were therefore performed by men. The charms would typically include appeals to higher powers for help, and *historiolae* of past success were often included; for example, “sinä kuun kehästä päästit, / päivän pilvestä selitit, / tule, päästä tääkin päästö” (‘you released the moon from shadow, freed the sun from cloud: come, release this release too’) (SKVR VII4, no. 3031). The charms ask who has brought about the woman’s troubles, and, determining the cause, banish the malevolent factors of the mother’s predicament (e.g. SKVR XII2, nos. 6211, 6214; SKVR I4, nos. 960, 963, 974, 979); suspects may include other people and their curses or envy, and words of envy may occur in charms (SKVR I4, no. 961; SKVR VII4, nos. 3015, 3018) (Viļjakainen 2005: 5).

M. Viļjakainen (2010) presents and discusses an example of a birth charm performed by the late-nineteenth-century Karelian charm practitioner Elissei Valokainen. The charm is 44 lines long, and falls into three parts. The first sets out the problem, that a child is due to be born but is stuck. The second deliberates on a solution: should the practitioner call on the aid of ‘the old Laplander’ (a spirit helper)? Elissei asserts his own power by pointing out how serious the situation is, to the extent that the mother is about to die, which indicates the immensity of the task he will successfully complete. The old Laplander is an active helper, pulling out his knife to help cut out the child; he notes that release from the womb has always succeeded (“ain on peästy ihmisest irgi”). The third section outlines the good outcome: declaring this is tantamount to accomplishing it. The charmer concludes by noting that it is not his own power, but that of God, of old Väinämöinen, that has achieved this:

Kannoin kohtuu kuusi kuuta,  
 Idze ylendin yheksän kuuda,  
 Kuuda kaiken kymmenenki.  
 Jo tuli lapsel tuloaiga.  
 Midäs täs kipuloi tarvitaa,  
 Vaivoi midäs vaaitaa  
 Lapsen syndymiseh,  
 Sigiön siidämiseh?  
 Jo on lapsi luista kiini,  
 Ei van anikko ala lähe.  
 Nygön täh tarvittas  
 Varsin vanha lappalaine  
 Tämän lapsen soahestani,

I carried my belly for six months,  
 bore it myself for nine months,  
 all of ten months.  
 Now the child’s time to come has come.  
 What is needed for the pains here,  
 what is required for the anguish,  
 for the child to be born,  
 for the offspring to appear?  
 Now the child’s stuck in the bones,  
 it’s close to coming.  
 Now there could be need here  
 for a very old Laplander  
 to get this child out,

Sigjön sivuista siidämine.  
 Tuli ukko lappalainen:  
 Voiba sinä ämmä raukka,  
 Jo nyt olisit kohta kuollu,  
 Kohta on kivut kovasta,  
 Vaivat rindahen parettu.  
 Votas, otan omilla kobril,  
 Keärin pienih kämmenih.  
 Mis on männy, siinä tullaa.  
 Otan veitseni tupesta,  
 Leikan laian, leikan toisen;  
 Anna tulla matkamiehen,  
 Sigjön alas siirdyä,  
 Peästä imeises irgi!  
 Kaik on kahekse peästö:  
 Vanhat peästö Väinämöiset,  
 Segä nuored Jougamoised,  
 Ain on peästy ihmisest irgi.  
 Peästi Luoja, peästi päivä,  
 Peästi peällinen Jumala  
 Näistä päivistä pahoista,  
 Angarista ahkioista  
 Minun käsin käydyäni.  
 Lapsi tulla luiskahti,  
 Olgiloilla pöksähteli,  
 Silmät hänel on sioille silmät,  
 Kaikk on korvat kohallee,  
 Peä paikoille pantu;  
 Ei voimal omalla voimal,  
 Voimalla Jumalan voimal,  
 Väellä vanhan Väinämöisen.

this offspring to appear from the loins.  
 An old Lapp man came:  
 Oh, you poor woman,  
 you'd soon have been dead!  
 Soon the pains will be over,  
 the troubles in your breast healed.  
 Wait, I will take hold with my own grip,  
 I'll turn it round in my small palms.  
 Wherever it has gone, there it will come.  
 I'll take my knife from the sheath,  
 I'll cut one flank, I'll cut the other;  
 let the journeyman come,  
 to move the offspring down,  
 to set the baby free from its mother!  
 There are eight releases in all:  
 old Väinämöinens were freed,  
 and young Joukamoinens,  
 they are always released from someone.  
 The Creator released, the sun released,  
 God the master has released  
 from these wicked days,  
 from harsh travails,  
 after I used my hands.  
 The child has slipped out,  
 onto the straw it popped out,  
 its eyes are where eyes should be,  
 both its ears just right,  
 its head in the right place;  
 not by [my] own strength –  
 by the strength of God,  
 by the might of old Väinämöinen.

