



**HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS**  
**Hugvísindasvið**

# **A GIANTESS DECEIVED**

*A Re-Investigation into the Origins and Functions of Hávamál  
Stanzas 104-110 in the Light of Sacral Kingship*

**Ritgerð til M.A.-prófs**

**Dorian Knight**

**Maí 2012**

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## *Dedication*

This thesis is dedicated to my parents who inspired me in the first place and whose financial contributions have allowed me to follow my interests, and to Zuz, who helped me in more ways than she knows.

I would also like to greatly thank my friends in Iceland for all the memorable times we have shared and my supervisor Gísli Sigurðsson and Torfi Tulinius, the director of the M.A. programme in Medieval Icelandic Studies, for academic guidance when and where necessary.

## ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

The thesis illuminates stanzas 104-110 in *Hávamál* as a motif of initiation into sacral kingship by a comparison to the very same theme within Celtic mythology.

Using Gísli Sigurðsson's premise that the oral background to much eddic poetry was more open to Gaelic influence than normally assumed and the inherent conservatism of the pagan Irish sacral kingship tradition I will focus on the following points: through a detailed analysis and comparison of a selected 11<sup>th</sup> century Old Irish text I illustrate that salient mythological aspects in *Hávamál* point to an initiation into sacral kingship underlying the text. Furthermore, in a similar manner to that which Gro Steinsland has recently provided for certain other eddic poems I attempt to show that these stanzas in *Hávamál* were written by a Christian editor/scribe using the *hieros gamos* motif on behalf of a Norwegian royal lineage, with Gunnlöð as an ancestress of Hörðaland.

However if stanzas 104-110 can be understood as a motif of sacral kingship certain elements appear to be missing. In all the eddic poems identified by Steinsland as comprising *hieros gamos* an offspring is produced. In *Hávamál* this is not the case as Óðinn steals the mead and Gunnlöð is left betrayed and weeping with no offspring forthcoming, parodying the traditional roles of the sovereignty goddess in such motifs. This indicates that although the editor/scribe of the stanzas in the *Codex Regius* had a degree of knowledge about pagan sacral kingship he is parodying the *hieros gamos* motif to means that are fully explored in the thesis.

## ÁGRIP (ÍSLENSKA)

Ritgerð þessi skýrir erindi 104 – 110 *Hávamála* í ljósi frásagna um innleiðingu í heilagan konungdóm og með samanburði við sama þema í keltneskri goðafræði.

Byggt er á kenningu Gísla Sigurðssonar um að munnlegur bakgrunnur Eddukvæða hafi verið móttækilegri fyrir gelískum áhrifum en gert er ráð fyrir venjulega, en einnig á eðlislægri íhaldssemi írsku hefðarinnar um heiðinn heilagan konungdóm. Í brennidepli verða eftirfarandi atriði: með nákvæmri greiningu og samanburði á völdum fornírskum texta frá 11. öld verður sýnt að mikilvæg goðafræðileg atriði í *Hávamálum* bendi til að frásagnir um innleiðingu í heilagan konungdóm búi undir textanum. Þar að auki verður með svipuðum hætti og Gro Steinsland notaði til að upplýsa önnur Eddukvæði, sýnt að þessi erindi í *Hávamálum* hafa verið samin af kristnu skáldi/skrifara sem notaði *hieros gamos* mótífið fyrir hönd konunglegs norsks ætternis með Gunnlöð sem formöður frá Hörðalandi.

Þó hægt sé að skilja erindi 104 – 110 þannig að þau innihaldi minnið um heilagan konungdóm, virðast vanta tiltekna þætti. Í öllum Eddukvæðum þar sem Steinsland telur að finna megi *hieros gamos* er afkvæmi getið. Þetta gerist ekki í *Hávamálum* þar sem Óðinn stelar mjöðinn og skilur eftir Gunnlöð svikna og grátandi án væntanlegs afkvæmis. Því verður haldið fram að hér sé um skrumskælingu að ræða á hinu hefðbundnu hlutverki fullveldisgyðjunnar í slíkum mótífum. Þótt ritstjóri erindanna þekkti vel til hins heiðna heilaga kongudóm, virðist hann vera snúa út úr *hieros gamos* mótífinu með hætti sem er kannaður ítarlega í þessari ritgerð.

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## I. INTRODUCTION – CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS

In this thesis I will provide a reappraisal of stanzas 104-110 in the eddic poem *Hávamál* in light of the theory of sacral kingship. Although many aspects of the poem have been well studied, ‘fewer recent scholars have dealt with the obscure and difficult mythological elements’ (Svava Jakobsdóttir 2002, p.28) contained within it.<sup>1</sup> I suggest it is only through a comparison with the Old Irish sources, that a greater appreciation of the sacral kingship motif within these stanzas of *Hávamál* can be reached.<sup>2</sup> My approach will be explained further in the following introduction.

Sacral kingship in the Old Icelandic and Old Irish cultural record comes down to the modern reader through the Old Icelandic and Old Irish myths, refracted through literature. A definition of myth is therefore of paramount importance. Although the theoretical discussion behind the meaning of the term is problematical, it is not the main topic of this thesis. Therefore I shall limit myself to the straightforward definition of myth expounded recently by Brink (2001, p.79) as ‘stories concerning divinities, giants, monsters, elves, heroes, ancestors and human beings, etiological accounts of fundamental events in a beginning or in some not definable *then*, when time and space dissolves’.

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<sup>1</sup> See Svava Jakobsdóttir 2002, pp.27-29 for a brief historiography on the tradition of *Hávamál* criticism, and Larrington, C., 1993. *A Store of Common Sense: Gnomie Theme and Style in Old Icelandic and Old English Wisdom Poetry*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. See the bibliography for a more complete listing.

<sup>2</sup> A note on terminology is important here. Although occasional reference is made to ‘Celts’, I will focus on the Insular Celts and more specifically the Old Irish, as they were the most obviously present in medieval Iceland. Gaelic also refers to the specifically Old Irish peoples in this thesis. However, occasional reference will be made to other Insular Celts, for example, the Brythonic Welsh. The terminology on the Nordic side is a little trickier. Although the myth present in *Hávamál* were likely to have been known in various and similar forms across the Nordic/Scandinavian region (indicating the geographical areas where the Old Norse language predominated), my focus in this thesis is how the myth, as it is written in Iceland in the medieval period is manifest in *Hávamál* in the *Codex Regius*. Therefore I shall primarily use the term ‘Old Icelandic’ in this thesis for purposes of clarity. However, when deliberately referring to pan Nordic/Scandinavian material I shall use the term ‘Old Norse’. Some academic authors I have quoted from are more indiscriminate in their usage of these terms. Therefore although they may use different terminology (as many authors identify Old Norse as tantamount to Old Icelandic) they do not necessarily conflict with my views.

A definition of sacral kingship is also vital. The theoretical underpinning of sacral kingship in the phenomenology of religion came to light in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This was under the influence of scholars such as Frazer and Mannhardt who constructed theories around the ‘annual cycle of nature and the pattern of life-death-resurrection’ (Sundqvist 2002, p.18) in relation to Middle Eastern and Mediterranean gods such as Osiris and Adonis. Since then the definition and study of sacral kingship has blossomed into a very complex phenomenon at the core of which is still a belief in the divine element of a king.<sup>3</sup> In the application of a sacral kingship model to Old Icelandic myth, most definitions cite *hieros gamos* as being a key feature whereby a god or king marries the country, which is personified as a woman. Many diverse cultures have utilised the myth, from Isidore of Seville who ‘praised Spain as a sought-after beauty,’ to ninth-century Abbasid panegyric poets who paint ‘Arabian highlands and lowlands as brides awaiting their consort’ (Frank 2007, p.175). The motif in Old Icelandic literature and mythology has not however found total acceptance in the scholarly community, as it has been hard to pin down in the sources tending to ‘wiggle and jiggle like jello’ (ibid 2007, p.186) when found. However there is some degree of acknowledgement in the academic community; most notably Gro Steinsland (1991) who recently analysed the eddic poems *Skírnismál*, *Ynglingatal*, *Háleygjatal* and *Hyndluljóð* successfully in light of sacred marriage myths. Although the matter remains far from settled, works by Svava Jakobsdóttir (2002) and Enright (1995) have uncovered significant parallels of the Old Irish *hieros gamos* in Old Icelandic literature and it is this idea of Irish similarity and influence upon Old Icelandic myths that I shall build on in this thesis.

An understanding of the Old Icelandic evidence in light of the Old Irish sources raises questions about the uses and values of comparing the literature and mythology of these two cultures. Despite very close cultural contact and a common Indo-European background, their mythologies developed in separate ways whilst maintaining many connections. Amongst scholars this separation has resulted in a tendency to see Celtic (including the Irish) and Nordic cultures (including Iceland) as worthy of study in isolation from one another. Yet that approach ignores ‘the strong links that undoubtedly existed between the thought-patterns and world-pictures upon which the myths were based’ (Davidson 1993, p.4). In regard to academic studies of Old Irish influence on the

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<sup>3</sup> See Sundqvist’s (2002) introduction for a detailed analysis on the history of sacral kingship and the definitional problems associated with it in Old Norse/Icelandic mythology.

Old Icelandic world, the silence is extremely manifest. Fortunately this separationist methodology has been changing recently.<sup>4</sup> As further understanding of pre-Christian Icelandic and Irish medieval civilizations comes to light, culturally monolithic viewpoints give way to greater inclusivity. It is not hard to imagine why; due to the strong cultural links and historical ties between the Icelanders and the Irish, a greater appreciation of Irish influence could have a ‘major impact on the evaluation of early Scandinavian history’ (Michel Richter 2010, p.160).<sup>5</sup> Likewise it has been stressed that knowledge about Britain as found in Iceland during the saga writing age is not that learned from foreign books, but ‘the reflection of a living oral tradition among those who told and listened to sagas’ (Gísli Sigurðsson 2006, p.286). This statement indicates a significant contribution from the British Isles to the Icelandic oral tradition. It is worth examining this point in more detail to illustrate the extent of the effect the people of Ireland had in this field.

Although the material across the eddic spectrum comes from various roots and was most likely used for different purposes and audiences, what unites it is that it contains ‘folk material . . . drawn from early Scandinavian oral tradition which at some stage seems to have adopted the poetic form as a means of dealing with mythological and heroic subjects’ (Gunnell 2005, p.97). The folk material that Gunnell refers to is that of the pagan Old Icelandic religion. This is in Whitehouse’s (2000, p.111) terminology an ‘imagistic’ religion as opposed to an ‘episodic’ one, such as Christianity. An imagistic religion has a ‘low level of uniformity in the individual interpretation of symbols’ (ibid, p.111), compared to a doctrinal religion such as Christianity whose principles are clearly laid out in sacred scripture. This also means that the religion is more obviously open to outside influences. As the Old Icelandic pre-Christian religion was based on oral tradition, which was not hermetically sealed, it is hard to point out where for example in

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<sup>4</sup> For examples of this type of scholarship see: Gísli Sigurðsson, 2002. *Gaelic Influence in Iceland*. Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press. Enright, J. M., 1995. *Lady With A Mead Cup: Ritual Prophecy and Lordship in the European Warband from La Tene to the Viking Age*. Four Courts Press. Gísli Sigurðsson, 2009. Um Gelisk Áhrif á Íslandi. Margrét Eggertsdóttir, Árni Sigurjónsson, Guðrún. Á. Grímsdóttir, Guðrún Nordal & Guðvarður Már Gunnlaugsson (eds). *Greppaminni: Rit til heiðurs Véstein Ólasyni sjötugum*, pp.153-63. Chestnutt, M., 2000. Nordic-Celtic Links in Folk Literature. Fellows-Jensen, G., (ed) *Denmark and Scotland: the Cultural and Environmental Resources of Small Nations*, pp.153-71.

<sup>5</sup> For example the increasingly well recognized presence of the Irish in medieval Iceland during the settlement period.



medieval Iceland, Norse derived Old Icelandic paganism stops and pre-Christian Irish paganism begins. This has particular relevance as these two cultures intermingled over a long period of time in the Early Middle Ages in Iceland. Therefore due to the nature of this material, namely its lack of any ‘institution which decided on what was the genuine tradition and what was not, the stories were open to additions and variations...It is in this manner that Gaelic material could become a part of Old Norse/Icelandic mythology without changing its basic assumptions’ (Gísli Sigurðsson 2000, pp.73-4). Sacral kingship in particular is an area where scholars have been very keen to stress the inherent conservatism of the tradition due to the tenacity of paganism in Ireland. Thus according to Byrne (1973, p.12) on Old Irish society and kingship:<sup>6</sup>

‘The record offers a detailed picture of a self-absorbed society, at the same time archaic and sophisticated – a backwater undisturbed by the mainstream of the Latin Middle Ages, to which it paradoxically contributed a refreshing current of intellectual liveliness and religious idealism. The primitive characteristics of Irish society, and in particular the archaic features of Irish kingship, find their nearest European parallels in pre-Christian Scandinavia.’

Along the same line of thought, Steinsland (1991, p.129)<sup>7</sup> claims that ‘probably there has been contact and mutual influence between the Norse and Irish surroundings that also contained traditions of kingship.’<sup>8</sup> Although a sacral kingship (most likely) already existed in pre-Christian Norway from where many of the Icelandic settlers came, when it comes to poetry written in the cultural melting pot that Iceland was in the medieval period it seems unreasonable to suggest that the ideas were derived just from the pre-Icelandic Norse culture. Instead it is perhaps better to view that literary culture in Iceland as being based on ideas from a mixture of cultures, of which the Irish was significant in Iceland. Therefore perplexing Old Icelandic mythological elements about sacral kings in Old Icelandic literature can be unraveled when they are analyzed as belonging to variants of Old Irish ideas about such sacral kings. It is this small but growing academic tradition of

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<sup>6</sup> In his book, Byrne operates with the model that 13<sup>th</sup> century Old Icelandic texts are a source about pre-Christian mainland Scandinavian religion. Although that is not my contention in this thesis, his points still hold true for how Irish ideas about sacral kingship can be connected to Iceland.

