

NOORDSE LETTERS *opstellen naar An Duits*

d' yeghelijk hijn  
n Oolten, en van  
als een onderdaem  
hoogher *Feesle* ga  
am de *Fama* dalen.

# NOORDSE LETTERS

*opstellen  
voor An Duits*

, en van Noort, v  
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aer verlangh, den  
ollen Raet, der G  
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sy hun Heer, hae  
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*Helicon*, van vreuc  
yt en was ghehoc

**Undir hveralundi :**  
notes on *Völuspá* 35.

By Kees Samplonius

The stanza to be discussed runs as follows:

Hapt sá hón liggja  
undir hveralundi,  
lægiarn[s] líki  
Loka áþekktan;  
þar sitr Sigyn,  
þeygi um sínom  
ver velglýjuð -  
vitoð ér enn, eða hvat?

The first helming (Vsp. 35/1-4) is missing in the Hauksbók version, where preference has been given to a more detailed account of Loki's torture. In the following I will only take account of the Codex Regius text, thought to be closer to the poem's original composition. I will first discuss some of the stanza's stylistic features, then proceed to the problem of interpretation, notably the meaning of the much-discussed *hveralundr*.

The manuscript reading <lægjarn> is traditionally emended to *lægjarns*, which gives good meaning indeed: *hapt áþekktan* (acc.) *líki* (dat.) *lægjarns* *Loka* (sg.) 'in shape alike to malignant Loki.' Technically, in terms of poetic license, we could be dealing with *enallage* (cf. Virgil Aen. IV, 132 *odora canum vis*), which would make the emendation redundant, but since the transfer of epithets is unusual in Old Norse poetry, it is probably better to stick to the editorial practice of reading *lægjarns*. The presence of other poetic devices in the stanza is less doubtful: the hyperbaton *hapt áþekktan*, with the helming's first and last word syntactically linked, is hard to miss, as is the litotes *þeygi velglýjuð* 'not very delighted' (cf. Vsp. 17 *lítt megandi* = powerless). Interesting is the way in which the poet refrains from making explicit mention of Loki's punishment, which, however, can be inferred from the phrase *þeygi velglýjuð*, used to characterize Sigyn's mood. Loki is not even named initially, but referred to as Loki's look-alike, a way of designating persons of which the poet appears rather fond.

Structurally, in terms of narrative function, the picture of the captured Loki is reminiscent of the people of Gog and Magog, who according to legend had been concealed by Alexander the Great behind an inaccessible mountain pass in the North, from where they will break free at the end of times (de Goeje 1888, 103). This tallies with the fact that according to Vsp. 51 and *Snorra Edda* Loki leads the forces of destruction at Ragnarök, but here the similarity ends, and there is no indication that the poet was familiar with the legend.

The description of the joyless Sigyn sitting over her malicious husband offers no problems of interpretation. The scene was apparently well-known, since a picture of it occurs on the shaft of the Gosforth Cross, which according to Bailey dates from the period 920 – 950 AD. The significance of this will be touched on later.

The real crux of Vsp. 35 concerns the meaning of *hveralundr*, a compound involving the elements *lundr* and *hverr*. ON *lundr* denotes 'a small wood or grove,' in poetry or translated literature also 'tree,' especially a big and shadowy one. It is probably this last meaning that we are dealing with, though it should be noticed that the said meanings don't differ as much as we, not having one word for both, are inclined to think. It is possible that the poet, in using *lundr*, took account of both meaning of the word. The word *lundr* 'grove' occurs regularly in place-names, often in combination with the name of a heathen deity (Njörðr in Swedish *Närlunda*, Týr in Danish *Tislund*, Þórr in *Torslunde*), which suggests that the word was used to denote groves of a sacrificial character. The Norse toponym *gildalundr* in Stange points in the same direction (Olsen 1915, 160). The sacral overtones of the toponym *lundr* can also be inferred from Reginald of Durham, who in his chronicle describes a certain *lundr* as *nemus paci donatum* 'a grove given to peace' (Smith 1956, 28). *Landnámabók* similarly records how in tenth-century Iceland the settler Þórir snepill *blótaði lundinn* 'worshipped the grove' (Lnb. 1900, 197). Finally, *Barri*, the place where according to *Skírnismál* the god Njörðr meets his beloved, is explicitly called *lundr* in the poem (Skm. 41). The meaning 'tree' occurs in *Merlínusspá* II, 83, a translation of the Prophecies of Merlin (as part of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*) made around or shortly after the year 1200 by the monk Gunnlaugr:

