

Ritual and Hierarchy in Old Norse Mythology

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ABSTRACT: *Within Old Norse mythological narratives, the presence or absence of ritual establishes hierarchy. As exemplified in death ritual, ritual orders the two major classes of mythological beings, placing the Æsir (gods) above the jǫtnar (“giants”). In addition, the practice of ritual or ritual-like activity, resembling sacrifice, orders the class of the Æsir themselves, placing Óðinn above Þórr.*

RESUME: *I de norrøne mytologiske narrativer etableres et hierarki igennem tilstedeværelsen og fraværet af ritualer. Dødsritualer er et eksempel på, at ritualer ordner de to store klasser af mytologiske væsner hierarkisk ved at placere aserne (guderne) over jætterne. Desuden rangeres aserne også hierarkisk indbyrdes igennem ritualer eller ritual-lignende aktiviteter, som minder om ofringer, idet Óðinn placeres over Þórr.*

KEYWORDS: *Myth; ritual; sacrifice; Norse mythology; Óðinn; Þórr*

Chapter 29 of *Laxdæla saga* is our source for information about the circumstances concerning the performance of Úlfr Uggason’s poem *Húsdrápa* at the home of Óláfr pái Høskuldsson in western Iceland in the very last decades before the formal conversion to Christianity.¹

...eftir þat fastnar Geirmundr sér Þuríði, ok skal boð vera at áliðnum vetri í Hjarðarholti; þat boð var allfjölmennt, því at þá var algjört eldhúsit. Þar var at boði Úlfr Uggason ok hafði ort kvæði um Ólaf Høskuldsson ok um sögur þær, er skrifaðar váru á eldhúsinu,

¹ Although my topic in this article is ritual activity within mythological narratives, it is worth pointing out that the circumstances presented in this text indicate several levels of ritual activity: the *veizla*, the feast that fills the newly built hall, to which Óláfr invites great men to whom he gives lavish gifts (see Viðar Pálsson 2016); the passage rite of the marriage of Þuríðr, the daughter of Óláfr pái, to Geirmundr gnýr, the great Viking and unpleasant retainer of Hákon jarl; and probably also the performance of the poem.

ok færði hann þar at boðinu. Þetta kvæði er kallað Húsdrápa ok er vel ort. Óláfr launaði vel kvæðit. Hann gaf ok stórgjafar öllu stórmenni, er hann hafði heim sótt. Þótti Óláfr vaxit hafa af þessi veizlu. (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934: 80)

(Geirmund was then engaged to Thurid, and their wedding was held later that winter at Hjarðarholt. A great number of people attended the feast as the fire-hall was finished by that time. Among the guests was a poet, Ulf Uggason, who had composed a poem about Olaf Hoskuldsson and the tales carved on the wood of the fire-hall which he recited at the feast. It is called House Drapa and is a fine piece of verse. Olaf rewarded him well for the poem, and gave all the important people who attended the feast fine gifts, gaining considerable respect as a result. (Kunz 2000: 324))

Manuscripts of *Skáldskaparmál* contain two full and ten half-stanzas from the poem.² Since they are not quoted together, putting them together is an editorial task, but we do know that three myths were included. Most editors, including the latest, Edith Marold et al. (2017), place them in this order: some sort of struggle between Heimdallr and Loki (one stanza); Þórr fishing up the Miðgarðsormr (three half-stanzas and one full stanza); Baldr's funeral (five half-stanzas); in addition, we have two self-referential half-stanzas which appear to be from the beginning and end of the poem, respectively.

The stanza about Heimdallr and Loki is difficult and presumably only a fragment of what once existed in the poem. According to the interpretation of Marold et al., Heimdallr "takes away land from the amazingly cunning son of Fárbaumi <giant> [=Loki] at Singasteinn" (2017, 407). This reading is convincing on grammatical grounds,³ but it also makes mythological sense: the story would be a myth of acquisition, like so many others in this corpus of materials.

