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NÍÐS ÓKVÍÐNUM

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The problem to be discussed concerns the end of Vsp. 56.

gengr fet niu
Fjörgynjar burr
neppr frá naðri
níðs ókviðnum

The meaning of the words *níðs ókviðnum* - according to Dronke the most difficult line of the poem - depends heavily on the interpretation of the first word *níð*. The Arnarnaganae editions of Edda Snorra Sturlusonar (1848-87) and Edda Sæmundar hins fróða (1787-1828) unanimously render *níð* with *contumelia*, as does Sveinbjörn Egilsson (1860: 619) in his lexicon of Old Norse poetic diction. Thus, the phrase *frá naðri níðs ókviðnum* is translated without comment as 'ab angve contumelias non metuente' in the 1828 Volume III of Sæmundar Edda, which makes clear that the editors regarded the words *naðri níðs ókviðnum* as one nominal clause. This syntactical relation was never questioned until 1888, when Finnur Jónsson (1888: 9) proposed to read *níðs ókviðnum*, interpreted by him as a reference to Þorr. The interpretation earned him the praise of Sigurður Nordal, who in his *Völuspá* monograph warmly supported the idea. The emendation would provide the stanza with an elegant framing, and stylistically the idea has something to commend it, but the dative form *ókviðnum* occurs in all manuscripts, and the suggestion must be rejected. Now, Latin *contumelia* means not only 'insult, reproach,' but also 'assault, blows, malice' and the like, and it was perhaps this secondary connotation of the Latin word which led Müllenhoff (1908²: 83) into positing a meaning 'Schandtät.' His example was followed by Gering (1903 s.v.) and, more recently, Dronke (1997: 151), who translate 'Freveltat' resp. 'vile act'. These translations have in common that they all depict the serpent as the enactor of the *níð*. This interpretation has two flaws. First, ON *níð* is associated with verbal hostility - to the purpose of humiliating your adversary publicly -, and not - at least not directly - with physical violence. Aware of this, Gering (1927: 72) pointed to Old English, where the cognate word *níð* displays a wide

semantic range, including such meanings as 'nequitia, malitia' (Grein 1912 s.v.). In itself, Old English influence is conceivable, and one might be inclined to consider the interpretation favourably, were it not that Gering's explanation suffers from a misinterpretation of *ókviðinn*, the other flaw of this line of approach. As pointed out by Björn M. Olsen (1914: 165), *ókviðinn* refers to a state of mind in response to something threatening, and it cannot mean 'nicht scheuen' (Müllenhoff), or 'nicht zurückschrecken vor' (Gering). To view the word as a litotes for 'eager' seems ill-advised, though the device as such does occur in the poem.

More attractive is the idea advanced by Kock (1923: § 7), who, taking *ókviðinn* in its ordinary sense 'unafraid', suggests a meaning 'fight, battle' for *nið*. Unfortunately, ON *nið* does not occur in this sense, and to maintain it, Kock too must turn to OE *nið*, for which Grein (1912) lists a meaning *pugna*.¹ In that case the apposition would be of a positive nature: the wolf/serpent unafraid of (the) battle / who does not fear the fight. I wonder, though, whether we really have to assume Old English influence. An indication that this need not be necessary, may be the nine paces (*gengr fet niu*) which Þórr steps after killing the World Serpent. The feature is significant, because it probably reflects one of the conditions which had to be fulfilled in order to be proclaimed victorious in a duel. The same detail occurs, albeit in a different context, in the Poppo legend, where it is told that *Poppo biskup lét leggja glóandi járnslá i hǫnd sér ok bar niu fet, svá at allr týðr sá* (Flb. I, 113). There can be little doubt therefore that the poet views the encounter as a duel, which may give us the key to a proper understanding of the phrase *niðs ókviðnum*. In *Gísla saga*, Holmgöngu-Skeggja expresses his contempt for his rival - Kolbjörn, who fails to turn up for a duel - by directing a *nið*-ceremony to his absent adversary. Kolbjörn saved his life by staying away, but his conduct made him the subject of a humiliating *nið*. The World Serpent looses his life in the fight, but he does not back out. So, whatever people think of him, he is no coward, and he does not have to fear any *nið* being directed against him. It may seem unusual to endow a monster with feelings of honour and pride, but Snorri does the same in his story about the fettering of Fenrir. If the analysis is correct, the words

¹ Kock also compares Old-Saxon *niðes ni sehanti*, rendered by him as 'ej fruktande (eientl. ej havande försyn) för strid' but no references are given, and the parallel appears a reconstruction. A meaning 'battle, fight' for OS *nið* is not recorded by Seht (1925) or Heyne (1866).

serve to enlarge Þórr's triumph, who not only slew an enemy, but one that could not be accused of cowardice. Björn M. Ólsen (1914: 166) once raised the question who, then, would there be left to praise or blame after all living beings had perished. Nordal replied in response that the answer can be found Vsp. 60, where the serpent is mentioned as a topic of conversation in the reborn new world. The assembly gathered there memorizes the world serpent as *máttigr moldþinnur* 'mighty earth rope' - no mean commemoration, I would think - which accords well with the idea that the words *níðs ókviðnum* are used to underscore the serpent's fierceness. The interpretation advanced here is basically the same as the one advocated by Nordal, the difference being that the words don't refer to Þórr, but to the serpent - in accordance with manuscript readings. That the words allude to the serpent as an epitheton ornans was suggested already by Deiter (1899: 36), who wondered "Bedeutet der Ausdruck so viel wie 'die keine üble Nachrede zu schauen hat, berühmt?'" The answer appears to be in the affirmative. There is more. The interpretation brings to mind the formula *mamma mæst óníðingr* 'the most un-dastard among men,' found on a number of Swedish and Danish rune stones (DR 68, Sm 5, Sm 37 and Ög 77), in which the element *níð* is likewise combined with the prefixed negation *ó-*. This may be coincidence, but the poet's fondness for word-play makes a case for arguing that *níðs ókviðnum* touches on a commemorative formula of the kind found on the rune stones. I don't want to use this as an argument though, nor is there any need to. As I hope to have shown above, it is perfectly possible to accept the words as we have them without manipulating the preserved text or assuming Old English influence. If not, we have no choice but following Kock in viewing *níð* as a word for battle, in which case *níð* might belong to the group of words (such as 41/1 *ljǫr*) in the poem which betray influence of Old English semantics.

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