Upp renn siðan  
(sé ek þat fyri)  
traust í turni  
tré Lundúna;  
þrír eru kvistir  
þeim lundí á  
er hann laufi þekr  
land með hringum

rendering the Latin:

Exin super turrim Londoniarum procreabitur arbor, quae tribus solummodo ramis contenta, superficiem totius insulae latitudine foliorum obrumbrabit

Finnur Jónsson (1926, 218) once argued that the vocabulary of *Merlínusspá* shows influence of *Völuspá*. In that case, the use of *lundr* in *Merlínusspá* could indicate that the word occurs in a similar sense in *Völuspá*, though it need hardly be said that the semantics of *lundr* in Vsp. 35 cannot be inferred with any certainty from the meaning allotted to the word by Gunnlaugr. All the same, it is an indication, especially as *lundr* has no equivalent in the Latin text. Gunnlaugr's use of the word shows that *lundr* 'tree' does occur in a context (*spá*) similar to that of our poem. So, nothing forbids us to assume a meaning 'tree' also here. If so, it can only refer to the world tree, which resonates with Vsp. 47, where it is described how the old tree *Yggdrasill* roars when the giant (= Loki) breaks free. If *hveralundr* denotes the world tree, the scene corresponds remarkably with a passage contained in the late-medieval Cornish miracle play called *Creacion of the World*. The play, apparently based on a medieval version of the apocryphal *Life of Adam and Eve*, relates how Seth, at the request of Eve, sets out to collect the oil of mercy for his dying father Adam. Seth experiences three glimpses of Paradise,

which he later conveys to the audience (Neuβ 1983, 155):

In Paradise I saw  
 several marvels, really  
 especially a glorious tree  
 reaching proudly up  
 right to Heaven, I truly believe,  
 with its roots reaching down  
 right into Hell below  
 and there, really and truly  
 in great trouble, was  
 my brother Cain, in pain.

I am not suggesting, of course, that *Völuspá* copied the scene from the Cornish play, or vice versa. The similarity can be accounted for by assuming that the poet of the *Creacion* drew on a medieval Christian tradition similar to the one underlying the *Völuspá* scene.<sup>1</sup> Whatever the relation, the comparison is informative, since the similarity illuminates the *Völuspá* scene.

No less problematic is the compound's first element *hverr*. The word meant originally 'cauldron', but in Iceland it was also used to denote a hot spring. Scholars, with the exception of Finnur Jónsson, long believed this last meaning to be present in Vsp. 35, which in turn was interpreted as proof of the poem's Icelandic provenance (Jessen 1871, 37,72; Björn M. Ólsen 1894, 101). In the words of Gering (1927, 48): "Da es derartige quellen in Norwegen nicht gibt, während sie in Island häufig sind, beweist die stelle den isländischen ursprung der Vsp." (As such springs don't occur in Norway, whereas they are frequent in Iceland, the passage is indicative of the poem's Icelandic origin). In his *Völuspá* monograph Nordal puts great weight on the argument. However, a meaning 'hot spring' would not necessarily prove an Icelandic origin, since medieval sibylline literature was definitely acquainted with the phenomenon. In the *Prophetia Sibillae Magae*, for instance, an early-medieval sibylline text discovered in the last century, God is addressed (v. 49) as *qui calidos latices fervere iubet in viscera terrae* (You, who command hot springs to boil in the bowels of the earth). More importantly, Icelanders would have regarded a hot spring with trees around it as a most inviting environment, and they would hardly have associated it with the infernal environment in which Loki must pay for his crimes. As Hans Kuhn (1945, 171-2) put it: "Heiße Quellen und ein Birkenhain dabei, das hat für die isländische Phantasie wohl nie ein Ort des Grauens sein können" (No Icelander would ever envisage a hot spring with a birch grove as a place of terror). The observation led Kuhn into following Finnur Jónsson, who had preferred to stick to the word's basic meaning 'basin, hollow.' It was perhaps in anticipation of such criticism, that Nordal (1923, 106) suggested that the landscape sketched by the poet was largely imaginary: "Ímyndun goðsagnanna er ekki þrælbundin því, sem menn hafa séð" (In divine myths imagination is not chained down to what men have seen). Aware that such statement might undermine the value of the passage as evidence for the poem's presumed Icelandic origin, he added between brackets: "enginn gat hugsað sér vellandi uppsprettu, sem hafði ekki séð hana né fregnir af haft" (No one could have imagined a boiling spring who had not seen it, or heard of it). Modern scholarship on the whole is less inclined to regard the description as proof of the poem's Icelandic provenance. Hermann Pálsson (1994, 82) flatly rejects the argument, and even Dronke, who still defends an Icelandic connection, is cautious to say (1997, 140): "While hot springs most immediately bring Iceland to mind, their proximity to the tree can only relate to a mythological, not a natural landscape." Dronke assumes *hverar* to