Marold et al. tentatively associate Heimdallr's land-taking with Kurt Schier's argument about the cosmogonic nature of the underlying myth (Schier 1963; cf. Schier 1976b): Heimdallr and Loki would be bringing land up out of the sea. This argument would elevate the myth to a cosmic level (commensurate with the myths of Þórr and the Miðgarðsormr and the funeral of Baldr), a position also argued by Marold (2000a; 2000b).⁴ It might also obliquely suggest ritual, in this case namely land-taking ritual (Strömbäck 1928). In any case, carvings of cosmic myths would presumably reflect the very high status of the owner who had commissioned them (especially perhaps one bearing the cognomen *pái* "peacock"), and the connection of the wood, and probably the myths in the carvings, with Hákon jarl would be further indication of high social

² *Skáldskaparmál* also confirms Óláfr as the poet of *Húsdrápa* and tells us that it included both the Baldr myth and the myth of a struggle between Heimdallr and Loki, each in the form of a seal.

³ Marold et al. show that *rein* "strip of land" must be the dative object of the verb *bregðr* "takes away" or possibly "quarrels over" in the first helming (2017, 407-09), whence this translation.

⁴ I find myself finally unpersuaded by Marold's clever suggestion of Loki and Heimdallr as opposing parts of an Odinic triad and would prefer to read Loki here in his identity as *jötunn*, not *áss*.

status (Schier 1976a).⁵ If we accept the speculation about the cosmogonic nature of the Heimdallr-Loki story, the three myths carved into the hall at Hjarðarholt might be regarded as treating the mythic past (cosmogony), the mythic present (Þórr and the Miðgarðsormr), and the mythic future (the death of Baldr and its aftermath). Such a flow might be appropriate for a wedding, where issues of fertility and the continuity of the family are at issue.

The stanzas about Þórr's fishing expedition fit into a larger tradition of verbal and iconographic representation of this myth, the most widely attested within Old Norse mythology (see the treatments in Abram 2011, 31-50; Lindow 2020; Lindow 2021, 65-102). Mostly the artists and poets seem to have wished to portray the moment when Þórr had the monster on the hook, and that is the case in *Húsdrápa*, for two of the extant half-stanzas present this moment. Scholars, however, going all the way back to Snorri Sturluson,⁶ have fretted over whether the monster escaped or was killed.⁷ Although it is possible to construct a chronological argument for the variant outcomes (Meulengracht Sørensen 1986), it seems just as likely that we are dealing with the kind of variation we would expect in an oral religion, and which we would presumably see much more of if we had as many witnesses to other myths as we have to this one. However, Úlfr Uggason left no room for doubt about the outcome of the encounter. The final stanza on this myth in *Húsdrápa*, st. 6 in the edited version, runs as follows.⁸

Fullöflugr lét fellir
 fjall-Gauts hnefa skjalla
 —ramt mein vas þat—reyni
 reytar leggs við eyra.
 Víðgymnir laust Vimrar
 vaða af frónum naðri

⁵ Since there appears to have been little love lost between Óláfr and Geirmundr, who only secures the engagement through a bribe to Óláfr's wife Þorgerðr, the carvings can have little to do with Geirmundr's status as a retainer of Hákon jarl, especially since work on the carvings must have been begun before the engagement was settled.

⁶ "En Þórr kastaði hamrinum eptir honum [scil. the Miðgarðsormr], ok segja men at hann lysti af honum höfuðit við grunninum. En ek hygg hit vera þér satt at segja at Miðgarðsormr lifir enn..." (But Thor threw his hammer after it, and they say they he struck off its head by the sea-bed. But I think in fact the contrary is correct to report to you that the Midgard serpent lives still...) (Faulkes 2005, 45; Faulkes 1987, 47). It is worth recalling that the speaker is Hár, not Snorri himself.