<sup>7</sup> *‘Trolig har der vært kontakt og påvirkning mellom irske og norrøne miljøer som også har omfattet kongeideologiske tradisjoner’.*

<sup>8</sup> My translation.

working with Old Irish influence on Old Icelandic sources as regards to kingship that I shall draw on. Not with the intent to analyse the Irish material but instead to use it as a means to illuminating the Old Icelandic myth of sacral kingship in *Hávamál* stanzas 104-110 in its own right.

Despite many commonalities between these cultures, methodological caution must be exercised. There are many problems associated with the study of comparative mythology and specifically *hieros gamos* as the sources are very complex. Referring in particular to the Irish tradition but equally applicable to the Icelandic, despite the bulk of preserved material 'it has not come down in homogenous form, but in multiple and fragmentary transmissions' (Bowen 1975, pp.18). Additionally the motif occurs widely dispersed both geographically and chronologically. Added to this is the inevitable distortion that occurs when myth is reflected through literature. All evidence is unfortunately based on scattered clues and 'all avenues must be explored before reaching conclusions' (Enright 1995, p.168) in order to present a coherent picture of sacral kingship underlying the relevant parts of *Hávamál*.

As a departure point I will uncover examples of the *hieros gamos* motif in Old Irish literature, then proceed to the Old Icelandic. I will then illustrate how the myth uncovered in *Hávamál* relates to an inversion of the traditional *hieros gamos* motif.

## II. THE INSULAR CELTIC EVIDENCE – *HIEROS GAMOS* IN OLD IRISH AND MEDIEVAL WELSH LITERATURE<sup>9</sup>

There is little direct attestation to *hieros gamos* in the Welsh corpus. However it is worthwhile briefly examining what is available, as it will help augment the Irish material analysed below and develop a better picture of the semantic universe relating to sacral kingship. Limited evidence of the *hieros gamos* survives in Welsh prosimetrum earlier than the *Mabinogi*.<sup>10</sup> By the eleventh century in Wales ‘any clear semblance of an intergrated mythological tradition had passed away’ (MacCana 1977, p.16). However certain basic concepts survived the conversion to Christianity in Wales and of these the *hieros gamos* was one of the most permanent. Importantly in medieval Welsh literature, as will be seen in the literature of the Irish below, the various literary usages of *medd* (mead) correlate to ideas surrounding sovereignty; it rhymes with the modern Welsh *gwledd* (feast), and is connected to the verb *meddwi* (to get drunk). Moreover it is a ‘homophone of *medd* meaning “possession, dominion” found in the modern Welsh words *meddiant* (to own) and *meddu* (possess something) and this would have fostered a connection with the idea of sovereignty’ (Haycock 1999, p.11) and kingship. This type of wordplay on similar sounds is often adopted in early medieval poetry to achieve richness of texture and meaning in poetry.<sup>11</sup>

Sovereignty in the medieval Welsh tradition occurs in the stories connected to Heledd, narrator of the 9<sup>th</sup> century poem *Canu Heledd* (Song of Heledd).<sup>12</sup> Heledd was the

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<sup>9</sup> I have not referenced any Old Welsh material, as there is so little of such literature extant. All useful sources come from the medieval period in Wales. This title also raises the question about the justification of using the umbrella term ‘Celtic’ to unite the two separate literatures of medieval Wales and Ireland. Although this debate is ongoing, I shall maintain MacCana’s suggestion (1987, pp.16-19) that to speak of Celtic mythology (although also applicable to literature) ‘is not too imply a close unity, but merely to recognize a tangible relationship . . . an underlying homogeneity that justifies us speaking of one Celtic mythology rather than several’.

<sup>10</sup> The *Mabinogi* is the name given to eleven prose tales from medieval Welsh manuscripts. Many of the tales contain information regarding Insular Celtic paganism.

<sup>11</sup> For an example of this phenomenon in Old English poetry see Greenfield, R., 1972. *The Interpretation of Old English Poems*, pp. 84-108.

<sup>12</sup> In all my English language translations throughout this thesis, normalised spellings of Old Irish and Medieval Welsh names will be maintained.

last surviving member of the Powys dynasty and many scholars have seen her as a ‘renewed instance of the Celtic perception that the land is personified by a goddess’ (MacKillop 1998, p.67). Likewise Gwenhwyfar (King Arthur’s queen in the medieval Welsh tale of *Kulhwch ac Olwen* written circa 1100) can be seen as part of the very same sovereignty phenomenon; ‘Guinevere with her beauty, her several lovers ...and her connection with a cup, may derive from a Welsh equivalent of the goddess known in Irish literature as the Sovereignty of Erin’ (Goetnick 1975, p.354). What the sparse evidence points to is a complex of images and associations of alcohol, kingship and sovereignty. In summary ‘liquid is an important factor in these Welsh sovereignty myths’ (ibid, p.357).

The evidence of *hieros gamos* is more plentiful on the Irish side, to which the ‘legends and historical sources give clear testimony’ (Svava Jakobsdóttir 2002, p.36) and is well represented across a series of medieval Irish sagas.<sup>13</sup> Within these sagas there is often an ‘allegorical representation of the Sovereignty Goddess’ (Bhreatnach 1982, p.243) who at the core of every relevant myth pours out draughts of red liquor in a golden cup and offers it to each successive king of Ireland. Many scholars believe this sovereignty theme to be ‘one of the most pervasive in early Irish history’ (Trindade 1986, p.153). The most well known figure associated with the sovereignty tradition is queen Medb (Irish, she who intoxicates/the intoxicating one; cf. Greek *methu*, wine; Latin *medus*, mead; Welsh *meddw*, drunk, related to Old English *mead*, and Old Icelandic *mioðr*), the warrior queen of the province of Connacht, whose myths are ‘often clustered around the myth of the king’s *hieros gamos* or sacral marriage’ (Bowen 1975, p.20). This association lasts well into the Christian period where it is still an important aspect of queen Medb to accept human leaders in marriage. However, despite being one of the more well-known sovereignty goddesses, Medb is but one ‘of many very closely related figures who populate the female sovereignty pantheon in Irish, Welsh and British sources’ (Enright 1995, p.273).

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<sup>13</sup> This includes *Baile in Scáil* and *The Death of Crimthann*, although particular attention will be paid to the former due to its similarity to the Icelandic material. These can be found respectively in: Thurneyson, R., 1920. *Baile in Scáile*. *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 35, pp. 218-29; and: Cross, T.P., & Slover, C.H., (eds) 1936. *The Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid Mugmedon*. Cross, T.P., & Slover, C.H., (eds). *Ancient Irish Tales*, pp. 508-513.

The sovereignty motif is so widespread in the Irish tradition that it is also present in other cycles of Irish literature.<sup>14</sup> This includes the *Fiannaidbeach* (The Fenian Cycle) material in which Fionn Mac Cumhail (a mythical hunter and warrior) acquires the possession of supernatural knowledge and prophetic powers in one instance by ‘drinking a draught from the Otherworld well’ (O’ Rahilly 1946, p.326), that of ‘*don lionn iombais*’ (the liquor of inspiration) as presented to him by Céibhfhionn, a daughter of Bec mac Buain.<sup>15</sup> However, for the purposes of this thesis and due to considerations of space and clarity I will now turn to one particular episode that will impact upon a later study of the Old Icelandic evidence.

The scene in question is the 11<sup>th</sup> century Irish adventure story of *Baile in Scáil* (The Phantom’s Poetic Frenzy) in which Conn Cétchathach (Conn of the Hundred Battles), the protagonist of the story, along with his retainers are enveloped in a mist before being led by a mysterious horseman to the royal residence of Tara, a sacral site in Ireland associated with kingship. There they are greeted by the Celtic god Lúgh and a woman seated upon a crystal throne, with a golden crown upon her head, a silver cauldron and a golden cup in front of her. She then ladles spoonfuls of the drink out for Conn and with every drink handed out proclaims Conn’s descendents future kings. The Old Irish prose in English translation reads:<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Cycle refers to the method used by scholars to divide ‘the early prose narratives of Ireland into four main groups: (1) The Mythological Cycle, which concerns Ireland’s earliest inhabitants and the people of the *side* (the Celtic Otherworld); (2) The Ulster Cycle, which depicts the exploits of the Ulaid, the heroic warrior elite of Ulster, and in particular the exploits of Cú Chulainn; (3) the Kings Cycle which treats the activities of allegedly historical Irish kings; and (4) the Fionn Cycle, which chronicles the adventures of the swashbuckling Fionn mac Cumhall and his companions in a group known as the Fian’ (Conlee 2000, pp. 284-91).

<sup>15</sup> Bec mac Buain is the keeper of the wisdom giving well in what is now County Limerick, written in the late medieval Irish tale *Feis Tighe Conain* (The Feast at Conán’s House).

<sup>16</sup> ‘*Lotar iarum issa tech co-n-acatar ingen maccthacht i cathair glanindi & barr órdhai fora mullach & brat co srethaib di or impe. Dabach arcait co cethraib cernaib ordaib ara bélaib, lán di dergflaith. Escra oir ara óu, airideog nech di ór ara belaib. Et co- n-acatar a scál fadcissin isin taig ara ciund inna rígsudiu. Ocus ropu mor a delgnaidhe. Ba dethbir son, ar ni- frith hi Temraig riam fer a meti nach- a chaimhe ar aille a delba n . . . chrotha & ara inganti . . . Et bas ii ind ingen boi esin taigh ara cind flaith Herenn . . . In tand didiu luid ind ingen don dail, as bert-friu, cia dia tia-berthae ind airdech cosin dergflaith. & fris-gart in scál di iarum’ (Thurneyson 1920, pp. 219-20).*

‘They went into the house and saw a girl, seated in a chair of crystal and wearing a gold crown. In front of her was a silver vat with corners of gold. A vessel of gold stood beside her, and before her was a golden cup. They saw the Phantom himself on his throne, and never was there seen in Tara one as wonderful as he . . . The girl was the Sovranty of Ireland . . . When she went to serve the ale, she asked to whom the cup of red ale should be given, and the phantom answered her’.<sup>17</sup>

This episode appears to be an example of the *hieros gamos* motif in which a person, in this case Conn, is ‘mystically invested with sovereignty by means of immemorial inauguration rites’ (Dillon & Chadwick 1967, p.93). The circumstances at the heart of the Irish *hieros gamos* motif are as follows: ‘the goddess (sovereignty and the land personified) offered a consecrated victim a drink and went to bed with him’ (ibid 1967, p.93).<sup>18</sup> It is this mythic core that I believe also lies at the root of the verses in *Hávamál* that I shall pursue. First however, I shall turn to the *hieros gamos* motif in Old Norse/Icelandic culture.

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<sup>17</sup> Translated by Dillon 1948, pp.108-9.

<sup>18</sup> It is not evident from the passage written above from *Baile in Scáil* that the second circumstance at the core of the *hieros gamos* (sexual intercourse) takes place. In these Irish tales ‘varying emphasis is laid on the two motifs; sometimes one or the other is in the foreground, while in some only one of the motifs appear’ (Svava Jakobsdóttir 2002, p.37). In most of the stories ‘in which a woman appears who declares herself to be the Sovereignty of Erin, she becomes the bride of the hero’ (Loomis 1927, p.221).

### III. THE OLD ICELANDIC EVIDENCE – *HIEROS GAMOS* IN OLD ICELANDIC/NORSE CULTURE – A BRIEF SURVEY

The *hieros gamos* is depicted as far back as Bronze Age petroglyphs in Scandinavia, for example those from Tanum and Tuvene in Bohuslän in Sweden.<sup>19</sup> Similarly many scholars have pointed to the tiny gold foil squares depicting embracing couples from Merovingian and Viking Age Scandinavia. The basic myth of the *hieros gamos* was ‘strongly connected to legitimation of the elite, to the peoples wish for fertility as well as philosophies around death and resurrection’ (Kvilhaug 2009, p.23). Recently, using eddic poetry as a departure point, Gro Steinsland and her supporters have shown how the *hieros gamos* motif existed in Norse/Icelandic society and most likely had a ritual counterpart. The motif gained cultural currency ‘following the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D., when royal lines and central rule achieved greater importance than before; when the ancient custom of sacrificing outside in groves and bogs was replaced by a cult much more closely linked to royal houses’ (ibid 2009, p.24). Thus the motif proved very important for royalist ideologies as the king wished to show that he represented a different type of being, and was a descendent of a god and a giantess, indicating ‘cosmic polarity’ (ibid 2009, p.24). Kvilhaug’s theory that associates the *hieros gamos* with royalist ideology will become important further on in the thesis.

Gunnell has underlined the existence of the *hieros gamos* motif by showing how it may have possibly survived into modern Scandinavian folklore in the form of ‘mock marriages’. When myths and rituals no longer fulfil their true function in society they ‘degenerate into idle tales told for amusement and conventional ceremonial which at best is merely quaint and picturesque’ (James 1988, p.166), which is what appears to happen to the *hieros gamos* motif and its reincarnation as the ‘mock marriage’. These normally take place in Scandinavian folk traditions relating to the beginning of summer and the summer solstice or during winter. Unfortunately all relevant folk material is uncertain in its connection to *hieros gamos*. Summing up this position in regards to the summer tradition but equally applicable to the winter folklore Svensson (1938, p.75) concludes:<sup>20</sup> ‘all explanations of how the summer bridal couple entered Scandinavian folk tradition

<sup>19</sup> See Gunnell 1995 for further analysis of early examples of *hieros gamos* in Scandinavia.

<sup>20</sup> ‘Varje förklaring på hur sommarbrudparet kommit att ingå i nordisk folksed, är överhuvudtaget osäker, då man icke vet något om dess existens här i alder tid’.

must be regarded as uncertain, since we have no knowledge about the existence of this tradition in older times.' However 'the possibility must remain that some of these folk marriage ceremonies have roots in a form of pagan *hieros gamos*' (Gunnell 1995, p.140).



