The Talk of the Tits: Some Notes on the Death of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani in Norna-Gests þátr

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The famous Norna-Gests þátr, preserved in Flateyjarbók, was especially popular among researchers of Scandinavian antiquities.1 This could be partly explained by the fact that this text, recorded at the end of the 14th century, contained many direct references to a more archaic cultural layer. In the þátr, one finds whole blocks of retellings and citations from poetry found in the Poetic Edda and informative remarks referring to it, as well as rather intriguing mention of the fact that eddic verse could be orally performed at the court of a king.

Among other parts of the Edda present in Norna-Gests þátr, there is a song called Guðrúnarbrǫðr háfim forn ['The Old Perfidy of Guðrún']. It is precisely this song, in addition to the song of Gunnar’s battle, that Gestr performs, playing the harp, before King Óláfr Tryggvason. Mention of the cycle of plots connected with Guðrún and Sigurðr Fáfnisbani ['Slayer of Fáfnir'] or the Dragon Slayer is not limited, of course, by the titles of the heroic songs. Indeed, Norna-Gestr is presented as a man who has lived several centuries and who has served many kings. He had been among Sigurðr’s troops at the very beginning of his career, which is why Óláfr Tryggvason, the last ruler whom he meets, asks in detail about ancient times, addressing Norna-Gestr as a contemporary and eye-witness of those events.

One of the passages of this story is rather close to the text completing the Brot af Sigurðarkviðu in the Poetic Edda, where different versions of Sigurðr’s death are described:

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1 Poetic Edda

Hér er sagt í þessi qviðo frá dauða Sigurðar, oč vícér hér svá til, sem þeir drepi hann úti. Enn sumir segia svá, at þeir drepi hann inni í reccio sinni sofanda. Enn þýöverscir menn segia svá, at þeir drepi hann úti í scógi. Oc

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2 Flateyjarbók

Konungr mællti. huat uard Sigurdi at bana. Gestr suarar. su er flestra manna sögnt at Guthormr Giukason legdi hann suerde j gegnum sofanda j sæng Gudrunar. en þyverskrir menn segia Sigurd dreppinn hafa...
There is no word-for-word correspondence between these two extracts. Nevertheless, they are so close to each other that their textological connection is beyond question. This is related to interesting questions about manuscript transmission of these narrative traditions. It is possible that the author of *Norna-Gests þáttr* worked with some recorded text that was, at least in this part, close to the prose fragment we find in Codex Regius. The elucidation of the level and nature of this connection is not the goal of this study. Instead, I would like to draw attention to the lack of correspondence in one of the extracts of these two texts that seems more informative than some directly similar cases.

In the prose passage of the *Poetic Edda*, *Guðrúnarkviða hin forna* ['The Old Lay of Guðrún'] is indicated as a source of the information that Sigurðr was killed when he was going with Gjúki’s sons to the thing. (The song named *Guðrúnarkviða hin forna* in the Codex Regius manuscript is consistently called *Guðrúnarkviða II* ['The Second Lay of Guðrún'] in all modern studies and editions of the *Poetic Edda*.) In the corresponding place of *Norna-Gests þáttr*, *igður* ['chickadees', 'blue tits' or some type of small twittering birds] are named as a respectable source of this information:

> en igdurnar sögdu sua at Sigurdr ok Giuka synir höfd(u) ridit til þings nokkurs ok þa drépi þeir hann

But small birds said that Sigurðr and the sons of Gjúki had ridden to a Thing and they slew him then.

This of course seems mysterious to the modern reader. Where on earth could those tits have appeared from that are equal in their testimonies to the Germans and to ‘most men’?

When the original texts are analyzed, a clue to this mystery may appear before us. This is the wording with the name *Guðrún*: í *Guðrúnar qviðo inni forno*. In the manuscript, this reads:

> í Guðrúnar qviðo inni forno

This word combination looks graphically rather similar to the text with the word designating these birds – the name of the birds being *igðurnar* (singular *igða*). Following this observation, the most probable explanation would appear to be that the divergence between the *Poetic Edda* and the *Norna-Gests þáttr* are, in this case, due to a mistake made during the adaptation process, during reading in the rewriting:

> ...oc svá segir í Guðrúnar qviðo inni forno, at Sigurðr oc Giúca synir... → ...en igdurnar sögdu sua at Sigurdr ok Giuka synir...