SKVR VII 4, no. 3017

Elisse Valokainen, recorded by Väinö Salminen, Suistamo, 1908<sup>80</sup>

80 NOTES ON THE TEXT. Valokainen was an innovative manipulator of the verse tradition; his lexical usages are often personal and difficult to penetrate. Thus, although the general sense is clear, there are ambiguities over details of expression.

**siidämiseh:** the form is obscure, but must be parallel in sense with the *syntyminen* ('being born') of the previous line. It may derive from the rare (but not unparalleled) form *siitää*, a variant of *siintää* ('appear') (the verb occurs in traditional verse, including from Suistamo). Other possibilities, at a stretch, include a derivation from *siiteä* ('be necessary'), 'at the offspring's [time of] necessity'; or the verb in question could perhaps be a misheard form of *siirtää* ('move'), i.e. 'for the moving of the offspring' out of the womb, which is the topic of the charm (and which occurs later in the text).

**kohta ... parettu:** the sense is not entirely clear, but "parettu" ('healed, made better') indicates the Laplander is likely to be reassuring the suffering woman that the ordeal is coming to an end.

Viljakainen (2010: 230) notes that the charm is not typical in certain respects, in particular in having the mother speak in the first person at the opening, and in describing the successful outcome, but this illustrates the flexibility within the tradition. Various strategies are employed to achieve the desired outcome in this and comparable charms. Threatening spirits are banished, whereas helping spirits, such as the Virgin Mary or the high god, Ukko, are summoned to approach. The charmer may evoke helpers to threaten illnesses: if you don't obey, I will summon my helper and attack with hosts of supporters. He may forbid the illness to do certain things, or order it to put right the damage it has caused. In summoning spirit helpers, the charmer aims to manipulate the power, *väki*, which characterises the helper, and also to make use of the helper's possessions, such as fiery weapons, which both the spirit helper and the charmer use against the illness (the *väki* of the primordial sage, Väinämöinen, is invoked in the last line of the charm quoted above). Although sometimes the cause of problems may be what we would term physiological, such as the baby being stuck in the pelvis, at other times it was other people's ill-will (their 'resentments', *kateet*) that were to blame; the charmer's task then would be to send back the *kateet* whence they had issued (SKVR VII 4, no. 3015, is entirely devoted to this task). Some charms confront problems by presenting them as affronts to cosmic order: thus, one charm asks a tree why it is harming people, cutting into them and so forth, when it was created to be useful for people (SKVR VII 3, no. 245). The charmer as it were questions his own understanding of the correct order of things, before asserting his own power by setting the natural order of things back into equilibrium (Viljakainen 2010: 234).

The strategies for dealing with illness spirits and assistants, and the overall interaction with otherworld beings, are, of course, absent from any Norse 'charms', but must have existed whenever charms were used in a practical

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**votas ... kämmenih:** it is not clear if the Laplander is talking about the baby in the womb, or the knife he will use, though the former seems more likely, given that he states that wherever it has gone, he will be able to get it to come.

**kahekse peästö:** eight releases, i.e. in epic tradition, some of which he then goes on to mention. "Väinämöiset ... Joukamöiset": the plurals probably indicate 'Väinämöinen/Joukamöinen and his like'.