## IV. THE *HIEROS GAMOS* MOTIF IN THE STORY OF GUNNLÖÐ AND ÓÐINN<sup>21</sup>

The motif that I am dealing with in this thesis comes down to the modern reader in two redactions, namely *Hávamál* within the *Poetic Edda* and in *Skáldskaparmál*, contained within *Snorra-Edda*. Below are the two versions in English translation and accompanying original Old Icelandic, beginning with *Hávamál*:<sup>22</sup>

104-I visited the old giant, now I've come back,  
 didn't get much there from being silent;  
 with many words I spoke to my advantage  
 in Suttung's hall.

105-Gunnlöð gave me from her golden throne  
 a drink of the precious mead;  
 a poor reward I let her have in return,  
 for her open-heartedness,  
 for her heavy spirit

106-With the mouth of the auger I made space for myself  
 and gnawed through the stone;  
 over me and under me went the path of the giants,  
 thus I risked my head.

107-The cheaply bought beauty I made good use of,  
 the wise lack for little;  
 for Óðrerir has now come up  
 to the rim of the sanctuaries of men.

108-I am in doubt as to whether I would have come  
 back from the court's of giants,  
 If I had not made use of Gunnlöð, that good woman,  
 and put my arms about her.

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<sup>21</sup> In all my English language translations throughout this thesis, normalised spellings of Old Norse names will be maintained.

<sup>22</sup> Translated by Larrington 1996, p.28-29.

109-The next day the frost-giant went  
 To ask of the High One's advice, in the High One's hall;  
 They asked about Bolverk: whether he was amongst the gods,  
 Or whether Suttung had slaughtered him.

110-I thought Odin had sworn a sacred ring-oath,  
 how can his word be trusted!  
 He left Suttung betrayed at the feast  
 and made Gunnlöð weep' <sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup>104-Inn aldna iǫtun ec sótta,  
 nú em ec aptr kominn,  
 fát gat ec þegiandi þar;  
 mǫrgom orðom  
 mæltu ec í minn frama  
 í Suttungrs sǫlom.

105-Gunnlöð mér um gaf  
 gullnum stóli á  
 drycc ins dýra miðar;  
 ill iðgiǫld  
 lét ec hana eptir hafa  
 síns ins heila hugar,  
 síns ins svára sefa.

106-Rata munn  
 létomc rúms um fá  
 oc um griót gnaga;  
 yfir ok undir  
 stóðomc iǫtna vegir,  
 svá hætta ec hofði til.

107-Vel keyptz litar  
 hefi ec vel notið,  
 fás er fróðum vant;  
 þvíþat Óðrerir  
 er nú upp kominn  
 á elda vés iaðar

108-Ifi er mér á,

And the *Snorra-Edda* version:<sup>24</sup>

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*at ec væra enn kominn  
iǫtma gǫrðum ór,  
ef ec Gunnlaðar né nytac,  
innar góðo kono,  
þeirar er lögðomc arm yfir*

*109-Ins hindra dags  
genge Hrimþursar,  
Háva ráðs at fregna,  
Háva hǫllo í;  
at Bǫlverki þeir spurðo,  
ef hann væri með bǫndum kominn  
eða hefði hánom Suttungr of sóit.*

*110-Baugeið Óðinn,  
hygg ec at unnit hafi;  
hvat skal hans trygðom trúa?  
Suttungr svikinn  
hann lét sumbli frá  
oc grætta Gunnlǫðo (Nekel & Kuhn 1962, pp. 33-34)<sup>23</sup>.*

<sup>24</sup> 'Óðinn sótti til náttstaðar til jǫtuns þess er Baugi hét, bróðir Suttungs. Baugi kallaði ilt fjárhald sitt ok sagði at þrælar hans níu hǫfðu drepizk, en talðiz eigi vita sér ván verkmanna. En Óðinn nefndisk fyrir honum Bǫlverkr. Hann bauð at taka upp níu manna verk fyrir Bauga, en mælið sér til kaups einn drykk af Suttunga miði. Baugi kvazk enskis ráð eiga at miðinum, sagði at Suttungr vildi einn hafa, en fara kvezk hann mundu með Bǫlverki, of freista, af þeir fengi mjǫðinn. Bǫlverkr vann um sumarit níu mannsverk fyrir Bauga, en at vetri beiddisk hann Bauga leigu sinnar. Þá fara þeir báðir til Suttungs. Baugi segir Suttungi bróður sínum kaup þeira Bǫlverks, en Suttungr synjar þverliga hvers dropa af miðinum. Þá mælið Bǫlverkr til Bauga, at þeir skyldu freista véla nokkurra ef þeir megi ná miðinum, en Baugi lætr þat vel vera. Þá dregr Bǫlverkr fram nafar þann er Rati heitir ok mælið at Baugi skal bora bjargit, ef nafarinn bitr. Hann gerir svá. Þá segir Baugi at gǫgnum er borat bjargit, en Bǫlverkr blæss í nafars raufina, ok hrjóta spænirnir upp í móti honum. Þá fann hann at Baugi vildi svíkja hann ok bað bora gǫgnum bjargit. Baugi boraði enn. En er Bǫlverkr blés annat sinn, þá fuku inn spæninir. Þá brást Bǫlverkr í orms liki ok skreið inn í nafars raufina, en Baugi stakk eftir honum nafrinum ok missti hans. Fór Bǫlverkr þar til sem Gunnlǫð var ok lá hjá henni þrjár nætr, ok þá lofaði hon honum at drekka af miðinum þrjá drykki. Í inum fyrsta drykk drakk hann allt ór Óðreri, en í ǫðrum ór Boðn, í inum þriðja ór Són ok hafði hann þá allan mjǫðinn. Þá brásk hann í arnarham ok flaug sem ákafast. En er Suttungr

‘Odin sought lodging for the night with a giant called Baugi, Suttung’s brother. Baugi reckoned his economic affairs were going badly, and said his nine slaves had killed each other, and declared he did not know where he was going to get his workmen from. Odin told him his name was Bolverk; he offered to take over the work of nine men for Baugi, and stipulated as his payment one drink of Suttung’s mead. Baugi said he had no say in the dispersal of the mead, said that Suttung wanted to have it all to himself, but he said he would go with Bolverk and try whether they could get the mead. Bolverk did the work of nine men for Baugi during the summer, and when winter came he asked Baugi for his hire. Then they both set off. Baugi told his brother Suttung of his agreement with Bolverk, but Suttung flatly refused a single drop of the mead. Then Bolverk told Baugi that they would have to try some stratagems to see if they could get hold of the mead, and Baugi said that was a good idea. Then Baugi got out an auger called Rati and instructed Baugi to bore a hole in the mountain, if the auger would cut. He did so. Then Baugi said that the mountain was bored through, but Bolverk blew into the auger-hole and the bits flew back at him. Then he realized that Baugi was trying to cheat him, and told him to bore through the mountain. Baugi bored again. And when Bolverk blew a second time, the bits flew inwards. Then Bolverk turned himself into the form of a snake and crawled into the auger-hole, and Baugi stabbed after him with the auger and missed him. Bolverk went to where Gunnlod was and lay with her for three nights and then she let him drink three draughts of the mead. In the first draught he drank everything out of Odrerir, and in the second out of Bodn, in the third out of Son, and then he had all the mead. Then he turned himself into the form of an eagle and flew as hard as he could. And when Suttung saw the eagle’s flight he got his own eagle shape and flew after him. And when the Æsir saw Odin flying they put their containers out in the courtyard, and when Odin came in over Asgard he spat out the mead into the containers, but it was such a close thing for him that Suttung might have caught him that he sent some of the mead out backwards, and this was disregarded. Anyone took it that wanted it, and it is what we call the rhymster’s share. But Odin gave Suttung’s mead to the Æsir and to those people who are skilled at composing poetry. Thus we call poetry Odin’s booty and find, and his drink and his gift and the Æsir’s drink’.<sup>25</sup>

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*sá flug arnarins, tók hann sér arnarham ok flaug eftir honum. En er Æsir sá, hvar Óðinn flaug þá settu þeir út í garðinn ker sín, en er Óðinn kom inn of Ásgarð, þá spýtti hann upp miðinum í kerin, en honum var þá svá nær komit at Suttungr myndi ná honum at hann sendi aptr suman mjöðinn, ok var þess ekki gætt. Hafði þat hver, er vildi, ok kollum vér þat skáldfífla hlut. En Suttunga mjöð gaf Óðinn Ásunum ok þeim mǫnnum, er yrkja kunnu. Því kollum vér skáldskapinn feng Óðins ok fund ok drykk hans ok gjof hans ok drykk Ásanna*<sup>24</sup> (Faulkes 1998, pp.3-5).

<sup>25</sup> The full account of the Old Norse prose can be found in Faulkes 1996, pp.63-64.

## V. SOURCE CRITICISM - *HÁVAMÁL* OR *SKÁLDSKAPARMÁL*?

The majority of previous scholars have viewed the myth as it is preserved in *Hávamál* as being referential to the fuller account of the (supposedly) same myth in *Snorra-Edda*. I believe in order to bring the motif of the *hieros gamos* in *Hávamál* into sharper focus it is necessary to disregard (for the most part) the *Snorra-Edda* version, penned in *Skáldskaparmál*. The picture that is painted of the motif in *Snorra-Edda* tells the modern critic something about how Snorri functioned as a mythographer; he filled in narrative gaps with ‘informed, but not necessarily right guesses that omit some details and exaggerate others’ (Bragg 2004, p.70) in an attempt to understand a ‘myth of a religion he did not believe in’ (Kershaw 2000, p.272). I shall now turn to how he accomplished this.

A great many of the details in the *Snorra-Edda* account differ from *Hávamál*. Summarily these include a prehistory of Kvasir, a more submissive role for Gunnlöð, no conversation with a frost giant, Suttungr’s lack of conversation with Óðinn, the mention of three drinking vessels, Óðinn’s metamorphosis into a snake and an eagle and an account of the episode involving Baugi. Snorri’s account of the myth remains ‘subtle and loaded with meaning’ (Abram 2011, p.208) and it will become apparent he adopted it for his own concerns and usage, which differs from its purpose in *Hávamál*.<sup>26</sup>

Snorri was the first to synthesize the pagan myths into a written narrative. There is no consensus as to exactly why or for whom *Snorra-Edda* was written. However, we do know that Snorri was writing in the context of a ‘learned mythological renaissance’ (Abram 2011, p.208) in the thirteenth century. This essentially means that he was a well-educated Christian writing about and shaping the Old Icelandic myths in the light of Christian universal history and to suit the needs of a Christian literary elite audience. This was achieved with the specified purpose in *Skáldskaparmál* of aiding aspiring poets

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<sup>26</sup> It has been pointed out to me in private communication with Gísli Sigurðsson that the motif as presented in *Hávamál* and *Snorra-Edda* can only be assumed to be variations on a similar narrative if we study them from the same traditional background and frame of reference. If we don’t, this leaves open the possibility that the two narratives actually represent separate myths, yet with shared characters and occurrences. However, as I do not have the room to defend this position, I shall maintain the more traditional view that the two narratives are intrinsically connected to each other, although maintaining that it is possible to study them in isolation from one another, as the variations between the two are great.

through an ‘analysis of poetic language’ (Faulkes 2008, p.313). Snorri even states ‘we must read these old stories in the light of his explanation in the prologue’ (Abram 2011, p.210). Specifically regarding the mead motif, Snorri adapted the myth into a story about the origins of the skaldic mead of poetry. At no point in *Hávamál* is the mead connected or seemingly intended for poets. It is only referenced as *ins dýra mjaðar* (the precious mead) and therefore most likely has a different mythic function in *Hávamál* as will be illustrated in the proceeding sections.

Arguments have however been put forward that the *Hávamál* myth is simply referential to the *Snorra-Edda* myth and therefore merely alludes to the details that are present in Snorri’s account. Meulengracht Sørensen (1991, p.223) sums this up: <sup>27</sup>

‘The myth cannot be understood on the basis of these stanzas alone. They presuppose that it [the myth] is known before hand. Nor is it the main purpose of these passages in *Hávamál* to tell the myth . . . This kind of relationship between an extant poem about gods and the underlying myths is not uncommon. It can rather be said to be the rule. The Edda poem presupposes that the myth is known, and it often only reproduces part of it and often in a specific connection.’<sup>28</sup>

Meulengracht Sørensen’s comment is correct in that most of the mythological eddic poems (including *Hávamál*) are ‘enumerative’ as identified by Klingenberg (1983, p.135) and essentially composed of myth catalogues:

‘Myth catalogues assume an audience initiated into mythological lore. The deeds of the gods and other individual myths are compressed into highly terse utterances, abbreviations which have a referential function as they assume more extensive narration elsewhere of the myth to which they allude’.

So the details of *Hávamál* were known in greater depth by the intended audience than the poem itself assumes. However, as will be shown below the myth in the two accounts

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<sup>27</sup> ‘Myten kan ikke forstås alene på grundlag af disse strofer. De forudsætter altså, at den på forhånd er bekendt. Det synes heller ikke at være *Hávamál*-passagens vigtigste formål at fortælle myten... Denne slags relation mellem et bevaret gudedigt og bagvedliggende myte er ikke sjælden. Den må snarest siges at være reglen. Eddadigtet forudsætter myten bekendt, og gengiver ofte kun en del af den og tit i specielle sammenhænge.’

<sup>28</sup> My translation.