⁷ Besides Snorri, scholars have tended to look first at eddic poems, and the ending of the encounter in *Hymiskviða* is indeed ambiguous: "sökkðisk síðan / sá fiskr í marr" (then that fish sank itself into the sea) (st. 24; Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason 2014, 404; Larrington 2014, 77). Larrington chooses to translate the mediopassive *sökkðisk* as indicating agency, which is certainly formally possible. However, Hans Kuhn glossed the verb with *versinken* ("sink, founder;" that is, without agency) in his glossary of eddic poetry (Kuhn 1968, 199 s.v. *sæcva*), and La Farge and Tucker follow with "to sink" (La Farge and Tucker 1992, 258 s.v. *sökkva* (*kð*)). If the monster indeed dies, its lack of funeral might be echoed in st. 26-27, where Þórr hauls up the boat onto shore—a possible inversion of Hyrrokkin's launching of Baldr's funeral ship, moved from the shore down into the water.

⁸ I feel confident calling it the final stanza on this myth because it ends with the *stef*.

hlusta grunn við hrønnum.
Hlaut innan svá minnum.

(The most powerful killer of the mountain-Gautr <man of the Gautar> [giant > = Þórr] let his fist crash against the ear of the tester of the bone of the reed [stone > giant]; that was a mighty injury. The Víðgymnir <giant> of the ford of Vimur <river> [= Þórr] struck the ground of the ears [head] off the gleaming serpent near the waves. Thus [the hall] received [decoration] inside with memorable pictures. (Marold et al. 2017, 415))

Whether the “mighty injury” of the first helming was inflicted on the giant who apparently accompanies Þórr here,⁹ as in other versions, or on the serpent, the second helming is about as clear as skaldic diction allows: Þórr decapitated the monster.

Four of the five half-stanzas about Baldr’s funeral present a procession of the Æsir, mentioning by name Freyr, Heimdallr, and Hroptatýr (that is, Óðinn), and adding that *valkyrjur* and ravens accompany Óðinn; the fifth has a giantess (“fjalla Hildir”) launch a ship, while Hropt’s (that is, Óðinn’s) companions kill her steed. Given the growing realization of the importance of processions in pre-Christian Scandinavian religion (Nygaard and Murphy 2017; cf. Schjødt 2019; 2020b, 630-34), it seems likely that we should regard the procession as part of the funeral ritual; indeed, it is quite possible that the stanzas regarding Baldr’s funeral in *Húsdrápa* may reflect a foundational myth for funeral ritual, which presumably involved procession and the implicit presence of supernatural beings (Lindow 2019).¹⁰

Thus in Óláfr’s hall in late pre-Christian Iceland one could clearly compare the ritual treatment of the dead Baldr with the killing of the Miðgarðsormr, and—here is a point I wish to stress—the complete absence of any ritual treatment for the serpent. Viewers of the carvings and listeners to the poem might be particularly drawn to such a comparison if they considered two other issues. The first is the role of the *jötunn* Hyrrokkin in Baldr’s funeral, which I have argued was necessary for successful completion of the ritual but involuntary on Hyrrokkin’s part—a triumph of the Æsir (led here by Óðinn according to Snorri) over the *jötnar* (Lindow 1997, 49-100). The second is the role of the “extra giant” in the two myths. The one in the boat tries to hinder the monster-slaying and fails (when the monster dies, as in *Húsdrápa*), and the one who pushes the funeral boat helps the Æsir to conduct their ritual and, according to the poem, loses her own transport at the same time.

Just for the sake of comparison, let us compare the aftermath of the killing of this monster,¹¹ surely the most dangerous in the mythological environment, with the

⁹ The previous stanza refers to a “heavy-set fat one” (“þjokkvøxnum . . . þikling” (dat.)) (Marold et al. 2017, 414). Marold et al. take this expression to be “the god’s insult to the giant” (Marold et al. 2017, 414).

¹⁰ Thinking intertextually in the specific context of *Húsdrápa*, could the lack of funeral for the Miðgarðsormr be taken as mythologically foundational for the lack of funerals for *jötnar* in the mythological present? After all, Ymir’s death at the very beginning of time is something of a special case, despite its mythic analogues (see below).