**ahkioista** is obscure; *ahkio* is a lumbering type of sledge, but the word is sometimes used metaphorically for a lumbering oaf (notably a term of abuse used by the mother-in-law for the new bride in traditional verse). Whatever solution is arrived at, it needs to mirror the sense of the previous line's 'wicked days', though this might be achieved in different ways. The usual word accompanying *ankara* in charms is *asia* ('thing, business'), which would here give *ankarista asioista*; is Valokainen intending a play on this, but offering a more interesting but homoeophonic word to replace *asioista*? The only sense that would work for *ahkio* here would then appear to be 'brutish oaf', in reference to the evil forces which are causing the labour difficulties. The possibility exists that the word has been recorded incorrectly; for example, it might represent *ohkehista* ('from sighs, weeping'), though why the recorder should have misheard the word is unclear.

capacity. Elissei's methods are nonetheless relevant in some other respects. It is striking how both the woman herself and then the 'old Laplander' helping spirit speak in the first person; this was evidently a strategy to enliven the charm, to make its power more forceful to an audience. Heimdallr, speaking of his birth (and hence his power over birth, which a charmer would aim to secure for himself), would fit well as a helping spirit in a charm of this sort. The focus on cosmic disorder as a means of demonstrating a charmer's power – he is boasting, essentially, about what he can set right – could also suggest a role for the evocation of Loki's monstrous birth-giving, as found in *Hyndluljóð*, if we imagine this as reflecting the methodology of practical charms.

### *Cosmography in Karelian Birth Charms and Potential Norse Parallels*

Tarkka argues that Karelian birth charms are imbued with traditional cosmographic understanding. Thus they exemplify how a woman's internal space, her womb, is conceived as a mythic site (Tarkka 1990: 253). This womb from which the child is born becomes synonymous with the deathly otherworld of Pohjola ('Northland') of epic verse from which the hero must make his escape; the Pohjola of the birth charms, however, is also the place of banishment for evils that hinder the childbirth (and it is also their place of origin). The boundary which in ritual childbirth texts has to be crossed concretely is interpreted as being the symbolic boundary that men must cross in heroic verse. The midwife acts as a psychopomp, bringing the child across this boundary between worlds; in contrast, the woman giving birth is generally more or less ignored in the verse, becoming a 'landscape' for the birth-giving. Birth, then, is a journey by which a denizen of the otherworld is accompanied into this, and the hindrances on the way and the 'landscape' are mythic images in bodily form (SKVR I4, no. 941–985). The *tietäjä* would open the 'vein gates' of the fence that marked off the otherworld, like the iron fence that slows down the mythic hero Lemminkäinen on his journey to the otherworld, and then the way back is sealed again against the powers of the otherworld (Tarkka 1990: 249). The child thus comes from afar, for example from behind the stars and the shoulders of the Great Bear ("taivon tähtien tasatse, otavaisten olka päitse", SKVR I4, no. 972), or appears (in many charms) 'on land' ("maalle"), like Väinämöinen appearing on land in Pohjola after his long sojourn on the sea.<sup>81</sup> Once it is born, the child is encircled with a magic protecting fence and the mother is blessed, and the child crossed. We may recall here the magical empowerment of Heimdallr at

81 The charms I have examined, however, do not specify that the child comes from the ocean, merely that it appears 'on land', which could be taken to indicate the crossing of the otherworld boundary into this world.

his birth, which may recall some folk custom comparable to the protective blessing of the Karelian baby.

We do not have anything to indicate that the Brisingamen myth was used in practical childbirth charms, but on the basis of the use of mythic imagery in the Karelian charms – something that appears to have happened also in Germanic charms – we may envisage how the watery skerry would function as an image of the otherworld of the womb, from which the birth talisman, Brisingamen, symbolising the child, is freed by the heroic action of the doughty god Heimdallr, who, acting like a Karelian *tietäjä* (or midwife), overcomes the obstacles to birth in the form of Loki. Wave Skerry would also correspond to the Karelian *kipuvuori* (‘mountain of pains’), that functioned as the archetypal place of banishment for deleterious beings – hence Loki could, in effect, have been banished there by Heimdallr, who, like a *tietäjä* going beyond the call of duty actually pursues him there to render him powerless even in this otherworld setting.