(*Snorra-Edda* and *Hávamál*) is so substantially different and obviously adapted to different purposes that by remaining close to the sources it seems unlikely that *Hávamál* was supposed to simply refer back to the myth as it presents itself in *Snorra-Edda*. Therefore it seems perfectly plausible (and necessary) to focus just on the eddic version.<sup>29</sup>

Eddic poetry is often likely (although by no means necessarily) to provide an older version of the myth.<sup>30</sup> Although no consensus has been reached as regards accurate dating methods, written down in the medieval period the poems themselves probably originated earlier than the manuscripts which contain them; eddic poetry bears the ‘hallmarks of oral-traditional verse; it is alliterative, as are older analogous forms of Germanic oral poetry . . . and formulaic’ (Abram 2011, p.19). Oral poetry is not a static phenomenon, and current trends in scholarship indicate that it is wisest to see eddic poems as ‘fossils of a once vital living tradition of myth and poetry, which developed organically and evolved as they moved through time and space’ (ibid, p.19), until they were eventually written down in the *Codex Regius* in the thirteenth century. Although eddic poetry provides no ‘secure historical context’ (ibid, p.20) due to dating issues, the material is likely for the most part to provide a more ‘genuine vision’ (Gunnell 2005, p.97) into the heart of pagan Icelandic culture and hence pagan myths. It is therefore worthwhile seeing how this manifests in *Hávamál*.

*Hávamál* is the longest extant eddic poem, and the most disparate. According to literary minded scholars, it is most likely a composite of (some) pre-existing oral poetic material and Latinate writing, and probably a conflation of pre-existing poems.<sup>31</sup> There is a great deal of uncertainty regarding the exact relationship of these pre-existing poems to

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<sup>29</sup> At this point it is important to mention that the myth as it is told in *Snorra Edda* (seemingly) is possibly referenced on the Stora Hammars III stone in Gotland, Sweden. However, as Abram (2011, p.10) points out ‘the physical remains of the Viking Age (and earlier periods) appear to put us in touch with their pagan creators, but they very rarely come with the sort of contextual information that enables us to make sense of them’. Therefore, due to confines of space, I cannot enter discussion of the archaeological material (as this would take up a separate thesis). Instead I will focus just on the evidence as it is manifest in *Hávamál* in the *Codex Regius*.

<sup>30</sup> Although this view is commonly held most scholars it seems to me impossible to tell if the contents of the myth of Óðinn and Gunnlöð as preserved in *Hávamál* is necessarily any older than that in *Snorra-Edda*. Instead (as partly already suggested) they could be two (among perhaps many other variants that are now lost) versions of a myth. This idea is explored further throughout chapter VI.

<sup>31</sup> See McKinnell 2005 (b) & 2007 for an explanation of this.

*Hávamál* as it appears in the *Codex Regius*. This problem according to Abram (2011, p.223) is due to the fact that:

‘we do not know whether their amalgamation into a single text occurred at a relatively early stage of transmission; or if the current form of the poem owes itself to the decision of an ‘editor’ who noticed the correspondences between the component poems and wove them together as part of the process by which they were written down.’

In 1891 the German scholar Karl Müllenhoff suggested that *Hávamál* is a sequence of six separate poems with the unifying theme of Óðinn as the narrator. Many scholars have maintained this belief since Müllenhoff’s time. Furthermore, stanzas 84 and 91-110 are often considered as constituting one of these six separate poems, often entitled ‘the Poem of Sexual Intrigue,’ with stanzas 104-110 seen as constituting a subsection of this. I shall maintain this methodology throughout this thesis. The age of the poem will prove important for points raised later on. The dating of *Hávamál* has pivoted between revealing itself as the ‘artistically unified creation of a mid-thirteenth century Icelandic author-editor who principally embodied in his work the clerical culture of the European middle ages . . . and the native wisdom and ethics of the pre-Christian north’ (Evans 1989, p.127). Indeed the dating of stanzas 104-110 points to a contradictory interpretation, just as it does for the rest of the poem.

One of the most recent analysts (McKinnell 2005 (b), p.83-110) indicates that linguistic evidence such as the frequency of the expletive particle *um* points to a late tenth century composition. Confusingly, comparative literary criticism paints a different picture due to similarities in phrasing to, for example, Virgil’s *Eclogue X*. Although the issue of dating remains highly problematical, the majority of scholars have therefore suggested a compromising mid-way in dating the poem. McKinnell (2005 (b), p.100) summarises this:

‘The balance of the linguistic evidence suggests that the narrative parts of *Hávamál B*<sup>32</sup> may date from the later tenth century, while the cultural links of the non-narrative stanzas seem to be with the twelfth. The best explanation of these apparently conflicting indications may be that *Hávamál B* in its present form dates from the twelfth century, but that its poet was led by the example of Ovid to illustrate the war of the sexes by

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<sup>32</sup> This refers to McKinnell’s (2005(b) identification of the story of *Gunnlöð* and *Billings Mær* as constituting a poem in their own right.



using fragments of the text of one or two older mythological poems, which includes the story of Gunnlöð’.

This statement indicates that although the editor of the *Codex Regius* was a Christian using themes from classical learning, he still had knowledge of pagan mythology, including some degree of acquaintance with the pagan *hieros gamos* myth.<sup>33</sup> That will prove important for my analysis later on and must be borne in mind. Thus I will study the *Hávamál* account of the *hieros gamos* in isolation from the *Snorra-Edda* account, and will now proceed to a further analysis of it.

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<sup>33</sup> The point raised here begs the question of how a writer in the thirteenth century would have any real knowledge of a pagan motif such as the *hieros gamos* myth, as Iceland was converted centuries before. As Gro Steinsland has indicated, there was remarkable continuity in the transmission of the myth from pagan to Christian times. See Steinsland, G., (ed) 2011. *Ideology and Power in the Viking and Middle Ages: Scandinavia, Iceland, Ireland, Orkney and the Faroes*. Leiden & Boston: Brill Academic Publishing.

## VI. A RITE OF SACRAL KINGSHIP IN *HÁVAMÁL*

As mentioned above, there are vital differences in the two accounts that lend different meanings to the myths in *Hávamál* and *Snorra-Edda*.<sup>34</sup> Most importantly there is a narrative divergence in that Óðinn uses Rati (a gimlet or awl) to escape from the giant's stronghold, compared to using it to get in (as dictated by Snorri's account) to Gunnlöð's mountain home. This detail is important and worth paying attention to as it supports the view that '*Hávamál*'s Óðinn does not come in secrecy; he has legitimate business in the ancient giant's hall' (Svava Jakobsdóttir 2002, p.33), which would support the likelihood of deliberate ritual underlying his presence there. His journey into the hall is not rushed, whilst his exit is, the reverse of the *Snorra Edda* account of the same myth. Indeed his journey into the giantess's mountain in *Hávamál* comes across as natural; stanza 104 (an Óðinnic monologue) supports the legitimate presence of Óðinn in the hall, and it is possible to detect an arrogant tone in his claim that *nú em ec aptr kominn: fát gat ec þegiandi þar*; (now I've come back, didn't get much there from being silent).

Most importantly for my thesis, Svava Jakobsdóttir (2002, p.32) believes we should translate the lines: '*Gunnlöð mér um gaf/ gullnom stóli á / drycc ins dýra miðar* as 'Gunnlöð on the golden chair gave me a drink of the precious mead' compared to the majority of previous scholars who see Óðinn as being the one seated on the chair. If this alternative translation is correct it would portray Gunnlöð in a 'noble, ritualistic light' (ibid, p.32) that brings to mind the Irish sovereignty figure mentioned in *Baile in Scáil* sitting on her crystal throne. Furthermore the stanzas in *Hávamál* praise Gunnlöð's 'beauty, goodness and helpfulness' (Bragg 2004, p.70) further associating her with a character similar to the Old Irish sovereignty figure. The meter of stanza 105 also supports the idea of a wedding and the air of religious solemnity composed, as it is in *galdralag* known as 'the incantation meter' which seems suitable for an occasion such as the inauguration of a sacral king. Indeed 'known *galdralag* stanzas usually mark turning points of composition of the lays they are found in' (Sverdlov 2011, p.60). Sverdlov points to the fact that the majority of these compositionally important *galdralag* stanzas in eddic poems are often related to

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<sup>34</sup> For a list of all similarities see Doht (1974, pp.42-43)

actual magical spells.<sup>35</sup> In other parts of *Hávamál* this is also clearly the case, as for example in stanza 149:<sup>36</sup>

A forth I know,        if men shall fasten  
                                  Bonds on my bended legs  
 So great is the charm     that forth I may go,  
                                  The fetters spring from my feet,  
                                  Broken the bonds from my hands.<sup>37</sup>

This stanza is often considered to be related to the Old High German *First Merseburg Charm* as all three fetter-shattering spells contain the words *bond*, *hapt* and *springa*. After Sverdlov (2011, p.63) this illustrates that:

‘Irrespective of whether certain *galdr* stanzas stem from real spells or not, such stanzas do work as spells in the Eddaic texts; they are meant to work as magic by the characters that utter them and are understood as such by the characters that hear them. They are repetitive too, matching the key features of known magical texts in various European and non-European traditions.’

This point is also applicable for *Hávamál* stanza 105. The passing over of the mead by the female sovereignty figure to a hero or god is considered a ‘magical’ act by many archaic societies. Indo-European derived cultures linked the idea of a libation and prayer in a sacred context. This idea can be related back to an ‘Indo-European formula . . . to pour forth prayers like a libation’ (Kurke 1989, p.121). It seems appropriate in light of that evidence that stanza 105 may have indeed been an eddic spell pertaining to kingship due to the connection of libations to the sacred aspects of religiosity such as prayers. Of course passing over the mead also has a more mundane use, being used by many cultures

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<sup>35</sup> See Sverdlov 2011, pp.39-73 for a summary of magical spells in the *galdr* stanzas of *Lokasenna* and *Skirnismál*.

<sup>36</sup> *Þat kann ek it fjórða    ef mér fyrðar bera*  
                                  *bönd at boglimum*  
*svá ek gel,                    at ek ganga má,*  
                                  *sprettr mér af fótum fjóturr,*  
                                  *en af höndum hapt* (Neckel & Kuhn 1962, p.42)

<sup>37</sup> Translated by Sverdlov 2011, p.62.

as an act of binding together members of a community, in this case binding Óðinn to Gunnlöð.<sup>38</sup>

Besides the passing over of a sacred drink, the *Hávamál* account of the mead of poetry also contains the second necessary characteristic as noted by Dillon and Chadwick that constitutes a sacral kingship marital ritual; namely sexual intercourse seemingly in the context of a wedding. Stanza 104, that has proved problematic for many scholars can perhaps be best understood following the interpretation of the line *ins bindra dags* as ‘the day after the wedding’ indicating that such an event had taken place. That interpretation of the line is historically justifiable; the phrase is present in medieval Norwegian law as *bindardags* and medieval Swedish law as *bindradagher*, where it ‘regularly has the sense of a day after a wedding’ (Evans 1986, p.123). It seems Óðinn even swears on a sacred (wedding?) ring; *Baugeið Óðinn, bygg ec at unnit bafi; hvat skal hans trygðom trúa?* This wedding then entails sexual intercourse; *ef ec Gunnlaðar né nytac, innar góðo kono/þeirar er lögðomc arm yfir*. From this it can be seen that sexuality was ‘deeply interwoven not only in the religious practice of the Nordic past but in political negotiations as well’ (Hedeager 2011, p.112) and here in the context of legitimizing kingship.<sup>39</sup>

The language of these stanzas in *Hávamál* is according to Jakobsdóttir reminiscent of ‘openness and ritual rather than secretiveness and deception . . . The description is uniquely pictorial in its simplicity and bears little relation to the secret assignation in a dismal mountain nook as described by Snorri’ (ibid, p.32). The settings of the poem are also worth noting. The scene is set upon an open stage in which ‘a woman on a golden chair pours out for Óðinn the precious mead, which he appears to have won by means of his pre-eminence’ (ibid, p.32). In *Snorra-Edda* these stanzas are compressed into less than two lines; *Fór Bólverker þar til, sem Gunnlöð var, ok lá hjá benni þrjár nætr, ok þá lofaði hon bonum at drekka af miðinum þrjá drykki*. It seems remarkable that Snorri who has been credited with the preservation of Icelandic mythic material and acclaimed as a master storyteller in his own right would choose to ignore fantastical details in his retelling of the myth, such as ‘golden chair’ (*gullnum stóli*) or a ‘ring-oath’ (*baugeið*). The conclusion to be drawn from the *Snorra-Edda* version of the story is that Snorri either did not know of these details, or deliberately chose to ignore them, which would indicate he retold the

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<sup>38</sup> See Enright 1995 for a detailed analysis on the use of mead as a binding element in various medieval cultures.

<sup>39</sup> See Hedeager 2011 for an elucidation of this idea from an archaeological perspective.

story with an essentially different purpose in mind. Indeed it is suggested by Harris (2005, p.76) that among the mythological poems found in the *Codex Regius* ‘only *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grímnismál* were in writing before Snorri’. That the *Hávamál* myth and the *Snorra-Edda* version spring from a common source is fairly likely, but as indicated above the two myths were adapted for different ends in the separate versions in which they are preserved.

Further proof that the mythic core of *Hávamál* pertains to a rite of kingship can be ascertained by putting the poem to the test that Jens Peter Schjødt recently developed regarding the initiation of a sacral king. Unfortunately ‘our material about the consecration of kings is sparse . . . there are no clear descriptions of the rituals to turn to’ (Schjødt 2008, p.378). However it seems natural to attempt to ‘go behind the direct descriptions to see whether we may find elements in the sources that indicate an initiation sequence associated with becoming a leader’ (ibid, p.373). This is due to the global nature of ‘initiation rituals associated with a new political leader’ (ibid, p.373). Indeed it would be very strange if medieval Icelandic culture did not preserve this phenomenon. Several scholars such as Steinsland (1991) and Fleck (1970) have analysed eddic poems for traces of kingship initiation rituals, although rarely extending to *Hávamál*.<sup>40</sup> Schjødt analysed the motif, but only the *Snorra-Edda* version. It is to *Hávamál* that I will now turn.

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<sup>40</sup> See Svava Jakobsdóttir (2002) and Enright (1995) for two exceptions.