¹¹ Here I am still referring specifically to *Húsdrápa*. In the other skaldic treatments, mostly or completely fragmentary, Bragi Boddason has the giant cut the line before the serpent is brought up, thus indicating its survival, while Gamli gnævaðarskáld states that Þórr, kenne

killing of the most dangerous animal in most parts of northern Eurasia, namely the bear. In many if not most such traditions, the bear is accorded a full funeral and its bones are respectfully reassembled (see for example Hallowell 1926; Honko 1971, 196-200; Edsman 1982; 1994). If we accept that Viking and medieval Scandinavians knew something about Sámi tradition—as is manifestly attested by the scene of the dueling shamans in *Historia Norwegie*—then we could imagine that they knew of the respectful treatment of dangerous animals after they have been killed. Of course, the bear is also a food source, and Sámi religion, at least, is what has been termed a hunting religion, that is, one that reflects the fact that game animals must be treated with respect if they are to be killed and eaten (Edsman 1970).

This is not to ignore the use of bear parts, such as claws and pelts, in Viking Age mortuary ritual (Møhl 1977; Ström 1980; Grimm 2013; Oehrl 2013). It is rather to draw a distinction between the full burial of the bear—that is, the bear in the role of the member of society whose death must be commemorated with a passage rite—as against the bear as one of those animals whose body parts might be strewn in a human grave.

The lack of any treatment of the body of the serpent in the context of an agricultural society perhaps puts it into the category of a wild animal, such as a wolf or fox, killed to prevent it from looting the farm animals. Perhaps no one thought very much about disposing the body of such a predator, but what I wish to reinforce here is that when scenes of a monster-slaying and scenes of a funeral are juxtaposed, it would be natural to think intertextually. The death of Baldr could certainly call up mental images of monsters on the prowl; and the funeral of Baldr could definitely point out the non-treatment of the body of the *Miðgarðsormr*.

I wish to propose further that juxtaposing the two scenes creates an unavoidable hierarchy: those whom one celebrates with a funeral are clearly hierarchically superior to those whose bodies are left in the sea for the scavenger fishes or those who are left on land for scavenger birds and animals. The trope of the beasts of battle expresses this hierarchy quite nicely: it is the winner of the battle who feeds the raven, and the bodies of the losers that provide the food. The losers receive no funeral ritual according to this trope. If defeated warriors are involved in ritual, it is in mass deposits, not funerals.

As Neil Price has pointed out a number of times, it appears that not everybody got a funeral: perhaps about half of the population may not have got graves in pre-Christian Scandinavia (Price 2008, 259; 2020a, 225-26; 2020b).¹² These were presumably

as the ruler of the hall *Bilskirnir*, “*nam rjúfa*” the serpent with *Mjöllnir*. Clunies Ross translates the verb phrase “smashed” (Clunies Ross 2017, 189), which is appropriate for a hammer, but “tore apart” would be a more literal translation and would be consistent with the beheading in *Húsdrápa*. Within the skaldic material still extant, only these three stanzas suggest an outcome. While these numbers cannot be statistically significant, I will point out that two of the three do indicate the death of the monster.

¹² In his recent publications, Price more cautiously explains that we simply have no archaeological trace of burial for perhaps half the population (Price 2020a, 225-26), leaving open the possibility that the issue is not lack of burials but rather limitation of our ability to