In Karelian epic poetry, the great heroic quest to free the mystical welfare-bestowing *sampo* from the dark otherworld of Pohjola is conceived, in Tarkka’s view, as resembling the freeing of a baby from the otherworld, and the imagery of childbirth charms is used in this epic verse, the *sampo* being freed, for example, from behind the locks of a mountain fastness by oiling the gates (e.g. SKVR I 1, no. 91.103–104), just as the midwife eases out the child from the womb (SKVR I 4, no. 960) (Tarkka 1990: 250). Tarkka also points out the connections between the symbolism of the childbirth charms and the world’s creation (the hero, particularly Väinämöinen, churns up the ocean (e.g. SKVR I 1, no. 305.84–87), which may allude to other creation stories in which mud is brought from the depths (see nn. 27, 34 above), like bringing a child from the womb), as well as how Väinämöinen’s arrival in Pohjola (e.g. SKVR I 1, no. 54) – where the epic of the *sampo*’s forging commences – is parallel to a childbirth: “Väinämöinen, drifting across the sea in the Creation of the World poem, may be interpreted as a *tietäjä* drifting like a piece of driftwood or snag in a deathly space, and in his lifting onto land to be helped and cared for by the mistress of Pohjola he does the same as a child when it is born”.<sup>82</sup>

Heimdallr’s birth from ocean onto land (“við jarðar þròm”) is thus parallel to that of Väinämöinen, drifting in the creation myth on the ocean, swayed in the breeze like a baby in a cradle (Tarkka 1990: 253), fatherless like Heimdallr, and coming onto land in Pohjola. In Finnish-Karelian poetic tradition, the link

82 “Maailmansyntyruton meressä ajalehtiva Väinämöinen voidaan tulkita kuolemanomaisessa tilassa, ajopuuna eli vesihakona ajalehtivaksi tietäjäksi – noustessaan maihin Pohjolan emännän auttamana ja hoivaamana hän tekee samaa kuin lapsi syntyessään” (Tarkka 1990: 254).

in imagery with that found in childbirth charms is apparent – the child is thought of as coming up onto land, as if from an otherworld ocean; the emergence from the ‘ocean’ of the womb obviously lay behind this image of passage between worlds. In view of this parallel, the imagery of Heimdallr’s birth could well have been used as a sort of *historiola* in Norse birth charms (or ‘literary’ compositions that alluded to such charms). The ‘birth’ of Väinämöinen onto land occurs in the creation myth; Väinämöinen also acts as a demiurge in the creation story, other variants of which involve the drawing of mud from the ocean’s bottom, the imagery of which again matches that of the birth of a child, drawn from the otherworldly ocean of the womb. The parallelism in the imagery in the much better-recorded Finnish-Karelian poetic corpus again supports what was argued above, that the saving of the Brisingamen from the waters of Vágasker alludes to the formation of the world by drawing mud from the ocean’s depth, and that Heimdallr’s own birth myth acted as a metonym of the formation or ‘birth’ of the world from the ocean’s depths.

When Väinämöinen lands in Pohjola, he embarks on a heroic adventure involving the creation, then rescue, of the *sampo* from this dark and deathly realm. The *sampo*, like the Brisingamen, is a guarantor of well-being (if not specifically of birth: but its story was used in charms aimed at securing successful harvests), which originally seems to have been a concrete realisation of the world pillar that signified the working structure of the cosmos – much as, as has been argued, Heimdallr personified the social and cosmic order signified by the world tree. The Finnish-Karelian and Norse myths, and the emphases within them, are not identical (for example, the shattering of the *sampo* is not paralleled by anything that happens to the Brisingamen, as far as we know), but they may be seen as slightly different arrangements of very similar mythic elements into narrative sequences. The possibility of influence between Norse and Finnish-Karelian traditions, probably in the Viking age and before, is certainly possible.

### III. Synthesis

#### What was *Heimdallargaldr*?

It was noted in the concluding section of Part I that Heimdallr emerges as a guardian of birth. Yet, as was observed above, he is not merely a guardian of birth, but a fierce defender of order, of which birth forms part, in which

role he contrasts with the monster-bearing Loki. Any invocation of Heimdallr would therefore, in practical terms, surely have been intended to ward off the ills of disorder that could characterise birth in so many ways, and to which birth charms, recorded for example from the Karelian tradition, pay such keen attention. Heimdallr's defence of order is manifest in his role as guardian of the boundary of the realm of the gods (against incursions of giants in particular). His guarding the realm of the gods is, surely, a macrocosmic representation of the *vårdträd* overseeing the welfare of a farm and its inhabitants, which must include the successful production of progeny – as is made explicit in the custom of birthing women clutching the *vårdträd*. Birth is itself a crossing of boundaries between worlds; this is made very explicit in birth charms in the Karelian tradition. Here, the *tietäjä*'s job is to open a safe passage for the baby from the world beyond, and to close off the passage immediately afterwards to ensure against the ingress of evil spirits, which would harm both the baby and the community – a role reminiscent of Heimdallr's guardianship of divine boundaries.