## VII. TESTS OF INITIATION INTO SACRAL KINGSHIP IN *HÁVAMÁL*

Initiation within the field of religious history from its birth in van Gennep's *Les rites de passage* in 1909, through to Eliade and Turner's contributions all agree that initiation comprises a transition 'from one status to another . . . through a specific sequence of rites' (Schjødt 2008, p.48). In this case the transition refers to becoming a sacral king. Using Schjødt's criteria as a methodological basis and applying it to the phenomenon of sacral kingship I will now examine stanzas 104-110 in *Hávamál*.<sup>41</sup>

### 1) Irreversibility

This first category refers to the irrevocable transition that occurs to the subject undergoing the initiation.<sup>42</sup> Little need be mentioned here, as following the consumption of the mead Óðinn 'attains an irreversibly higher status . . . with regard to knowledge, as he is now in possession of it and can use it for the rest of mythical time' (Schjødt 2008, p.172).

### 2) The tripartite sequence

This category refers to the sequence of events that the myth must pass through which is fundamental to its role as an initiatory myth<sup>43</sup>. In Schjødt's opinion (2008, p.400) the *Snorra Edda* myth

'transverses a regular initiation sequence . . . as it corresponds to the symbolic sequence: the subject who leaves the initial situation is different from the one who possesses knowledge in the final phase. The subject has become something completely different'.

The same criteria are clearly fulfilled in the *Hávamál* account as well. This final phase therefore lies in opposition to the initial phase regarding the qualitative difference

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<sup>41</sup> Some scholars have seen initiation as a theme underlying other stanzas in *Hávamál*. This would increase the chances that stanzas 104-110 also refer to this. See Gísli Sigurðsson 1998, p.52 for an example.

<sup>42</sup> See Schjødt 2008, pp.72-73 for a detailed analysis of this category.

<sup>43</sup> See Schjødt 2008, pp.73-74 for a detailed analysis of this category.

thematized in the possession of the numinous object (the mead). The mythic process that brings the numinous object from the liminal phase into the final phase can be understood as a symbolic expression of death and rebirth; it is only through Óðinn's direct contact with feminine sexuality in the form of sexual intercourse and a wedding with Gunnlöð that liberates the numinous object into his grasp and therefore into the world of the gods.

### 3) Oppositional pairs which are analogous to the liminal vs. the non-liminal

This refers to the presence of oppositional pairs in initiation myths which essentially mirror the theme of liminal versus non-liminal in the initiation myth. These, as identified by Schjødtt, are present in the myth of *Hávamál* stanzas 104-110.

#### a) life – death

It is characteristic of the underworld (Gunnlöð's mountain home where Óðinn attains the mead – see section below) that death plays a vital role.

After Schjødtt (2008, pp.414-15):

‘we ought to see the underworld and death as closely connected if not simply alternating mythemes which, indeed, belong to different codes, but which are more or less identical in the universe of myths . . . because both death and the underworld are expressions for the Other as oppositions to the condition and place that is the stage for human society’.

As sacral kingship is concerned with the provision of fruitfulness and riches that the king is supposed to provide, the mythical metaphors of life and death seem very fitting.

#### b) upper world – underworld

In other eddic poems in which initiation occurs, the attainment of a numinous object always occurs in a world that is ‘other’ than the one which the gods normally inhabit, and which is always ‘below’. This includes from the ‘dead, the dwarfs and the Vanir’s abode, from inside mountains, from caves and from wherever the well originates’ (Schjødtt 2008, p.413). *Hávamál* stanzas 104-110 clearly show this, as Óðinn must travel into a mountain in order to reach Gunnlöð.

### c) manifest/active – latent/passive

This category is connected to the appearance of the semantic category that forms an opposite to the masculine, namely ‘the other’. After Schjødt (2008, p.417) this category is ‘very suitable as a purveyor of a potential, whose procurement is analogous to the production of physical life, and which is numinous – which is of and about the Other and which contains the mysteries of life and death’. It is the potential, which is a latent and passive entity in the underworld, where the masculine hero must fetch it and bring it into the upper world, thereby realizing its potential.

### d) masculine – feminine

Little need be said here, as the myth in *Hávamál* clearly mediates between the masculinity of Óðinn and the femininity of Gunnlöð. In all myths relating to the acquisition of a numinous object the purveyor of the object is a woman. The feminine as a semantic category in Old Icelandic culture is intrinsically linked with ‘chaos, wild nature or the irrational’ (McKinnell 2005(a), p.233). Giantesses specifically are often associated with ‘the forces of nature and the land itself . . . due to menstruation and childbirth, the female was commonly associated with the seasons and the forces of wild or productive nature’ (ibid, p.8). Likewise the masculine is marked by traditional values such as order and civilization.

## 4) The object that is acquired in the liminal phase always consists of a form of numinous knowledge

This final category refers to the rule that the object that is acquired in the initiation must always contain a form of numinous knowledge.<sup>44</sup> This category is clearly fulfilled in *Hávamál* as Óðinn gets a drink of the precious mead. Various scholars have understood the mead as representing different forms of knowledge.<sup>45</sup> Yet a re-investigation is

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<sup>44</sup> See Schjødt 2008, pp.78 for a detailed analysis of this category.

<sup>45</sup> For examples of this scholarship see; Doht, R., 1974. *Der Rauschtrank im Germanischen Mythos*. (Wiener Arbeiten zur germanischen Altertumskunde und Philologie 3. Vienna. Rankovic, S., Melve, L., & Mundal, E., (eds) *Along the Oral-Written Continuum: Types of Texts, Relations and their Implications* (Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy). Turnhout: Brepols.



required if the purpose of the mead in *Hávamál* is to be understood as a mead of kings. This is examined further on page 30.

The motif in *Hávamál*, once dissected, therefore seems to conform very easily to the four criteria of kingship as identified by Schjødt and indeed seems to be paradigmatic of an initiation myth into sacral kingship. Summing up this position Schjødt (2008, p.440) claims that:

‘a prerequisite for the subject, who is always a living masculine individual from the upper world, being able to attain a new status that is irreversibly higher than the one which he comes from, is that he acquires numinous potential, which is of an Other World. In a number of ways, this is an inversion of the world from which the subject comes, and death and sex are present as conditions that allow the numinous to be released for use in This World.’

This leads me to conclude in accordance with Svava Jakobsdóttir that the two mythic kernels of firstly Gunnlöð's passing the mead to Óðinn and secondly the sacred embrace/sexual intercourse are ‘essential motifs which must have been preserved together and must be related to each other’ (Svava Jakobsdóttir 2002, p.34) at the mythic core of *Hávamál*. Therefore the core of the myth seems to be a ritual analogous to the royal consecration rites found in the Old Irish literary sources. Other aspects of the poem will relate it to a specifically Old Irish *milieu* that goes beyond basic similarities and indicates a deeper resemblance to those sources.

## VIII. THE POSSIBILITY OF OLD IRISH INFLUENCE AND THE IMPLIED RITUAL BEHIND STANZAS 104-110.

Further aspects of the scene in *Hávamál* can be tied to an act of sovereignty, when similar Old Irish literature and religious practices are considered. The very close similarity to Old Irish literary accounts of kingship show the close connection to *Hávamál* that will become important later on in the thesis.

### Colour symbolism of the mead and the relation between Old Irish and Old Icelandic mythical queens

A defining characteristic of the Old Irish drink of sovereignty is its red colouring. In the fragment from *Baile in Scáil* (see above, p.11), the drink itself is referred to as *derg flaitb*, meaning ‘red ale.’ The same colour is often implicit in the sovereignty goddess herself who is associated with the ale as well; the most well known Irish sovereignty goddess was *Medb Lethderg*. An etymology for her forename is provided above on page 11. Her surname is what interests me here however; *Lethderg* means ‘of the red-side’. The explanation for this naming lies in the fact that Old Irish sacral kingship was sometimes bloody, either ‘because the sovereign had to fight to preserve or gain territory, or because there may have been bloody contests to gain access to the throne’ (Ó hÓgáin, 1999).<sup>46</sup> A re-investigation of the *Hávamál* stanza 107 also illustrates the possibility of similar colour symbolism in the *Hávamál* mead; the relevant stanza reads: *Vel keypts litar hefí ek vel notit*. The word *litar* has been a point of disagreement among translators of the poem and ‘has not been satisfactorily explained’ (Evans 1986, p.121). However, a wide range of possibilities have been considered, including Richert’s belief that *litar* is a ‘poetic circumlocution for Gunnlöð’ (ibid 1986, p.121) to Möbius’s hypothesis that it refers to Óðinn’s metamorphosis into a serpent.<sup>47</sup> In light of the Irish evidence it seems

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<sup>46</sup> I have been unable to find the original source of the quote. However, it can be found at: [http://theses.univ-lyon2.fr/documents/getpart.php?id=lyon2.2009.beck\\_n&part=159293](http://theses.univ-lyon2.fr/documents/getpart.php?id=lyon2.2009.beck_n&part=159293) (accessed 12/11/2011)

<sup>47</sup> See Evans (1986, p.121) for a complete historiographical analysis of *litar*.

reasonable to assume that *litar* may refer to the colour of the mead itself and indicates a possible Old Irish influence on the form of the *Hávamál* stanzas.<sup>48</sup>

Other naming evidence may also indicate that Gunnlöð belonged to a similar literary tradition of Old Irish goddesses. The Irish word *flaith* (meaning both ‘ale’ and ‘sovereignty’) is interpreted as *lōð* in the name of the Old Irish queen Gormflaith, who is identified as Kormlöð in *Njáls saga*. As Svava Jakobsdóttir (2002, p.44) points out ‘Kormlöð is almost identical with the personifications of these sovereignty goddesses when the saga tradition has euhemerized them and placed them in a definite historical context’. *Lōð* meaning ‘hospitality’ in Old Icelandic seems especially appropriate as a name element when the favourable welcome Óðinn received upon entering Gunnlöð’s mountain home is considered. This etymological connection raises the question of a connection between the two figures of Kormlöð and Gunnlöð. It is known that ‘connections between elite women represent dynastic connections between the Scandinavian, Anglo-Saxon and Irish elites’ (Lewis-Simpson 2005, p.217). In the case of Gormflaith, she was a ‘true mother of kings for both Norse and Irish . . . indicating a remembrance of a Norse-Leinster alliance (Lewis-Simpson 2005, pp.218-22). If a strong Old Icelandic-Irish connection can be imagined, it seems reasonable to suggest that the two figures of Kormlöð and Gunnlöð may have sprung from the same source, and represent the Old Irish and the Old Icelandic adaption of a mythological female who initiates sacral kings.

Having analysed the myth of the sacred marriage in *Hávamál* in the light of the Old Irish evidence, I shall now examine other aspects of the stanzas to uncover further meaning of their purpose.

### **Óðrerir and a ritual context**

*Óðrerir* has proved to be difficult to translate.<sup>49</sup> In *Snorra-Edda*, *Óðrerir* refers to one of the three vessels in which the mead is stored by the giant Suttungr. However, it contains a slightly different meaning in *Hávamál*: there is general agreement that the term

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<sup>48</sup> I suggest this interpretation only tentatively. However, a colour component is important in another mythological female by the name of *Gullveig*, a female prophetess who appears only in *Völuspá*. Her name has been much discussed, and although no definitive meaning has been ascertained, it approximates to ‘Golden Drink’. See Simek 2007, p.123 for further details.

<sup>49</sup> See Evans (1986, p.120) for a complete historiographical analysis of *Óðrerir*.

designates the mead itself, although this has been a point of great contention and will be analysed below. It is worthwhile examining other stanzas in *Hávamál* for a greater appreciation of *Óðrerir*. Stanza 140 reads:<sup>50</sup>

‘Nine mighty spells I learnt from the famous son,  
of Bolthor, Bestla’s father,  
and I got a drink of the precious mead,  
poured from Óðrerir.’<sup>51</sup>

The grammatical and semantic uncertainties are worth examining here. Evans suggests a likely interpretation that the past participle *ausinn* means not poured, but sprinkled. This could be related to ‘the idiom *ausa barn vatni* ‘to sprinkle a child with water’ in pre-Christian name-giving rituals’ (Schjødt 2008, p.183). However, this would create further semantic problems as it would ‘not settle the question of whether *Óðrerir* points to the vessel or liquid’ (Orton 2007, p.284). Evans suggests a way around the complexity of this problem by proposing we take *ausinn* as a nominative, not accusative, in agreement with *ek*, ‘I’. Thus the stanza would read, following Evans’ understanding, as ‘I got a drink of the precious mead, (was) sprinkled with *Óðrerir*’ (Evans 1986).

Although the effects of imbibing mead in Old Norse mythological sources normally relates to an enhanced poetic ability, there are other effects as well. It is worthwhile examining these more marginal effects to appreciate the mead of *Hávamál*. For example, stanzas 14-18 of the eddic poem *Sigrdrífumál* ‘make plain, the associations of the holy mead were not confined to poetry, its potency reaching all corners of the mind and resulting in *matar meginrúnar* – excellent runes of power’ (Quinn 2009, p.209), which are used as instruments of gaining esoteric knowledge for those able to keep them (the runes) in their memory. The fact that the mead is to be gained from the underworld

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<sup>50</sup> *Fimbullióð níu*

*nam ek af inum frægja syni*

*Bólþórs Bestlu fǫður*

*ok ek drykk of gat*

*ins dýra mjaðar*

*ausinn Óðrerir*’ (Neckel & Kuhn 1962, p.40)

<sup>51</sup> Translated by Larrington 1996, p.34.

indicates to Doht (1974, p.150) that the mead is strongly connected to the water of life.<sup>52</sup>

In her own words:

‘The water of life, like water in general, imparts a higher knowledge since it is connected to the tree of life and knowledge, or since it originates from the gods, but also because it springs from the underworld and the dead not only possesses eternal life, but also knowledge and wisdom.’<sup>53</sup>

Other scholars have also noted connections of the mead in *Hávamál* with the water of life. Grimm (1875-78, p.760) found a semantic connection of sweetness in the Germanic cognates of the first element (*Óð*), thereby associating it with a liquid substance of similar function to the nectar of the classical Greek ambrosial cycle. He concluded the mead in *Hávamál* originated in<sup>54</sup> the sweet drink of divine poesy, which imparted immortality.’<sup>55</sup> Therefore, in tandem with Svava Jakobsdóttir’s (2002, p.52) line of thought, ‘*Hávamál*’s precious mead has to do with kings; it is a libation, the cup of life’. Readings into other areas of *Hávamál* will support this notion.