In other words, in both texts the same source was implied but its name in the younger
source was misrepresented, thus, Guðrún turned into ‘tits’ (‘ígvörvar’ → ‘ígðurnar’).

These speculations seem all the more natural because of the fact that mistakes of this kind are recorded from time to time in almost all manuscript traditions of the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, this proposition must be approached very cautiously. The graphic transformations involving the formation of a new word – appropriately integrated into the context at the level of grammar – is rather an efficient phenomenon, but it occurs much more rarely than one might expect. Most often, it occurs if the word from the original text is not quite clear or unknown to the compiler/rewriter of the new text: usually, it concerns unknown names, the designations of ‘exotic’ things of reality, and words that indicate well-known things and phenomena that are themselves nevertheless rarities. It is in these cases where the universal mechanism of adaptation usually works, turning the unknown into the known, the strange into the familiar. The action of this mechanism is undoubtedly limited by neither the manuscript sphere, nor by the medieval epoch.

However, in our example, we deal with quite a different situation. Apparently, no one among those who made Norna-Gests þáttr had available the form of the material in which it is available to us in the Poetic Edda. Nevertheless, the name Guðrún and the plot aura connected with the name could not have been unknown. Even if, at some stage in the creation of the existing image of the memorial, ‘tits’ would have appeared by chance in the place of this name, then the error would have hardly remained in the text without special supporting explanations. Moreover, it is not likely that other parts of the sentence would be grammatically appropriate to this ‘new’ word usage without special reasons. In other words, the graphic similarity between ‘ígvörvar’ and ‘ígðurnar’ would be insufficient in themselves for the substitution of one by the other to result in a formally correct phrase. This would instead make the extract quite senseless.

One may suppose that here the transformation is not graphic (or at least not exclusively graphic), based on a lack of understanding, but quite the opposite – based on the skillful manipulation of the heroic-poetic stories. In other words, the reference to ‘evidence of the tits’ regarding Sigurðr’s death in Norna-Gest’s narration is not made purely by chance, and is instead informed by eddic tradition. The matter is that tits or some other small twittering birds designated by the word igða play an important role in the stories about Sigurðr, where it is told about the murder of the dragon Fáfnir and Fáfnir’s brother Reginn (who was also Sigurðr’s foster-father). As we recall, this is the turning point in the fate of the epic hero, the moment determining, in addition to everything else, many of the things that are to happen to him later. A prophetic role is given to the tits in this short passage.

According to Fáfnismál, having tasted blood from the heart of the dragon killed by him, Sigurðr began to understand the language of birds (fuglǫrd) and heard what tits were saying. The many-voiced dialogue of the tits told Sigurðr what he had to do immediately and what he had to do in the future. They said that he had to eat the heart of Fáfnir, kill Fáfnir’s brother Reginn and acquire their gold. Having done all this, Sigurðr heard again what the tits were saying – they told him to seek King Gjúki’s daughter and the hero follows their advice. Thus, it appears that it is the tits who know beforehand what will happen to Sigurðr: both his nearest and distant future are before long reflected in their dialogues. This, in fact, would seem to be the reason why it is more than natural to let the tits tell the story of one of the versions of Sigurðr’s death.

The part of Fáfnismál under discussion is not presented in Norna-Gests þáttr. This small mention of the tits once more suggests that the composer of the þáttr knew some form of the Poetic Edda much better than can be judged from his direct eddic citations. As a matter of fact, he acts as a competent compiler of Edda, and as is practically inevitable in this kind of compilation, he, more or less, faces the task of ‘criticism of the text’, i.e. of the selection and, sometimes, interpretation of the evidence he had at his disposal. This process should be considered in light of the relationship of the adapted text to a manuscript exemplar more generally: the
copying process appears to have been more paraphrastic than a verbatim transcription, as is also found in variation between texts of Snorri Sturluson’s so-called Prose Edda and prose texts of the Poetic Edda, as well as even in the manuscript tradition of Snorri’s Prose Edda itself (exhibited in the Upsalienius manuscript and Frá Fenris úlfí attached to Litla skáldar). If this is a generally accurate perspective on the compilation process, then ‘criticism of the text’ rather than rigorous subscription to exemplars would be natural and possibly even expected of the compiler.