As guardian of the gods' realm, Heimdallr stays “á himins enda” (‘at the edge of heaven’); his birth also highlights his liminality, for he is born “við jarðar þròm” (‘at the edge of earth’), at the boundary between earth and sea, and at his birth he is *aukinn megni*, magically empowered, by both earth and water. His liminal empowerment is to be seen as an assertion of his ability to successfully oversee and regulate passage between worlds, such as takes place at birth, and the charm of his own birth acts as the primordial prototype to be invoked at any future births. The stress upon the nineness of his mothers surely relates to his control over all the realms of the cosmos, passage between which he oversees, like the world tree, which is arguably born of nine ogresses in *Völuspá* (Dronke 1997: comm. *Völuspá*, st. 2/7–8), and encompassing the nine worlds. His birth from the waves may allude to the first land rising out of ocean: hence he identifies his birth with the primordial act of the earth's formation.

Any first-person declaration by a god is an assertion of his power. The most notable is Óðinn's as he hangs on the tree in *Hávamál*, st. 138: “Veit ek at ek hekk” (‘I know that I hung’), which leads on to his acquisition of runes, and the declaration of his knowledge of various charms. Knowledge is emphasised as the goal in the first word the god utters: ‘I know’. In Heimdallr's case, the surviving line of *Heimdallargaldr* is an assertion of the god's power, derived from the declaration of his origin – it is birth that is emphasised, and, possibly, also his mastery of the nine worlds. It has been argued above that *Heimdallargaldr* probably followed the pattern of other eddic poems in dissociating the *historiola* from any usable conjuration, but, if we imagine

the poem as a charm proper, then the charmer reciting it would take on the persona of Heimdallr, becoming the powerful primordial son of nine mothers speaking in the first person, in order to appropriate the primordial power of the *historiola*. Relevant here are Tarkka's observations (2013: 189–191; cf. 1990: 247): in discussing a Karelian blood-staunching charm, she notes that in the epic poem *The Knee Wound* (whose narrative the charm references) the power to heal and susceptibility to be healed are traced back to primordial time; “the healer outlines a prototypical healing event in order to replicate its success in the present”. The words of the incantation tend to be framed as lines uttered by Väinämöinen, the eternal sage; hence, the singer of the epic (or charm) assumes a first-person identification with the primordial originator of the charm: “the narrative *historiola* creates an opportunity for the healer to identify with the mythical healer”. Any singer of *Heimdallargaldr* would similarly identify himself with the first-person narrator of the *galdr*, the god Heimdallr.

Apart from being a charm (in whatever sense), Heimdallr's declaration is also a *riddle*: what is born of nine sibling mothers – something that, as in all riddles, is literally impossible? A riddle can only exist, narratively speaking, in a dialogue: Heimdallr is, as it were, posing a culminating question in a wisdom contest: and just as Óðinn beat Vafþrúðnir by asking what he alone could answer, ‘What did Óðinn speak in the ear of his son before he was laid on the pyre?’ (*Vafþrúðnismál*, st. 54), so Heimdallr in effect asks ‘What am I, born of nine sibling mothers?’ – the answer to which is, in the words of *Hyndluljóð*, “einn borinn, öllum meiri” (‘the one who was born greater than all’), who therefore cannot be overcome. Although the evidence is sparse, we do not have any indication that anyone other than Loki could be Heimdallr's wisdom-contender (Loki's role as Heimdallr's opponent at *ragna rök* surely marks him out as occupying this role categorically); and just as Loki is finally overcome by Þórr's might in *Lokasenna*, in *Heimdallargaldr* he was, perhaps, defeated by Heimdallr's assertion of his own power. The use of the charm or spell in *Skírnismál* to overpower the will and resistance of Gerðr illustrates the power of words that is implicit in the title and the extant line of *Heimdallargaldr*.