Stanza 141 can also be used to understand the inherent meaning behind the myth of stanzas 104-110.<sup>56</sup> It reads:<sup>57</sup>

Then I began to quicken and be wise,

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<sup>52</sup> ‘*Das Lebenswasser, wie das Wasser überhaupt, teilt höheres Wissen mit, weil es mit dem Lebens- und Erkenntnisbaum verbunden ist, oder weil es von den Götten stammt, aber auch, weil es aus der Unterwelt hervorsprudelt und die Toten nicht nur ewiges Leben, sondern auch Erkenntnis und Weisheit besitzen.*’

<sup>53</sup> My translation.

<sup>54</sup> ‘*den süßen trank göttlicher dichtung, der unsterblichkeit verlieh.*’

<sup>55</sup> My translation.

<sup>56</sup> This is in tandem with the approach of Svava Jakobsdóttir (2002, p.39) who theorizes that to see the story of Gunnlöð in its proper context, other areas of *Hávamál* must be taken into consideration.

<sup>57</sup> *Þá nam ek frævask*

*ok fróðr vera*

*ok vaxa ok vel hafask*

*orð mér af orði*

*orðs leitaði*

*verk mér af verki*

*verks leitaði* (Neckel & Kuhn 1962, p.40)

and to grow and to prosper;  
 one word found another word for me,  
 one deed found another deed for me <sup>58</sup>

This passage refers to the effect that the mead has on Óðinn. A careful reading of the stanza indicates a reality of induction into sacral kingship behind the text. The middle-voice *fravask* occurs in only one other context in Old Icelandic verse, in a thirteenth century poem written on behalf of a certain bishop Guðmundr. There it refers ‘allegorically to the bishop becoming fertile with seed from the harvest of faith’ (McKinnell 2005 (b), p.101). *Þá nam ek fravask ok fróðr vera* – ‘then I began to quicken and be wise’ is also revealing. *Fróðr* is interesting in that it means ‘wise’. This word is used in other Old Icelandic myths, for example Freyr is described as *inn fróði* in the eddic poem *Skírnismál*. Old Icelandic also had a homophone meaning ‘fruitful and fertile’ (Evans 1986, p.135). Modern Swedish preserves *frodig* meaning ‘luxuriant’ and ‘rich’, as well as the noun *frodlem* meaning ‘penis’.<sup>59</sup> These references to fertility seem appropriate to the powers of a sacral king. The poet’s use of *vaxa* continues the fertility metaphor; it means ‘to grow’, but it has been suggested that the swelling inspiration of the poet is ‘like the swelling of a pregnant woman’ (McKinnell (2005 (b), p.101).<sup>60</sup> McKinnell then suggests a new reading of this stanza: ‘Then I began to be fruitful like a crop, and to be wise and virile, and to grow towards harvest and swell like a pregnant woman, and to grow up and flourish like a healthy child’ (ibid, p.101). This fertility imagery would apply well to the development of a king during an initiation ceremony, where he is being imbued with sacral power, which is what the poem seems to be describing.

In stanza 107 the reference to sacral kingship is corroborated as Óðinn ‘might be confirming his right to the realm’ (Svava Jakobsdóttir 2002, p.39), expressing that he had undergone the initiation ceremony and had grown in strength. In the second half of stanza 107 Óðinn seemingly expresses how he is putting his new found knowledge to use; *því at Óðrerir/ er nú upp kominn/ á elda vés iaðar* – this section of the stanza is often translated as ‘for now Óðrerir has come up/to the rim of the sanctuaries of men’ (Larrington’s translation). However, the line *á elda vés iaðar* has proved very problematic

<sup>58</sup> Translated by Larrington 1996, p.34.

<sup>59</sup> This discussion of *fróðr* is paraphrased from Evans (1986, p.135).

<sup>60</sup> Comparable to the phrase *óx brúðar kviðar* (the bride’s belly grew) from the eleventh century *Grámagafilm*.

for several scholars. According to Evans (1986, p.121) it ‘must be corrupt’. Likewise the passage is wrong on both ‘grammatical and metrical grounds’ (Schjødt 2008, p.151). Therefore many editors have resorted to emendation (as manifest by Larrington’s translation above). However, I follow Gísli Sigurðsson (1988) and Svava Jakobsdóttir (2002) in allowing the manuscript text *iadar* (the word it is frequently emended to) to stand, as it is preserved in the *Codex Regius* as *jarðar*, meaning ‘earth, ground’ (Barnes 2007, p.127). Following Svava Jakobsdóttir (2002, p.40) I will search for the meaning of this stanza in light of Old Icelandic religious practices and interpret the stanza as a description of where the initiation into kingship is actually taking place in the most literal sense, as that is what the poem seems to be describing if one follows my choice of translation. In this vein Svava Jakobsdóttir (ibid, p.40) suggests *vés* (how it stands in the manuscript) could be emended to *vé*.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, *alda* could plausibly be the accusative of the noun *aldi*, which may have been ‘used generally to refer to islands with particular topographical features’ (ibid, p.41).<sup>62</sup> If *vé jarðar* can be translated as ‘earth’s shrine’, a re-interpretation of the stanza fragment *því at Óðrerir/ er nú upp kominn/ á alda vé jarðar* (as I, following Svava Jakobsdóttir’s suggestion have emended it to) can now be translated as ‘Óðrerir came up to the island (*aldi*) (i.e.) Earth’s shrine (*vé jarðar*)’.<sup>63</sup> This would imply that the mead has been brought up to the world of men from a sacred shrine on an island. It is necessary to take this interpretation further and examine where the ‘Earth’s shrine’ was on the island of *alda* and how it can shed further light on the function of the relevant stanzas in *Hávamál*.

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<sup>61</sup> *Vé* designates a temple or shrine in Norse and Germanic paganism, particularly in connection with pagan deities and geographical features. For example, *Njarðar vé*, an island of the west coast of Norway, has been identified as a religious site. See Brink 2001.

<sup>62</sup> In the context of this stanza in *Hávamál* it may refer to the island where a holy place (*vé jarðar*) was. See chapter IX and X for further details of this phenomenon.

<sup>63</sup> If this emended version were correct, linguistically the phrase *á alda vé jarðar* would be an apposition. This means that the earth’s shrine (*vé jarðar*) is implied in the name *aldi*. In English this phrase could be rendered ‘*aldi* (i.e. earth’s shrine)’.

## IX. THE SHRINE OF THE GODDESS – THE NATURE OF THE RITUAL

It is thought by scholars that the pagan Old Icelandic religion was firmly connected to the worship of natural features in the landscape. ‘A religion may either bind people to a place or free them from it. The pagan religion of Scandinavia was obviously of the former kind’ (Brink 2001, p.86). Indeed the landscape of the pagan Icelanders was metaphysically impregnated with religious meaning, and certain myths were connected to certain physical features in the landscape. Although no obvious kingship initiation rituals survive in the cultural record that relates to the landscape, rituals relating to the formation of blood brothers do and can be located in the actual physical landscape. It will be worthwhile examining them in order to reconstruct the kingship ritual implicit in *Hávamál*. Sources for entry into such a blood brotherhood ritual exist across the Old Icelandic corpus. The first example is from *Gísla saga Súrssonar*:<sup>64</sup>

‘Now they walked out onto Eyrarhvalsodda and cut from the ground a strip of earth so that both ends were attached to the ground, and they put an inlaid spear under it, on which a man with his hand could reach to the spear nails. Those four, Þorgrímur, Gísli, Þorkell and Vésteinn were to go beneath it. And now they let their blood flow and let it be mixed in the earth that had been cut up under the strip of turf and they mix it all together, the earth and the blood; and afterwards they all fell to their knees and swear that oath that each one should avenge the other one as if (he were) his brother and they name all the gods as witness.’<sup>65</sup>

And from *Fóstbræðra saga*:<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> ‘Ganga nú út í Eyrarhvalsodda ok rista þar upp úr jörðu jarðarmen svá at báðir endar váru fastir í jörðu og settu þar undir málasþjót þat er maður mátti taka hendi sinni til geirnagla. Þeir skyldu þar fjórir undir ganga, Þorgrímur, Gísli, Þorkell ok Vésteinn. Ok nú vekja þeir sér blóð ok láta renna saman dreyra sinn í þeiri moldu er upp var skorin undan jarðarmeninu ok hræra saman allt moldina ok blóðit. En síðan féllu þeir allir á kné ok sverja þann eið að hverr skal annars hefna sem bróður síns og nefna öll goðin í vitni’ Björn K. Þórólfsson & Guðni Jónsson, (eds) 1943, pp. 22-23.

<sup>65</sup> Translation by Schjødt 2008, p.356

<sup>66</sup> ‘Hafði sú siðvenja verið hefð frægra manna, þeira er þat lög mál settu sín í milli, at sá skyldi annars hefna, er lengur lifði, þá skyldu þeir ganga undir þrjú jarðarmen ok var þat eiðr þeira. Sá leikr var á þá lund, at rista skyldi þrjár torfur úr jörðu langar; þeira endar skyldu allir fastir í jörðu ok heimta upp lykkjurnar svá at menn mættu ganga undir.’ (Björn K. Þórólfsson & Guðni Jónsson., (eds) 1943, p. 25).



‘That custom has been maintained among famous men who held that agreement amongst themselves that the one who lived longer should avenge the other one, that they should go beneath three strips of turf and that was their oath. That practice happened in this way that three long strips of turf were to be cut from the ground. Their ends were to remain fast in the ground with the loop pulled up so that men could go underneath.’<sup>67</sup>

Although the sources remain problematic, it seems that this ritual act of going under the earth was however not used simply for rituals of blood brotherhood but also in other aspects of ritual activity. The ritual is also present in *Vatnsdæla saga* where it seems to serve as a ‘kind of act of penitence in which something shameful was involved’ (Schjødt 2008, p.358) and *Laxdæla saga* where it ‘seems to serve as a *Gottersurteil*’ (Schjødt 2008, p.358) or divine judgement. In *Landnámabók* it seems to function as some form of consecration ritual:<sup>68</sup>

‘Then a shrine was made there, where sacrifices were performed; they believed that people died and went into the mound and Þórðr gellir was lead into it, before he assumed his honour’.<sup>69</sup>

It seems only natural to enquire as to whether the ritual could not be used in the initiation of kings; common to the literary descriptions of the ritual is the phrase *ganga undir jarðarmen* meaning ‘to go under a strip of turf’ (literally ‘an earth necklace’). Most scholars have seen the ritual in light of birth/death symbolism.<sup>70</sup> The most thorough treatment of the ritual was given by Hellmuth (1975, p.200) who claimed that those who perform the rite undergo a radical symbolic change:<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Translation by Schjødt 2008, p.355.

<sup>68</sup> ‘*Var þá gøð høg, er blot tóku til; trúðu þeir því, at þeir dæi í hólana, ok þar var Þórðr gellir leiddr í, áðr hann tók mannvirðing.*’ (Jakob Benediktsson. (ed) 1963, p.140.

<sup>69</sup> My translation.

<sup>70</sup> See Schjødt 2008, p.355 for an analysis.

<sup>71</sup> ‘*Und insbesondere die Begabung mit initiatorischer Weisheit, die denjenigen zuteil wurde, die unter den Rasen traten, rührt meiner Meinung nach daher, dass der Mensch, der sich ‘unter die Erbe’ begab, eigentlich kein Mensch mehr war: er wurde Toten und Geistern gleich und erlangte übermenschliche Fähigkeiten wie diese.*’

‘And especially the endowment with initiatory wisdom, which would fall to the share of each of those who went under the turf, is according to my opinion, due to the idea that the person who proceeded ‘under the ground’ was not in fact a human being any more; he had become like the dead or the spirits and acquired superhuman abilities like them’.<sup>72</sup>

This symbolism would seem extremely appropriate for a kingship initiation, if *Hávamál* is describing such a ritual. I would therefore suggest that the editor who set these stanzas to vellum had knowledge as to whether the *hieros gamos* myth was connected to a ritual, and if so, knew what was involved. As illustrated above, a ritual connected to the formation of a blood brotherhood pact seemingly existed in the Old Icelandic world. From literary sources this same ritual was likely used in other areas of ritual oath swearing and (possibly) initiation. The symbolism inherent in this ritual and the description of it these sources seems very applicable and relevant to the initiation of a sacral king and the ritual that is seemingly being described in stanza 107 of *Hávamál*, as stanza 107 describes earth’s shrine (*vé jarðar*). It is the place where this ritual may have taken place that I shall now focus on.

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<sup>72</sup> Translation by Schjødt 2008, p.362.

## X. NORWEGIAN SACRED ISLANDS - THE LOCATION OF THE RITUAL

It is thought by scholars that islands were particularly likely to contain religious sites in the Old Norse/Icelandic world. The unique position islands hold in the mental maps of certain people, suggests that 'islands conceptualized as a kind of progenitor or first land in a vast water. For people living in archipelagos . . . islands become equated with home and the ultimate home is the ancestral homeland' (Brink 2001, pp.92-3). Something similar may well have existed in the conceptions of the pagan Icelanders. As Brink goes on to say (*ibid*, p.93):

'In some cases, a certain god or goddess was believed to live on the island or was connected with or dedicated to it. In other cases the island was connected with several gods, perhaps more or less the whole pantheon operating in the region, so that the island may be looked upon as a mythological microcosm'.