low status individuals, such as slaves. This knowledge could hardly be in the sole possession of today's archaeologists; surely it was also known to people themselves during the Viking Age. They would know precisely what it meant to get or not get a funeral. *Jöttnar* get no funerals in the mythology, and thus the *Æsir* have yet another means to invoke the hierarchy that informs the mythology in so many other ways. And this view would have informed not only consumers of the mythology from the pre-Christian period, but—perhaps even more clearly—those from after the Conversion, who saw the mythology through a Christian lens. Baldr's funeral was not a Christian funeral, to be sure, but everyone knew that no funeral at all was presumably an even more serious business. Baldr's funeral could be read as an aspect of the natural religion that learned men thought, argued, or theorized had prevailed before their forbears found the true faith, and thus as a predecessor, typological if you like, of the funerals that Christians in the North learned to conduct. Baldr is the first of the *Æsir* to die, and he gets such a funeral. The *jöttnar* fall in all sorts of ways in the mythology, and not one of them gets a funeral. According to the theology that prevailed after the conversion, the souls of persons who did not get a proper funeral could never hope to achieve salvation.

Under either way of thinking, pre-Christian or Christian—and indeed under any kind of ritual theory—the dead who did not receive mortuary ritual would be dangerous. They were the dead without status, as Juha Pentikäinen called them (1969; see also Pentikäinen 1968; Kanerva 2013), and they were likely to pose significant problems for the living. Perhaps Glámr in *Grettis saga* leaps first to mind, surely the most well-known *draugr* in the sagas. A slave and foreigner, he is a nuisance even before he dies. Thereafter he is a menace to society in almost every imaginable way. As Russell Poole wrote about the overdetermined nature of Glámr, citing Bernadine McCreesh (1981):

As an *óhreinndi...*, Glámr can be associated with the ancestors who insisted on their pagan affiliations and allegiances and whose *ógæfa* lives on to plague the hero in a newly Christian society... Connotations of the devil and the diabolic are readily discernible in the text. Undeniably it embodies a strongly Christian ideology. (Poole 2004, 6-7)

This Christian ideology is important, for Glámr is twice the recipient of non-Christian mortuary efforts. Directly after his death, Glámr gets no proper funeral, because the men who discover his corpse find themselves unable to transport it to the churchyard and abandon it. An ox cannot pull it to the church, and a search party including a priest cannot find it. Finally, people just hide it under a pile of stones. Then, after Grettir kills it again and places the head next to the thigh, people burn the body and bury the ashes as far from human habitation and pathways as they can. In the Christian context of the saga, this treatment of the body constitutes no funeral at all. Glámr is thus treated like the *jöttnar* in the mythology.

detect their traces. However, he has also pointed out that the textual record does indicate that certain persons did not receive burials (Price 2020b, 869-70).

Thus far in the mythological arena I have invoked two polar opposites: the abandoning of the body of the Miðgarðsormr, and the elaborate funeral of Baldr, as invocation of the mythological hierarchy in which the superior position of the Æsir vis-à-vis the *jötnar* stood for order in the cosmos and in society.¹³ Lest there be objections that not all texts indicate the death of the serpent, we can at this point insert the killing of other prominent *jötnar*, such as Vafþrúðnir or Hrungnir. To repeat: while the funeral of Baldr is of central importance in mythic history, there is no indication whatever of mortuary ritual for any *jötunn* anywhere in the mythological corpus.

There is, however, also something of a middle ground. The most obvious case is that of Ymir, whose body is neither the object of mortuary ritual (as far as we know) nor abandoned. The kennings “Ymis hauss” (Ymir’s skull) for sky and “Ymis blóð” (Ymir’s blood) for the sea would appear to verify the notion of the cosmos as composed of Ymir’s body parts,¹⁴ but agency is less clear. In Eddic poetry, both *Vafþrúðnismál* 21 and *Grímnismál* 40 use the formula “var sköpuð” (was created), that is, the passive voice, about this creative act.

Ór Ymis holdi
var jörð um sköpuð
en ór beinum björg,
himinn ór hausi
ins hrímkalda jötuns
en ór sveita sjór.

(*Vafþrúðnismál* 21; Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason 2014, 359)

(From Ymir’s flesh the earth was shaped,
and the mountains from his bones;
the sky from the skull of the frost-cold giant,
and the sea from his blood. (Larrington 2014, 40))¹⁵

Ór Ymis holdi
var jörð um sköpuð
en ór sveita sær,
björg ór beinum,
baðmr ór hári
en ór hausi himinn.