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<sup>1</sup>. On the various traditions, see Quinn 1962, passim, esp. 160 note 66.

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denote hot springs, which she compares to the well beneath the world tree, commenting that 'cauldrons' of hot volcanic springs would be an appropriate place for Loki's confinement. The argument is doubtful. It is true that *Hvergelmir* (in Grm. 26), to which Dronke refers, reflects the idea of the well beneath the world tree, but apart from the name's first element *hverr* -to be discussed later- the well cannot be said to display any medieval hellish features. On the contrary, what we are dealing with is a highly positive myth of great antiquity: the watering of the world tree -the tree of life-, which is sustained and nourished by a subterranean source under it. This concept, the roots of which can be traced back to Ancient Mesopotamia, crops up in Ezekiel 31:3-10:

Behold I will liken you to a cedar in Lebanon, with fair branches and forest shade, and of great height, its top among the clouds. The waters nourished it, the great Deep made it grow tall, making its rivers flow around the place of its planting, sending forth its streams to all the trees of the forest. So it towered high above all the trees of the forest; its bough grew large and its branches long, from abundant waters in its shoots. All the birds of the air made their nests in its boughs; under its branches all the beasts of the field brought forth their young; and under its shadow dwelt all great nations. It was beautiful in its greatness, in the length of its branches; for its roots went down to abundant waters.

After nourishing the tree, the water pours out and flows to all other trees and waters, e.g. the rest of the earth. In Christian art the theme recurs as the picture of the well underneath a pinetree, from the branches of which the water is running down (Bauerreiß 1938, 24-5).<sup>2</sup> According to St Augustine, the river in Paradise flows from the tree in four branches (*De Gen. ad litt.* PL xxxiv 375). A fountain out of which flow four great streams of water and above it a marvellous tree is a standard motif in medieval myths of Paradise. In the *Visio Pauli* Paul records his entrance in Paradise: "And I entered in further and saw a tree planted, out of whose roots flowed waters, and out of it was the beginning of the four rivers ..." (James 1953, 549). The theme enjoyed great popularity in a modified form, in which interest had shifted to the four rivers of Paradise (in accordance with Genesis), whereas the tree itself was transformed into the Cross, but one that regularly showed tree-like features.<sup>3</sup> Many times we find various kinds of animals depicted to the sides, often, though not always, arranged as antithetical pairs. The scenery of Grm. 26. probably harks back to a configuration of this kind, especially as the hart mentioned there, is a well-known Christian symbol. The stanza (Grm. 26), therefore, does not lend much support to Dronke's idea of subterranean hot springs being an intrinsic part of Loki's punishment underneath the tree. It is possible that medieval concepts about Hell have played in, but in that case we had better skip all arguing about hot springs, and focus on the meaning 'cauldron' instead. This leaves us with the *kerlaugar* mentioned in Grm. 29, from which it cannot be inferred that the waters which the god Þórr must wade include volcanic springs underneath the world tree, though they don't refute it neither.