Indeed many such islands existed across the Old Norse/Icelandic speaking world and have been positively identified by archaeologists, such as *Selaö* in the province of Södermanland in central Sweden and *Njarðarlög* in western Norway.<sup>73</sup> Using this knowledge as a departure point, Svava Jakobsdóttir (2002, p.40) claims that *alda* (the island mentioned in stanza 107) could be the accusative of the noun *aldi*. *Aldi* is an island off the west coast of Norway and was known to the pagan Icelanders.<sup>74</sup> For example, the island is mentioned in *Egils saga*.<sup>75</sup>

Bugge has suggested that the name means 'high island' and islands with such generic topographical features may be designated with that same name.<sup>76</sup> It is impossible to pin the ritual *Hávamál* describes down to that particular island in Norway. However, evidence will strengthen the case that the ritual being implied in *Hávamál* refers to a

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<sup>73</sup> See Brink 2001 for further details on sacred islands in the Old Norse world.

<sup>74</sup> *Aldi* as it is written in the manuscript as uncapitalized, would be a general noun referring to an island with certain topographical features that may have designated it for an association with sacred shrines.

<sup>75</sup> See Sigurður Nordal (ed), 1933. *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar*. Reykjavik: Hið Íslenska fornritafélag. See Svava Jakobsdóttir 2002, p.41 for comments.

<sup>76</sup> Bugge, S., 1904. Bidrag til Forklaring af norske Stedsnavne. *Arkiv for Nordisk Filologi* 20, pp. 333-58.

specifically Norwegian *milieu*. McKinnell (2005 (a), p.167) has pointed out the interesting possibility that Gunnlöð was an ‘ancestress of the rulers of Hörðaland’. Two *fornaldarsögur* about Gunnlöð trace her origins to the west coast of Norway as the founder of Hörðaland. The Old Norse prose of the older saga, *Hálfs saga Hálfsrekka* reads:<sup>77</sup>

‘There was a jarl in Hordaland called Alf the Old. He married Gunnlod, daughter of Hromund Berserk and sister of the chieftan Hamund the Bold. They had two sons, each named Stein.’<sup>78</sup>

The younger appearance of Gunnlöð is as the wife of a powerful farmer and mother of Hrómundr Gripsson in *Hrómundar saga*. The relevant prose reads:<sup>79</sup>

‘There was a powerful farmer by the name of Gripr. He had a wife by the name of Gunnlöð, the daughter of Hrókr inn svartí, and they had nine sons, named Hrólftr, Haki, Gautr, Þröstr, Angantýr, Logi, Hrómundr, Helgi and Hrókr. They were all promising men, although Hrómundr was greater than the rest.’<sup>80</sup>

In this saga, when Hrómundr wrestles with the *draugr* of the berserkr *Þráinn*, the ghost comments on his strength: *Þú munt fæddr vera af Gunnlöðu. Eru fáir þínir líkar.*<sup>81</sup> ‘You must have been born of Gunnlöð – there are few like you.’<sup>82</sup> McKinnell (2005 (a), p.167), on criticizing this passage writes that the ‘implication is that Hrómundr’s mother must be a giantess.’ This suggests that the rulers of Hörðaland may have claimed descent from Óðinn and Gunnlöð. This idea is supported by the fact that both incarnations of Gunnlöð (‘who are most likely to be the same figure’ according to McKinnell) appear in

<sup>77</sup> *Á Hörðalandi var jarl sá, er Álfr inn gamli hét. Hann átti Gunnlöðu, dóttir Hrómundar berserks, systur Hámundar hersis ins frænka. Synir þeira váru tveir, ok hét hvárrtveggi Steinn* (Guðni Jónsson 1959, p.106).

<sup>78</sup> Translation by Bachman, B.W.Jnr., & Gudmundur Erlingsson 1991, p.13.

<sup>79</sup> ‘*Þar bjó einn ríkr bóandi. Sá hét Gripr. Hann átti þá konu, er Gunnlöð hét, dóttir Hróks ins svarta. Þau áttu níu sonu, er svá hétu: Hrólftr, Haki, Gautr, Þröstr, Angantýr, Logi, Hrómundr, Helgi, Hrókr. Þeir váru allir efniligir menn. Þó var Hrómundar fyrir þeim öllum*’ (Guðni Jónsson 1959, p.407).

<sup>80</sup> My translation.

<sup>81</sup> Guðni Jónsson & Bjarni Vilhjálmsson.,(eds) 1943-44. *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, volume II, pp.276-86.

<sup>82</sup> Translated by McKinnell 2005 (a), p.241.

the genealogy of the founders of Hörðaland in *Hversu Noregr byggðist*, in which they are the only females named.<sup>83</sup> The relevant prose reads:<sup>84</sup>

‘Höðr had there a kingdom, by the name of Haðaland. His son was Höddbroddr, father of Hrolf, Hrómundr berserkr, the father of Hámundr, Haki and Gunnlöð who was the mother of Útsteinn and Innsteinn. Hámundr was earl of the kingdom. He was the father of Hrókr inn svartí and Hrókr inn hvítí. Haki was farther of Hródgeir, the father of Hróðmar, the father of Haki beserkr. Gunnlöð was the daughter of Hrókr inn svartí, and mother of Hrómundr Gripsson.’<sup>85</sup>

It seems therefore possible (in light of McKinnell’s theory expounded above) to view Gunnlöð as a sovereignty goddess localized to Hörðaland.<sup>86</sup> Similar characters in Old Norse/Icelandic mythology can shed light on this function. For example, Þorgerðr Hölgabrúðr ‘seems to have originated as a local goddess’ (McKinnell 2002, p.272). In the sources written about her she occurs as patroness of the last great advocate of paganism in Norway, Hákon jarl inn ríki. ‘Since his family were called the *Háleygjjar* and his major power base was in the Trøndelag (just to the south of Hálogaland), it would not be surprising if his tutelary goddess was called Hölgabrúðr’ (McKinnell 2002, p.267). By connecting Gunnlöð to Hörðaland she is likely a part of the same mythic tradition as Þorgerðr Hölgabrúðr. This phenomenon of goddesses being connected to specific geographical locations is summed up by McKinnell (2005 (a), pp.165-69): ‘The Völsungar

<sup>83</sup> See Guðni Jónsson 1959, p.79.

<sup>84</sup> ‘Höðr átti þar ríki, er kallat Haðaland. Hans sonr var Höddbroddr, faðir Hrólfs, föður Hrómundar berserks, föður þeira Hámundar, Haka ok Gunnlaðar, móður þeira Útsteins ok Innsteins. Hámundr var Hórðajarl. Hann var faðir Hróks ins svarta ok Hróks ins hvíta. Haki var faðir Hródgeirs, föður Hróðmars, föður Haka berserks. Gunnlöð var dóttir Hróks ins svarta, en móðir Hrómundr Gripssonar’. (Guðni Jónsson 1959, p. 80)

<sup>85</sup> My translation.

<sup>86</sup> McKinnell does not explicate the exact relationship between the Gunnlöð(s) of the sagas/ *Hversu Noregr byggðist* and the Gunnlöð of *Hávamál*. However, the connection of geographical locations in Norway suggests there may be some common shared identity.

are said to be derived from Hljóð (daughter of the giant Hrímir) and Volsungr (who is probably Óðinn in another form) . . . and the Haðalanders perhaps from Gunnlöð.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> McKinnell here connects Gunnlöð to the geographical region of Haðaland in south-eastern Norway, not Hörðaland in south-western Norway as I have claimed before. However this does not devalue my argument, as long as Gunnlöð is connected to a certain geographical area of Norway.

## XI. A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF MYTH IN *HÁVAMÁL*

To gain a greater understanding of the meaning behind stanzas 104-110 as laid out above, and the function of Óðinn and Gunnlöð as being connected to a geographical location in Norway, a new and nuanced understanding of ‘myth’ is required, i.e. ‘myth as a gateway to power . . . which may explain how a certain dynasty can trace its descent to divine powers and therefore is entitled to hold important social positions’ (Steinsland 2007, pp. 26-7). This type of myth is at work in *Hávamál* stanzas 104-110. Steinsland roots this type of legitimizing myth in the cultural transformations from paganism to Christianity that occurred across Scandinavia in the early medieval period and utilised the old pagan myth of *hieros gamos* and the new ideology of rulership. This transferral of the pagan myth to European historiography is characterised by a specific characteristic as noted by Steinsland (2007, p.14): ‘the old mythological tension between the gods and the giants is in medieval historiography transformed into either a social or a geographical tension’, as indicated by Gunnlöð’s relationship to Hörðaland/ Haðaland. Thus the old, pagan myth can serve as a model for alliances both between different social or ethnic groups. This format worked due to the unique medieval Icelandic conception of history as revealing ‘an integrated view of the relationship between the past and present . . . allowing Icelandic writers to remember those aspects of their pre-Christian cultural heritage’ (Clunies Ross 1998, p.82). This allowed writers to enter into medieval European historiographical traditions like dynastic histories. Clunies Ross (*ibid*, p.83) states that:

‘typically, twelfth- and thirteenth-century European historians, basing themselves on earlier royal genealogies and historical writings, went back to the supposedly prehistoric beginnings of contemporary dynasties . . . enabling the development of a rich, many-layered ideology of dynastic history’.

For example, the royal families of the English did this, such as ‘those of Kent, Essex and East Anglia, who saw Woden as their ultimate progenitor in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, chapter 2’ (Motz 1986, p.73). Summing this position up, Steinsland (2011, p.68) says:

‘Changing power relations may be expressed via new creation, innovations and re-use of older mythological and ritualistic concepts . . . The change of religion in the Nordic countries initiated a period of interesting interaction between tradition and innovation.

Thus, with regard to our medieval literary sources we should be aware of postulating either-or pagan or Christian readings. Rather, we should envisage mixed compositions, and even the possibility of a deliberate mixed communication: rulers employing the pagan and Christian ideological languages'.

That is the cultural process behind the utilization of the *hieros gamos* motif in many eddic poems. However, the *Hávamál* account represents the motif in a very unique way. This representation will be elaborated upon in the following chapter.



## XII. A REVERSAL OF SACRAL KINGSHIP IN *HÁVAMÁL*

I have established that stanzas 104-110 in *Hávamál* represent an independent mythic narrative about the union of Gunnlöð and Óðinn, a *hieros gamos* motif similar to other eddic poems that were connected in some way to the legitimization of royal kingdoms. Yet something clearly goes wrong in the passage into sacral kingship in *Hávamál*. The only thing that occurs from the union is Óðinn's betrayal of Gunnlöð. As Svava Jakobsdóttir (2002, pp.41-53) puts it:

The consecration ends in tragedy. The newly consecrated king steals the sacred treasure . . . The viewpoint is not that of the courageous hero who has performed some remarkable feat. An almost tragic note is struck here. Faith is shattered and the integrity of the world of the gods is smashed'.

As gleaned from this statement above, there is no obviously beneficial outcome that one would expect from the union. To understand the extent to which the *hieros gamos* in *Hávamál* is out of the ordinary in relation to other eddic poems that contain the motif, it is worth examining a few of those more 'normal' aspects in other poems. Gro Steinsland has analysed *hieros gamos* as a constitutive part of Old Icelandic sacral kingship in several eddic poems. For example, she views the ideology behind the eddic poem *Skírnismál* as a mythic expression of a king's conquest and rulership over his land. However, the poem functions on a deeper level as well, due to the type of offspring which issues from the marriage. It can be seen from Snorri's version of the myth, as is also found in *Skírnismál*, that the marriage between the god and the giantess produces *Fjölfnir*, 'the prototypic king of the *Ynglingar* . . . neither god nor giant, he represents a new kind . . . corresponding to his illegality on a mythical level' (Steinsland 1991, p.349).<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, Steinsland (2007, p.12) claims that:

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<sup>88</sup> It may seem contradictory to use evidence from Snorri's rewriting of *Skírnismál* in this thesis, where I have been illustrating that Snorri's account and the eddic account of the mead of poetry motif in *Hávamál* are at odds with each other. However, as *Hávamál*, and not *Skírnismál*, is the poem under analysis here, for consideration of time and space we can assume that *Snorra-Edda* and eddic sources are not mutually exclusive, and that Snorri's versions do contain some similarities to the eddic poems. Furthermore, this is the methodological model that Gro Steinsland operates with.

'he represented a new species, a dynasty of rulers. Due to his strange birth, he carried the forces and energies of the two cosmic counter-poles, *Ásgård* and *Utgård*, in himself. It is this mythical origin from gods and giants which rendered the ruler special and which gave him and his lineage a unique position with regard to other people.'

From the preceding analysis we can see that the *hieros gamos* motif typically produces a king.

Many of the ruling dynasties in Norway legitimized their status through the *hieros gamos* motif. For example, according to Steinsland (2007, p.12) the earls of Lade (*Ladejarlsatt*) in the Trøndelag of Norway 'legitimised their status with the help of mythological propaganda-poems'. In competition with the kings of the *Ynglings*, the earls used the *hieros gamos* myth as well, but in a slightly different form. 'According to the praise poem *Håleygjatal* from the late tenth century, it was the god Odin and the giantess Skade who were the parents of a son who became the first of a long line of earls' (Steinsland 2007, p.12). Likewise 'king Hölgi of Hálogaland married Thora, the daughter of king Gusir of the Bjarns and Finns, who is a giant in some texts' (Motz 1986, p.77). Therefore in motifs of this kind, *giants and gods combine to create a king*,<sup>89</sup> although it is disputable whether these are the only requirements necessary for the creation of the king.<sup>90</sup> As pointed out above, although the *hieros gamos* motif in *Hávamál* contains the necessary conditions for an initiation into sacral kingship, the desired outcome does not come to fruition. I believe that a feasible explanation could be due to the writer parodying the traditional *hieros gamos* myth.

As I established earlier, a key feature for the *hieros gamos* motif (as indicated by the Old Irish evidence and present in *Hávamál*) is sexual intercourse with a giantess or supernatural women and the passing over of sacred mead. Also although not an essential feature to the *hieros gamos* motif, but important nevertheless, is Óðinn's ring oath to Gunnlöð which he breaks. It is these points that are being parodied. Although it is not stated in the poem what kind of oath Óðinn breaks it seems likely that it was in a marital context, and we can assume it was an important one. In the warrior ethos that the pagan religion was based on 'it was crucially important to avoid swearing false oaths – that is to say, either knowingly stating as truth something which he knew not to be, or undertaking to do something he could not achieve' (Pollington 2003, p.54). The fact that Óðinn

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<sup>89</sup> My italics for emphasis.