(*Grímnismál* 40; Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason 2014, 376)

¹³ This order was also invoked in the performance of the wedding ritual of Geirmundr and Þuríðr. Let us remind ourselves that presumably not everybody got a wedding ritual, either, and that hierarchy in human society was therefore also being invoked. I would also expect that cosmic order was being invoked in some sort of ritual analogous to what we would call consecration of a building. If we trust the evidence of *Laxdæla saga*, then, we have evidence for the ordering performance of ritual invoking myth in human society.

¹⁴ “Ymis hauss” is found in Arnórr jarlaskáld Þórðarson’s *Magnúsdrápa* st. 19 (mid-eleventh century) and “Ymis blóð” in Ormr Barreyjarskáld’s “Fragment” st. 2 (tenth or eleventh century).

¹⁵ Although Larrington based her translation on the edition of Neckel and Kuhn (1962), that edition varies from Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (2014) in the passages that I cite only orthographically and with insignificant differences in punctuation.

(From Ymir's flesh the earth was made,
and from his blood, the sea,
mountains from his bones, trees from his hair,
and from his skull, the sky. (Larrington 2014, 54))

Grímnismál st 41, on the other hand, besides the formula "... var sköpuð," does inform us that the "blíð regin" (cheerful gods; literally "powers") were the agents who constructed at least one part of the cosmos from Ymir's body.¹⁶

En ór hans brám
gerðu blíð regin
Miðgarð manna sonum;
en ór hans heila
váru þau in harðmóðgu
ský ǫll um sköpuð.
(*Grímnismál* 41; Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason 2014, 376)

(And from his eyelashes the cheerful gods
made Midgard for men's sons;
and from his brain the hard-tempered clouds
were all created. (Larrington 2014, 54))

As far as I know, only Snorri tells us that the triad of Óðinn and his brothers first kill Ymir, but I think we must agree that even if there was some kind of animist notion of Ymir living in the body parts that make up the cosmos—and there is no direct evidence for such a notion—a body being split apart cannot be anything other than a dead body. Making something out of that body (here the cosmos), or arranging the dismembered body parts, certainly looks like a sacrifice (de Vries 1956-57, vol. 2, 360-70; Lincoln 1975; 1981, 69-93; 1986; Clunies Ross 1994, 197-98) but can hardly be taken for a funeral. Following the recent arguments of Klas Wikström af Edholm (2020), we are perhaps justified in thinking of Ymir as akin to human warrior sacrificial victims, whose sacrifice served to illustrate the hegemony of the chieftain (and his followers) who had overcome them.

Beyond that, however, it is tempting to associate the dismembered proto-body of Ymir with the dismembered animal body parts that turn up in Viking Age human graves. If there is any connection, the performance of this particular aspect of mortuary ritual in the human world would be invoking myth and the order it promises. It would also, once again, invoke hierarchy, for it would associate the primal *jötunn*, Ymir, with animals, primarily dogs and horses, as I understand the statistics, not with humans. If there is anything to this line of thought, it is that some of the high-status humans who got graves may have been sent to the world of the dead with animal body parts that might have invoked the ultimate life-giving moment in the mythology, the creation of the cosmos, without which none of us could live.

The treatment of Ymir's body had nothing to do with the well-being of Ymir or his own society, the *jötnar*. Rather it was undertaken for the benefit of the hierarchically

¹⁶ The repetition of "var sköpuð" in the final line may or may not suggest that the "blíð regin" were responsible for the creative acts detailed with that expression in st. 40.

superior group, the Æsir, and their clients, human beings. While one could attempt a similar statement about the funeral of Baldr, everything we think we know about Viking Age mortuary ritual would suggest that Baldr's funeral had some function of easing his journey to and sojourn in the world of the dead. And again, let us recall that Christians too consumed this mythology. If they thought of Baldr's funeral in the light of any kind of natural religion, they would surely assume that his well-being in the next world was at stake. Beyond this, of course, was the well-being of society, of the survivors.