*Heimdallargaldr*, however, according to Snorri (on the majority manuscript reading), also treated Heimdallr's strange death – or at least his being struck through with a head (which implicitly killed him). Why would the god's death appear in a charm? We might compare the Second Merseburg Charm: here, even though the *historiola* is one of healing, the act of stumbling with a lame horse forms a premonition of doom, which we know to await Baldor, the lord who stumbles (see Frog, forthcoming). The charm presents us with the idea of the world balanced between creation and

destruction – which we may compare with the balance between Heimdallr and Loki in *Hyndluljóð* or *Húsdrápa*. The same principle is at work in the Finnish-Karelian charms which use a dualistic primordial scene to indicate how evil has tarnished things in the world: even an act of healing is only a temporary fix in a world mired in destruction. The inclusion of both Heimdallr's birth and his death in the *galdr* also corresponds to a feature common to Karelian charms (but absent from many other traditions), of proclaiming the whole history of something over which the singer wishes to gain power – though it should be reiterated that in the Karelian tradition this inclusiveness does not encompass eschatological elements (see for example Honko 1968: 126–128). Consistent with this principle would be the suggestion of Dumézil (1973: esp. 128), that Heimdallr is a so-called 'frame god', who appears at the beginning and conclusion of activities; this is an attractive interpretation, but the extant sources are too scant to allow any convincing conclusion on its viability.<sup>83</sup>

In her discussion of the Karelian *Knee Wound*, Tarkka notes (2013: 289–291) that the epic text might sometimes return to the fictive narrative of what happened after the healing, which disrupts the transposition of the magical power from the mythic world to the present situation, so that the epic text becomes a *representation* of a magical act, but not wholly magical in itself. This analysis has implications for the interpretation of *Heimdallargaldr*: if the primordial event depicted was directed, without interference, to effecting a healing or other change in the present, then it could be viewed as a charm in the strict sense, but if – as perhaps seems more likely – its narrative returned to subsequent events undertaken by Heimdallr, then it would be an evocation of a charm rather than having any immediate magical power in itself, assuming we accept Tarkka's categorisation as valid for other traditions than the Karelian.

The tendency noted by Tarkka for the narrative element to expand what is needed for a charm into the protagonist's wider career might be realised, in a Norse context, by inclusion of eschatological mythic motifs. Although this

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83 Heimdallr's primordality has already been considered above; his finality may be expressed in that the contest between Loki and Heimdallr at *ragna røk* is the last mentioned by Snorri (*Gylfaginning*, ch. 51): "Loki á orrustu við Heimdall, ok verðr hvár annars bani. Því næst slyngur Surtr eldi yfir jörðina ok brennir allan heim" ('Loki holds battle with Heimdallr, and each becomes the death of the other. Next Surtr casts fire over the earth and burns the whole world'). However, Snorri's main source for *ragna røk*, namely *Völuspá*, does not mention the contest between these two gods, and Snorri may simply have squeezed it into his account after giving the other contests which do derive from the poem. On the other hand, *Völuspá* does mention the sounding of Heimdallr's horn Gjallarhorn, which might be read as a symbol of finality and conclusion, in that it marks the end of the known world in time, after which chaos ensues.

differs from Karelian tradition, the general principle of desiring to expound what is significant about the protagonist's doings applies to both traditions. The interest in eschatological events (or even simply death-bringing outcomes) as narrative culminations is evident in a number of Norse poems, such as *Völuspá* or *Vafþrúðnismál*. The gods' fates at *ragna røk* represent their failures as the final outcomes of weaknesses they had exhibited during the course of the history of the cosmos.<sup>84</sup>

In Norse poems such as *Völuspá* or *Hyndluljóð*, the eschatology offers a framework within which to present mythological 'facts', with the implication that 'this is all there is to say about the god' (within the terms of each poem's remit; thus the focus of the knowledge in *Vafþrúðnismál* is cosmogonic and eschatological, as opposed to the cosmographic focus of *Grímnismál*). *Heimdallargaldr* could have been another such poem, with the beginning and end of the god acting as a container for mythological knowledge with some particular focus, within which the charm element was an evocation, rather than an exemplification of a charm proper.

Indeed, viewed as a charm proper, if Snorri is relaying an ancient tradition in his observation that Loki and Heimdallr fought at the end of the world, each killing the other, then the evocation of this eschatological contest would appear to be counter-productive, as illustrating the god's weakness rather than his power.