How, then, is *hveralundr* to be understood? Various explanations are possible, all of them speculative. Dettler and Heinzl (1903, 46) once argued that the name *Iárnviðr* may derive from the fact that the wood was used by blacksmiths for forging iron tools, and they suggested a similar background for *hveralundr*. In that case, *hverar* would refer to cauldrons

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<sup>2</sup>. For a slightly different, yet converging picture, see Rahner (1957, 259).

<sup>3</sup>. Medieval legend fostered a tradition according to which the Tree of Knowledge, situated at the center of Eden, corresponded typologically to the Cross of Christ, raised at the center of the world. Though close reading of the Scripture could only preserve a firm distinction between the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge, medieval writers at times substituted one for the other -or confused them altogether- for reasons of convenience. On this, see J.M. Evans (1968, 67, 139-40, 188).

and buckets manufactured by these blacksmiths. As regards *Iárnviðr* the interpretation is not without merits (see Comm. Vsp. 40), but for *hveralundr* any connection with blacksmiths is unlikely.<sup>4</sup>

Hermann Pálsson (1994, 81) also explains *hverar* as cauldrons, but in an entirely different way. Calling to mind that in place-names *lundr* often denotes a place of veneration (see above), Hermann assumes *hverar* to refer to cauldrons used for drinking at divine celebrations, as attested in the opening stanza of *Hymiskviða*.

To make clear my own view on the matter, it is necessary to return shortly to Nordal's interpretation of *hverar* as 'hot springs'. As said, Kuhn disregarded the idea on the ground that to Icelanders trees growing at a warm spring would appear a place of delight, not one of perdition. It is, perhaps, a main error of scholars of past generations that they, in one way or another, all sought to interpret *hverar* as a part of Loki's punishment. Does it really have to be that way? Must *hverar* have a meaning that connects it to Loki's punishment? Or more formally: are the pictures displayed in the stanza necessarily confined to the same time and space? Are we dealing with a pictorial unity here? I don't think so. Let us look once again at the above passage of the Cornish *Creacion of the World*. It is described here how Seth, before seeing Cain in chains, perceives all kinds of marvels. The diptychal features of the description are hard to miss. Consequently, if we accept the similarity, there is no need to reject the old interpretation of *hverar* simply because it would make *hveralundr* incompatible with the idea of punishment. What the poet depicts may well represent a many-levelled panorama: a view of the paradise tree, with underneath it (*undir hveralundi*) the image of the bound Loki as a portent of things to come.

It has been argued (Detter and Heinzel 1903, 47; Nordal 1923/1956) that *undir* in our stanza refers to something that is relatively small in comparison to something else. Such a meaning would be incompatible indeed with the interpretation advocated here, but in fact this meaning hardly reflects the word's main semantic feature, and there is no compelling reason for adopting it.

The probability that the description of Vsp. 35 involves different levels of view, clearly diminishes the force of Kuhn's argument. There is accordingly still room for advocating a meaning 'hot springs,' though hardly in the traditional way, where the hot springs constituted an essential part of Loki's punishment. If people regarded *hverar* in the positive sense advocated by Kuhn, then paradise –or an opaque concept of it perceived in early post-Conversion Iceland– may have been envisaged as a place adorned with trees and pleasant hot springs. All the same, that is hardly what *hverar* signifies here. It seems more likely that we are dealing with *hverr* as the receptacle at a well, a little basin, man-made or natural, over the edge of which water pours down as a little stream. This meaning of *hverr* is documented in the Old English place-name *hwerwyll* (with the first element apparently ON *hverr*, combined with a second element OE *wella* 'spring of water,' cf. Smith 1956, 272). A meaning 'hot spring' is out of the question here, since these don't occur on the British Isles. The idea that *hverr* in Vsp. 35 may denote just a spring, not only a volcanic one, has been suggested, albeit in a different context, by Benedict Gröndal (1892, 136) more than a century