It can be considered fairly certain that the tits did not appear as a result of a random transformation of the title of Guðrúnarkviða. The theme of causality is therefore admitted in these speculations. Indeed, as has been said, other sources named in the two prose fragments as the listed versions of Sigurðr’s death are rather close to each other. Could the mention of stories told by the tits appear in those texts independently? Here, one should recall what the ‘older’ of the two extracts in question presents. This is the prose conclusion of Brot titled Frá dauða Sigurðar ['On the Death of Sigurð']. The prose insertions in the eddic poems are the peculiar territory of story-telling, compilation, and commentaries to the poetic text they accompany. In this case, there appears to be an error in the commentary in the statement:

Oc svá segir í Guðrúnarkviða félfál í inni fornó, at Sigurð oc Guðc synir hefði til þings ríði, þá er hann var dreppin

And so it is told in the old Guðrún lay, that Sigurðr and Gjúki’s sons had ridden to the council-place/Thing, and that he was slain there

In the form that Guðrúnarkviða himn fornó (Gðr. II hereafter) is known, there is no such tale about the murder on the way to the Thing. It seems probable that this disagreement in the corpus of the Poetic Edda was not first noted only by the philologists or editors of the present era, but could have been observed centuries earlier.

If the composer of Norna-Gests þáttur, being aware of the fact that the passage of the murder on the way to the Thing was absent from Gðr. II, came across an opposed idea in the manuscript, it is quite probable that he would not only correct this inexactitude, but would think over its nature. The authority of the exemplar text did not allow any arbitrary change or mechanical elimination of this fact from the story. The excellent command of ‘the language’ of all the topics allowed him the supposition that the reference to the Guðrúnarkviða appeared as the consequence of an error in understanding or rewriting a mention of tits. In other words, the last commentator somehow returned to that preceding comment which seemed to him most valid. He eliminated the incorrect reference, noticeable to his eyes, and apparently supposed that he was dealing with a distortion that had appeared in the manuscript he was analyzing due to the evident similarity of two alternative letter combinations – ‘igðurnar’ and ‘igðurnar’.6

Corrections – sometimes hypercorrect – by the hands of scholars such as the one discussed here are rather universal for different manuscript traditions, if we speak of the Middle Ages. Most often they appear in the course of a gradual mastering of the foreign source of another culture, be it a Bible text or a novel about Alexander the Great. In the present case, we are apparently faced with some early attempts of incorporated comments of the scribe on his own vernacular epic tradition (i.e. not abstracted exclusively from the written material). The comments were, in their way, very typical of the Icelanders: the thorough attention to the creation of a predecessor is finely combined with a spirit of competition with him, and there still existed a rather well-prepared audience to judge the products of such a competition.

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Notes
1. On Norna-Gests þáttur, see in particular: Hollander 1916; Harris & Hill 1989; Würth 1993; Imhoff
2006; McDonald 2011; cf. also Kaplan 2004; Rowe 2004.


3. The variation in the text as a whole was recently discussed by Heimir Pálsson (the variation between the U manuscript of Edda and other traditions) and by Frog (the relationship of Snorra Edda and the prose texts Frá Aðgí and Frá Loka in the Poetic Edda). See Heimir Pálsson 2010; Frog 2011: 12–15.

4. For the discussion, see Zupitza 1873: 448; Köbbing 1874: 351–352; Detter & Heinzel 1903 II: 491, 493, 446–447; Boer 1922: 238, 270; Gering 1927–1931 II: 293.

5. Frog noted in his dissertation a similar revision in Heiðreks saga related to a change in the cultural referent providing a model for the brother-slaying (by the thrown natural object as a Baldr-slaying image to a sword equivalent to Mimingi / Mistilteinn / sword of Mimingus). Cf. Frog 2010: 273–277, 291, 296.

6. By doing so, he, perhaps, kept in mind that according to Volsunga saga [‘The Saga of Volsungs’] Sigurð gave Guðrún some of Fafnir’s heart to eat and after this ‘she was much grimmer and wiser than before’ (Sigurð raf Guðrúna at eta að Fáfnís hjarta, ok síðan var hún miklu grimmari en áðr ok vitrar) (Ranisch 1908: 46). Moreover, in the prose fragment at the very beginning of Guðrúnarkviða I [‘The First Lay of Guðrún’] it is stated that Guðrún had eaten of Fafnir’s heart, and that she understood the speech of birds (Pat er sogn manna, at Guðrún hefði etit af Fáfnís hjarta ok hon skilíð því fugls rodd), just as Sigurð did (Neckel 1936: 197). Cf. Finnur Jónsson 1917: 17, 26; von See et al. 2006: 467.

Works Cited