Yet Snorri may not have been telling the full story of the final conflict. *Völuspá* mentions the return of some gods in the new world, notably Baldr and Höðr, the protagonists of the greatest conflict of all (in that it forms a pivotal point in the course – *røk* – of the gods' downfall in the poem). *Vafþrúðnismál*, st. 45, indicates that a man and woman took refuge at the end of the world in Hoddmimir's *holt* (either a stand of trees, or more likely a single tree), and became the first couple of the new world. If they survived, then presumably so did the *holt*, and their emergence as the new primordial couple matches that of Askr and Embla, derived in some way from the world tree. If we view the sheltering and 'engendering' *holt* as an image of the world tree resurrected in the new world, then we might see a hint that Heimdallr – as a hypostasis of the world tree and guardian of (human) birth and life – is also reborn in some way, still "sif sífjaðan sjötum giörvøllum" (*Hyndluljóð*, st. 43) ('related by affinity to all families'). This is stretching speculation, of course, but it shows that an eschatological reference in a charm could potentially act as a reaffirmation of a god's power, rather than an acknowledgement of his ultimate defeat.

84 For example, Freyr lacks his sword that fought of itself against the giants, which is now wielded by Surtr in *Völuspá*, st. 50 (see Dronke 1997: comm. *Völuspá*, st. 50/3–4).

On the assumption that the *galdr* is likely to have included a *historiola* highlighting Heimdallr's contending with Loki, which would serve as a basis for dealing with the ills of actual childbirth, it would seem natural to think that such a contest over birth itself, occurring in a charm *historiola*, would be reflected in or allude to its mythic counterpart, the contest over the Brisingamen, the talisman of birth, which, emerging from the waters of Vágasker (as I read the myth), forms a metonym of Heimdallr's own birth from the waves. It is, of course, impossible to show that the Brisingamen was in fact referenced in the charm.<sup>85</sup>

Loki, if he did appear in the charm (as argued), can only have had the role of personifying the forces of chaos, attempting to make an ingress against the world of gods guarded by Heimdallr, which foreshadows his final ingress at *ragna røk*; in the *Húsdrápa*, this ingress takes the form of attempting to keep the Brisingamen, which may or may not have been the form this mytheme took in *Heimdallargaldr*. The particular focus must, in any case, have been the guardianship of successful progeny – contrasted, to judge by *Hyndluljóð*, with Loki's monstrous and destructive offspring. In charm terms (and bearing in mind the birth cosmography found in Karelian *tietäjä* charms), saving the Brisingamen from the bleak Vágasker represents the bringing of the child from the watery otherworld at birth; thus salvaging the Brisingamen and bringing it back to the world of the gods represents a successful guardianship over birth, the transition of the baby from the other world to this.

As for the actual content of *Heimdallargaldr*, if we take the bare facts (or reasonable suppositions) that *Heimdallargaldr* dealt with Heimdallr's birth and death, and hence, given that he fought against Loki at *ragna røk*, his contest with Loki, and leave aside the question of whether it also referenced the Brisingamen myth, then we are left with a core that is close to the charm passages of *Hyndluljóð*, which presents Heimdallr's birth and his guardianship of birth as part of ordered society (in his designation as being *sif sifjaðr*, related by affinity to all households), the monstrous birth-giving of Loki, and *ragna røk*, at which they both perished (though it mentions nothing of the felling by a head). In terms of charm ideology, the practitioner would be appropriating the beneficial powers of Heimdallr, and banishing the monstrous outcomes effected by Loki, by manifesting knowledge of them within the charm. As the central section of *Hyndluljóð* is best interpreted as

85 Snorri's use of *Húsdrápa* rather than *Heimdallargaldr* in his recounting of the Brisingamen myth may well simply reflect his purposes in *Skáldskaparmál*, to illustrate how skaldic kennings work through citation from skaldic, not eddic, verse; hence it is difficult to infer that he avoided *Heimdallargaldr* in this context because of any postulated absence of the Brisingamen myth.

a mish-mash of fragments from earlier sources, the Heimdallr/Loki stanzas could well be based on parts of *Heimdallargaldr*, and give an insight into its possible content (though *Hyndluljóð* is in simple *fornyrðislag* meter, while *Heimdallargaldr*, with its repeated three-stress pattern, is not, so recomposition must have taken place, unless lost portions of *Heimdallargaldr* were largely in *fornyrðislag* too). These stanzas moreover provide no information that Snorri would not have been able to derive from more easily comprehensible sources (other than the strange episode of Loki eating a thought-stone or heart of a woman), which would explain why he gives no further information about the content of *Heimdallargaldr* – it simply did not contain anything else, at least in a comprehensible form, that offered any potential for him to use that he could not have got elsewhere.<sup>86</sup> (This suggestion assumes that stanza 33 of *Hyndluljóð*, which Snorri indicates occurred in a so-called *Völuspá in skamma*, was not, in sources familiar to Snorri, associated within one poem with the Heimdallr/Loki stanzas of *Hyndluljóð*.)