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4. It is another matter that in medieval drama Hell is traditionally depicted with kitchen implements (Axton 1974, 113, 116), especially cauldrons and buckets, which, then, could be taken as referring to the abode of the Devil. These plays are admittedly rather late, possibly no earlier than the twelfth century, which makes it seem ill-advised to explain any possible occurrence of cauldrons in Vsp. 35 along this line. On the other hand, the image is probably older, since already Honorius Augustodunensis (ca. 1080-1137) calls the devil 'God's industrious blacksmith,' and he may not have been the first to do so. Cf. Ohly (1995 [1974], 125): *Wenn der Teufel in der lateinischen liturgischen 'Feier' im Kirchenraum auch keinen Auftritt hat, so heißt das nicht, die volkssprachige geistliche Dichtung habe höchstdramatische Teufelsszenen nicht schon lange vorher gestaltet.*

ago.<sup>5</sup> In view of this, Grm. 26 deserves attention: not only is *Hvergelmir* (literally 'sounding *hverr*') a receptacle, it also represents the well or spring from which all waters take their course: *þaðan eigu vötn öll vega*. This, however, corresponds exactly to the rivers that flow from the paradise tree of Christian legend, as described in the *Vision of Paul* (quoted above) and other apocryphal writings. Consequently, the imagery of Vsp. 35 may well reflect the idea of the world tree from which all rivers take their course, with Loki fettered underneath (in the basement, so to speak). That *hverr* has to do with the well of a river might derive support from the following stanza (Vsp. 36), where, seemingly without reason, the narrative suddenly focusses on a river. The emphasis would make sense, though, in the above interpretation, which may also give us a clue as to why stanza 36 is omitted in the Hauksbók version: no *hveralundr*, no river.

Finally, a word must be said about *áþekkr* (line 4). Dronke (1993, 123) sees the word as proof that the poet was familiar with the Christian doctrine of redemption through Christ:

The *völva*'s term, *áþekkr*, is a play upon Loki's disguise-name, *Þökk*, and upon the fact that he is now no longer disguised, but recognizable. By calling himself *Þökk*, Loki is embodying the 'Thanks', the *Deo gratias* that the Christians give, for the sacrificial upon which the redemption, the renewal of life after death, depends.

When I first read this suggestion, my reaction was one of disbelief, but renewed reading of the poem gradually convinced me that Dronke may have a point. The use of puns, hidden word-plays and underlying references, as well as words that are either vague or deliberately ambiguous is an characteristic aspect of the *Völuspá*'s poet's language. The same probably applies to the poet's use of Christian imagery. Two principles seem to steer the way in which the poet presents and describes the poem's chain of events: euhemerism and typology. The Christian features of Vsp. 35 fall into the latter category. We have to wake up to the fact that the Gosforth picture of Sigyn sitting over the fettered Loki occurs in a Christian setting, which can only mean that already in the tenth century the Baldr story (of which the Sigyn motif forms part) was interpreted in symbolic terms, as a pagan prefiguration of Christian truth. It shows that the *Völuspá* poet could draw on Christian interpretations of pagan imagery that had developed prior to the composition of the poem. It is in fact the only way that will ever make us arrive at a proper understanding of the poem, whereas the conventional approach -the adoption of Christian imagery in the service of heathen resistance- will never lead to a satisfying interpretation. It is simply a Christian poem. As I have discussed this matter elsewhere I will leave it at this here.

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<sup>5</sup>. "»hver« getur hér verið = brunnur, því öll þessi orð: hver, ketill, brunnur eru skyld að merkingu." As to why this lead was subsequently lost, one can only guess. Gröndal's conclusion differs from mine, in that he believes *hverar* to refer to *Hvergelmir*, *Mímisbrunnr* and *Urðarbrunnr*, which Snorri (*Gylfaginning* ch. 15) situates at the roots of the tree *Yggdrasil*. It never occurred to him that Snorri's account -itself at odds with (some of) the Eddic data- might be nothing but a distorted echo of the theme discussed above.

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