There are other "processed" bodies in the mythology, if I may refer to Ymir's body with this adjective, even if the notion of sacrifice seems close at hand. Body parts of both Kvasir and Mímir are processed after their deaths, not for their benefit but for the benefit of the dominant social group, the Æsir.¹⁷ Both bodies, while living, travel away from the Æsir, and in both cases the important body part is returned to them, processed but without the benefit of any usual kind of mortuary ritual.

Ymir, Kvasir, and Mímir are all in one way or another associated with Óðinn, at least as Snorri reports the myths (on the latter two, see Schjødt 2008, 108-72 for detailed treatment of the textual material). In the case of Ymir, it is Óðinn and his brothers who dismember and arrange the dead body. In the case of Kvasir, it is Óðinn who obtains the priceless body part, the fermented blood. In the case of Mímir, it is Óðinn who pickles the head and thus transforms it into something useful. In all three cases we can perhaps infer that it was Óðinn who understood the value of the bodies after death.¹⁸

I have already mentioned ritual dismemberment in connection with human funerary ritual. It may be worth adding here that at least the medieval understanding of pagan ritual had an emphasis on blood spilled on some kind of altar. This blood can perhaps be juxtaposed to the blood of Kvasir, which, however, comes from a being of human form and is further processed.¹⁹ I am less optimistic about associating Mímir with what we may know about actual ritual practice, but at least the dismemberment may recall ritual sacrifice.

I would argue that in the case of Ymir's dismemberment and the arrangement of the body parts, Óðinn is to be understood as the one who leads the performance of this implied mythicized ritual. Óðinn is also deeply and inextricably associated with the performance of skaldic poetry,²⁰ which might perhaps be understood as containing a ritual aspect in some performances, as for example an *erfidrápa* in connection with

¹⁷ Clunies Ross treats these as sacrifices, alongside the Æsir's assault on the enigmatic Gullveig and the self-sacrifice of Óðinn (1994, 187-228).

¹⁸ Mímir and Kvasir form underlying parts of the complex but convincing argumentation advanced by Schjødt (2008) for the central importance of initiatory sequences in the mythology of Óðinn and his acquisition and control of numinous knowledge. See especially chapters 6, 10, and 11.

¹⁹ Here the kenning for poetry adduced by Einarr Skálaglamm in *Vellekla*, st. 1, is of interest: "Kvasis dreyri" ("the blood of Kvasir"), since *dreyri* refers to blood flowing from a fresh wound (Fritzner 1972-73, vol. 1, 266 s.v.).

²⁰ Against this association with performance is Óðinn's relative absence from the content of skaldic poetry, in favour of, primarily, Þórr.

death ritual.²¹ And finally, if we read the anointing of the head of Mímir as ritual, we must accept that it was Óðinn who performed that ritual. This presents Óðinn, I would argue, as a leading performer of ritual or ritual-like activity associated with death and touching in some cases on mortuary ritual or sacrifice. In at least one other case in which Óðinn attends a death, namely that of King Geirrøðr in *Grímnismál*, there may be a ritual association as well, as many scholars have argued, having to do not directly with processing death but rather with the succession of kingship. Now, in the other major eddic death associated with Óðinn, that of Vafþrúðnir, we see no indication of a processing of a dead body or indeed any interest in it. And yet, in light of the argument I am pursuing here, I cannot help wondering whether the outcome of the wager does not require an implied processing, namely the dismembering of the *jötunn* through the removal of his head. The pivotal stanza 19, spoken when Vafþrúðnir takes up the role of questioner and Óðinn that of wisdom-performer, might well be read to indicate such a dismemberment:

Fróðr ertu nú, gestr,
 far þú á bekk jötuns,
 ok mælumk í sessi saman;
 hq̄ði veðja
 vit skulum hq̄llu í,
 gestr, um geðspeki.
 (*Vafþrúðnismál* 19; Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason 2014, 359)

(Wise you are, guest, come to the giant's bench,
 and we will speak together in the seat;
 we shall wager our heads in the hall,
 guest, on our wisdom. (Larrington 2014, 40))

Even if the hypothesis I have just advanced remains on the near edge of speculation, it is certainly so that, in general, Óðinn takes an interest in ritual associated with death. For the myths I have been taking up so far, we also see dwarfs and the Vanir (whose obituary may have been premature) as performers of ritual-like activity, namely slaughter, and, more important, the processing of the slaughtered body.