<sup>90</sup> See Motz 1986, p.79 for an example of this phenomenon.

breaks the oath shows a negation of the manner in which a god or ruler would therefore be expected to behave.

The same applies to Óðinn's seduction of Gunnlöð which leaves her weeping. It seems reasonable to assume that the ritual marriage of a god to a giantess was regarded as being a serious matter. Yet the tone in *Hávamál* of Óðinn's betrayal is 'light and self-mocking. It is worth noting that, along with the treatment of many Old Icelandic pagan gods in other myths, the poet in is treating Óðinn and the giantess as if they were all human beings' (McKinnell 2005, p.92).<sup>91</sup> Indeed the use of the verb *njóta* in stanza 107 implies exploitation for sexual purposes and suggests a 'determination to profit at the expense of the sexual partner' (ibid 2005 (b), p.90). Similarly the verb *trúa*, used in stanza 110 and mirroring the use of the same verb in the previous narrative concerning Óðinn's adventure with *Billings Mær* are the only two instances of the use of this verb where it refers to the (lack of) trust of someone else.<sup>92</sup>

Finally, the passing over of the sacred mead is portrayed in negative light. Michael Enright (1995) has shown how highly ritualised the passing over of sacred mead is to a king in the historical and literary traditions of the medieval Irish and Icelanders. That the mead would be drunk, its server seduced and left in tears is ridiculous, highly unlikely in reality and makes Óðinn reprehensible. This all shows that the editor has some degree of knowledge about sacral kingship and utilises many of its motifs (such as a golden throne, and a drink of mead presented by a sovereignty goddess). Yet he frames the myth of it in an aphoristic tale at the centre of which men's deceitfulness towards women is portrayed with a comic twist. It seems that there is little that is sacred in the outcome of Óðinn's seduction of Gunnlöð. Instead 'we are being confronted with an earthly, sordid affair, even if it has been transported to a mythical realm' (Simek 2001, p.239). Steinsland (2011, p.57) claims that the

'dangerous exogamous erotic alliance across the boundaries of the cosmic fields may have dramatic consequences, and opens the myth to different interpretations: as

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<sup>91</sup> McKinnell seems to be suggesting here that a single 'poet' composed *Hávamál*. Although due to concerns of space I am unable to participate in that debate, his comments regarding the purpose of Óðinn in *Hávamál* are still valid.

<sup>92</sup> The episode of *Billings Mær* is often considered to mirror *the Gunnlöð* episode and therefore often considered to have developed in tandem with it. However, as I am focusing just on the episode with Gunnlöð I shall not be taking it into account.

genealogical legitimisation of power, as sexual conquest, as justification for marriage across ethnic and cultural divides, or as a myth of fertility and fateful death?

I intend to show that therefore the myth was open to being parodied as well. It is to the impulse behind the motive of parodying such sacral kingship that I shall now turn.

### XIII. PARODY IN EDDIC POETRY WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO SACRAL KINGSHIP AND *HÁVAMÁL*

Parody has been detected as an underlying theme in several eddic poems. Clover (1979, p.140) has successfully illustrated in reference to *Hárbarðsljóð* that ‘certain structural features which appear on first glance to be random mistakes are in fact deliberate and systematic distortions of the generic norms.’ Likewise the abuse of the pagan gods at the hands of Loki in *Lokasenna* is often interpreted in light of a religious impulse to make fun of divinities. Unfortunately it is impossible to gauge exactly how these poems were interpreted at the point that they were written down. As that is firmly in the Christian era it is difficult to ascertain if the parody is the result of a Christian mockery of pagan gods, or the mockery is a form of institutionalized abuse that may have in fact reinforced belief in the *Æsir*.

If stanzas 104-110 of *Hávamál* parody sacral kingship, it is not the only example in the Old Icelandic corpus to do so. Below is the story of King Dómaldi, a ruler of Uppsala, member of the Swedish Yngling dynasty and descendent of Óðinn, as found in *Heimskringla*. *Ynglingatal* is attributed to a Norwegian poet Þjóðólfr ór Hvini on behalf of a local Norwegian king Ragnvald of Vestfold. It functions as a ‘poetic list of the legendary Swedish ancestors of the Norwegian kings that pays particular attention to how each member of the royal line met his death’ (Abram 2011, p.86). The relevant text reads:<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> *Dómaldi tók arf eptir fǫður sinn, Vísbur, ok réð lǫndum. Á hans dǫgum gerðisk í Svíþjóð sultr ok seyra. Þá efldu Svíar blot stór at Uppsǫlum. It fyrsta haust blótuðu þeir yxnum, ok batnaði ekki árferð at heldr. En annat haust hófu þeir mannblót, en árferð var sǫm eða verri. En it þriðja haust kómu Svíar fjǫlmennt til Uppsala, þá er blót skyldu vera. Þá áttu hǫfðingjar ráðagørð sína, ok kom þat ásamt með þeim, at hallærit myndi standa af Dómalda, konungi þeira, ok þat með, at þeir skyldi honum blóta til árs sér ok veita honum atgöngu ok drepa hann ok rjóða stalla með blóði hans, ok svá gerðu þeir. Svá segir Þjóðólfr;*

*Hitt vas fyrr,  
at fold ruðu  
sverðberender  
sínnum dróttni,  
ok landherr  
af lífs vǫnum*

‘Dómaldi inherited from his father, Vísbur, and ruled the country. In his time there was a famine and a lack of food in Sweden. Then the Swedes prepared a large sacrifice at Uppsala. The first year, in the autumn, they sacrificed oxen, but the crops did not improve. Next autumn they began to sacrifice people, but the crops were as bad or even worse. When the third autumn came round, a large number of Swedes gathered at the usual time of the sacrifices. The chieftains then held council and agreed that the famine must be caused by Dómaldi, their king, and they decided to sacrifice him to get better crops; to attack him, kill him and redden the alters with his blood. And so they did. Thjóðólf had the following to say about it:

It happened before  
 That sword-carrying men  
 reddened the earth  
 with/the blood of/their lord.  
 The host of the land  
 bloodied their arms  
 in the lifeless/corpse of/  
 Dómaldi,  
 when the race of the Swedes  
 would slaughter,  
 eager for crops,  
 the Enemy of the Jutes.<sup>94</sup>

Many modern commentators have related this passage to the significance of agricultural fertility in the pagan religion<sup>95</sup>. The word *sóa* in the Old Icelandic language has led scholars to believe that king Dómaldi was deliberately sacrificed in the name of a pagan ritual designed to ensure a better harvest. This story has therefore often been interpreted as a story based around the framework of sacral kingship, ‘a tragic myth dealing with the

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*dreyrug vopn*

*Dómalda bar,*

*Þás úrgjorn*

*Jóta dolgi*

*Svíá kind*

*of sóa skyldi*. (Bjarni Aðalbjarnason., (ed) 1941-45, p.31-32)

<sup>94</sup> Lönnroth, L., 1986. Dómaldi’s Death and the Myth of Sacral Kingship. Lindow, J., Lönnroth, L., & Weber, G., (eds). *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature*, pp.77-93.

<sup>95</sup> See: Abram, C., 2011. *Myths of the Pagan North- the Gods of the Northmen*. London: Continuum.

mystery of growth and vegetation' (Lönnroth 1986, p.83). It is also a rare example in Old Icelandic literature of 'a narrative that seems to describe an aspect of pagan religion, and to identify the connections between belief and practice that is so difficult to discern in other sources' (Abram 2011, p.92). Within the context of *Heimskringla* as a whole the function of the episode becomes clearer: Dómaldi is one of a number of kings who loses the faith of his people due to his inability to produce peace, tranquillity and crop growth. 'Such conflicts constitute one of the major thematic patterns of the work, which is built up in such a way to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity over paganism in securing the well-meaning of both king and people' (Lönnroth 1986, pp. 83-84). Although the Dómaldi episode is subordinated to this 'larger theological scheme' according to Lönnroth (ibid, p.86), in *Heimskringla* it may also have a more specific sub-function within this scheme, namely to illustrate the unfortunate results of pagan sacral kingship brought to Sweden by Óðinn and practised by the Ynglings. A politically motivated message has been read into the passage, as it seems difficult to interpret the poem in honour of the Ynglings. Instead that it is more 'natural to assume that the poem was made to make fun of the Ynglings' (ibid, p.91), to parody them. Most of the Swedish kings die in ridiculous fashions such as King Dag who dies in a battle he waged to avenge the death of his sparrow. It would appear that Þjóðólfr is playing with and parodying the theme of sacral kingship, if Lönnroth's analysis is correct.<sup>96</sup>

Steinsland has recently taken up the issue (2011, p.24) of parody in *Ynglingatal* to indicate that the poem is an ideological construct that should be read as an:

'account of ridicule directed against foreign kings, in particular the Swedish and Danish kings whom Haraldr hárfagri fought against at that time. These kings who suffer scurrilous and frequently ignoble deaths do not join Óðinn, which would have been the norm according to contemporary warrior-ideology. Instead, they unite with giants and monsters in grotesque and abnormal death-marriages.'

It would seem that the scribe who set down *Hávamál* stanzas 104-110 was partaking in a similar custom of making light of sacral kings.<sup>97</sup> Although it is impossible to pinpoint the

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<sup>96</sup>The authenticity of Þjóðólfr as the author of *Ynglingatal* is very dubious, although for the sake of simplicity I will not question the authorship, as it is not relevant to my thesis.

<sup>97</sup> The fact that *Ynglingatal* is most often dated to the ninth century whilst *Hávamál* was written around 1270 indicates the great discrepancy in time between these two accounts. Therefore it's highly

intent that the editor had when setting down *Hávamál* in the *Codex Regius*, certain eddic poems were likely used on behalf of royalty or ‘for the entertainment of the assembled *birð* – the king’s body guard, his henchmen and guests –and must have had a hilarious reception’ (Hollander 1927, p.142). Expounding further on this idea, Herschend (2002, p.138) sees the material inside the *Codex Regius* as ‘a wish in the thirteenth century to understand a historical situation, rooted in Merovingian times, reflected in an out-dated mythological understanding of the relationship between men and women, and in the political setting around aristocratic or royal matchmaking and marriage.’ The uses of ‘humour, irony, gods, myth, distance and deviance are all there to give the section a didactic touch and to produce a *Verfremdung* effect, promoting the understanding of a social play’ (ibid 2002, p.138).<sup>98</sup> This allows for inversion of traditional themes (in this case the motif of the *hieros gamos*) in order to promote humour, parody and criticism in parallel. I would suggest that as by the time the *Codex Regius* was written, Óðinn’s line was no longer in power, as another, Christian ruler had taken over, the parody of the *hieros gamos* could illustrate this discontinuation of Óðinn’s line; his initiation produces no offspring (as it should in the inauguration of a proper sacral king). Instead the union is limited to the purely physical pleasure Óðinn derives from Gunnlöð. It is this manner that the editor, using knowledge of sacral kingship, could parody the theme of the sacred marriage in *Hávamál*.

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unlikely that sacral kings were being parodied in the very same satiric tradition in both sources. My point is that sacral kings were open to being parodied in various satiric traditions throughout the Middle Ages in perhaps numerous different traditions.

<sup>98</sup> ‘Section’ refers to Herschend’s unique method of dividing up the *Codex Regius* into its constituent parts.



## XIV. CONCLUSION

To conclude, I have illustrated that the mead of poetry motif as it presents itself in *Hávamál* stanzas 104-110 is worth studying independently of the *Snorra Edda* account of the same myth. This is because the two myths appear, under analysis, to have separate functions. Snorri's account is fundamentally concerned with providing an origin for the skaldic mead of poetry. This mead is an intensifier of poetic capabilities. Stanzas 104-110 of *Hávamál* on the other hand appear to indicate that Óðinn is being inducted into becoming a sacral king, therefore the mead in these stanzas represents a royal libation. I argue this to be the case for the following reasons: firstly, the stanzas seem to fulfil the criteria put forward by Jens Peter Schjødt on the initiation into sacral kingship. Secondly, the giantess Gunnlöð has many characteristics associated with sovereignty goddesses in the sacral kingship tradition of Old Irish literature, namely that she presents Óðinn with a cup of mead whilst sitting on a golden throne and then has sexual intercourse with him. The Old Irish evidence of the *hieros gamos* seems to bear upon that of the Old Icelandic. It is therefore tentatively possible to suggest that due to the mixing of Irish and Scandinavians in medieval Iceland, Old Irish influence permeated the oral tradition of stories being told about sacral kings.<sup>99</sup> Further comparisons indicate that *Hávamál* seems to be describing a ritual that through analysis seems to be taking place in Norway. The implication of this is that *Hávamál* was participating in the same tradition that certain eddic poems were doing; namely that ruling dynasties in Scandinavia used eddic poems describing the ritual marriage of a god and a giantess to legitimise their own rulership.

However, if this is indeed the function of the *Hávamál* stanzas, then something goes very wrong. All other poems that contain the *hieros gamos* motif produce offspring from the giantess and the god (in the Old Icelandic sources, not the Old Irish sources). In *Hávamál* this form is being manipulated, as no offspring is produced; Óðinn steals the mead and leaves Gunnlöð after sleeping with her, thereby betraying her and parodying the normal elements of *hieros gamos* by relating it to a sordid affair. Comparative evidence

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<sup>99</sup> I have pointed out this Old Irish influence not to disregard the other influences that may have shaped *Hávamál* and possibly other eddic poems, but to point out that the Old Irish evidence can certainly help illuminate parts of *Hávamál*.

with *Ynglingatal* suggests that sacral kingship was open to being parodied and this is indeed what the stanzas 104-110 in *Hávamál* appear to be indicating.

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