The question remains of whether *Heimdallargaldr* was actually a practical charm. Although birthgiving charms are mentioned several times in eddic poems, primarily at *Sigrdrifumál*, st. 9, and *Oddrúnargrátr*, st. 7 (with *nornir* evoked as guardians of childbirth in *Fáfnismál*, st. 12–13), later records from Scandinavia appear scant, as far as I have been able to find. The neighbouring Finnish-Karelian tradition is much more abundant. Yet we find many features in such charms that cannot be paralleled in what it has been possible to suggest – albeit very tentatively – may have been included in *Heimdallargaldr*. Real charms are practical, even when they include narrative elements: although, for example, there is often almost no mention of the birthgiving woman in Karelian birth charms, nonetheless the baby, the otherworld beings, and the charmer are all very much present, and there is explicit mention of how the baby is brought out, for example from the ‘bone cage’ (Viljakainen 2010: 231–232). While Loki could possibly be equated with the pain-causing spirits who are sought out and banished in some birthgiving charms, we have no indication of the expression in the verse of any practicalities, nor is it possible to discern either any conjuration or any of the ritual elements expected in a practical charm. The inference, based partly on a reading of *Hyndluljóð* as derived in part from *Heimdallargaldr*, that the poem contained not one but several *historiolae* (Heimdallr’s birth, his demise, the antipathy of the heart-eating Loki) points away from *Heimdallargaldr* as a simple charm with one point of reference and one purpose.

86 It is also, of course, possible that *Heimdallargaldr* did contain further information, but Snorri simply did not use it.

On balance, it is more likely that *Heimdallargaldr* was primarily a mythological text, which exploited motifs of Heimdallr's guardianship of progeny and society in a way which alluded to the workings of practical *galdrar*, without actually being one itself: in other words, a *historiola* (or several *historiolae*) without a conjuration, as suggested above, along with a wider framework that included eschatological elements.

## Conclusion

We can never know what the contents of *Heimdallargaldr* were, beyond the surviving short fragment where Heimdallr proclaims his own birth: any consideration of the topic is speculative. Nonetheless, a consideration of what *might* have been dealt with in the poem prompts us to clarify what we can reasonably say about Heimdallr and his function and symbolism within the Norse poetic and religious tradition, and also to ponder what the term *galdr* may have signified when applied to an eddic poem. Establishing the nature of eddic charms in Old Norse must rely on analogues, since we possess no such actual charms, and all the analogues we may consider – those from the Scandinavia of later centuries, from other Germanic traditions such as the Old English or Old High German, and from neighbouring Finno-Ugric peoples, in particular Karelians – differ markedly from each other and most probably from Old Norse charms. We do not have the breadth of material in Old Norse that is available for analysis from the Finnish-Karelian area, which enables a plausible symbolic system of reference to be discerned, in which, for example, the birth of the world may stand as a metonym of the birth of a child (or *vice versa*). There are indications, nonetheless, that similar symbolic allusion existed in Old Norse in the case of Heimdallr between births on the microcosmic or personal level and the macrocosmic, the creation of the world itself; the profound symbolism of the Karelian *tietäjä*'s verses strengthens the case, already dimly discernible on the basis of internal evidence, for such symbolism to have existed in Old Norse too.

It is most probable, in my opinion, that *Heimdallargaldr* was never a 'real' charm, with a conjuration for use in actual childbirth, but, presenting itself as a *galdr*, it would have adopted much of the form and symbolism of a real charm related to childbirth, in the way *Völuspá* pretends to be a séance with a *völva*, alluding to the norms of such séances without actually exemplifying them. *Völuspá* appeals to a complex network of poetic allusion, and, as has been discussed in this chapter, *Heimdallargaldr*, in invoking Heimdallr's birth, implicitly does so too.

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