It is not my purpose here to make a list of all the beings in the mythology who might be regarded as performers of ritual. If we were to take an expansive view, there might well be many. However, here we must note another absence: namely the nearly complete absence of Þórr as a performer of ritual.²² To start with death ritual, while Óðinn is keenly interested in what happens to dead beings, Þórr is far less so. The

²¹ Richard North's conception of Þjóðólfr ór Hvini's performance of *Haustlǫng* at a *haustǫl* (autumn feast) as a kind of "northern pastoral" certainly implies a ritual context (North 1997, xxxi), although the hypothesis is too speculative to be evaluated. For the Christian period, it is difficult to believe that Einarr Skúlason's recitation of *Geisli* in Christ's Church in Trondheim in the middle twelfth century could have taken place outside of a Christian ritual context.

²² Schjødt offers a thorough survey of the evidence in which Þórr is said to use his hammer to consecrate something and argues that in the end, Þórr's role is to defend against demonic forces (2008, 225-32).

exceptions would be Snorri's statement that Þórr consecrated Baldr's funeral pyre with his hammer—a motif not supported by the extant poetry—and the runic formula calling on Þórr to hallow the runes that commemorate a dead person.

The consecration of Baldr's pyre is of course consistent with the other principal piece of textual evidence for Þórr's use of his hammer to bless rites of passage, namely at the end of *Brymskviða*.

Þá kvað þat Þrymr,
þursa dróttinn:
"Berid inn hamar
brúði at vígja,
leggið Mjöllni
í meyar kné,
vígið okkr saman
Várar hendi."

(*Brymskviða* 30; Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason 2014, 427)

(Then said Thrym, lord of ogres:
'Bring in the hammer to sanctify the bride,
lay Miollnir on the girl's lap,
consecrate us together by the hand of Var!'
(Larrington 2014, 97))

There is of course an extensive literature concerning the possible use of the hammer in wedding ritual. However, what I would like to point out here is that according to the text it is not Þórr who carries out the blessing but, because of the plural imperative verbs (*berid*, *leggið*, *vígið*), the assembled guests as a whole—the assembled *jotnar*. Thus, Þórr has no actual agency as the performer of the ritual as the poem presents it. And furthermore, because this is a ritual that takes place in the world of the *jotnar*, Þórr is thereby further removed from the performance of ritual within the family of the *Æsir*.

The late Viking Age runic formula "may Þórr bless these runes" also may suggest a ritual role for Þórr (Sonne 2013, 24-35), although it is important to recall that here the hammer is not explicitly invoked, in the formula at least.²³ More to the point, whether it represents a reaction to Christian formulas or not (Marold 1974), this ritual speech act was invoked in the world of humans, not of the *Æsir*, and it was in the world of humans that Þórr was to act. The same could be said of his apparent mention in the inscription on the Rök rune stone.²⁴ In the mythological world, as opposed to the human world, it is Óðinn who controls runes, which constitute an important aspect of his numinous knowledge (Schjødt 2008, *passim*). Despite the issue with the actual language of *Brymskviða*, mentioned above, I am certainly prepared to accept that in

²³ The role of apparent images of Þórr's hammers on rune stones must remain beyond our knowledge.

²⁴ Joseph Harris's view, perhaps most easily accessed in Harris 2006, is that Þórr is slotted into the role of Váli or Bous, the avenging son, in a Swedish version of the Baldr myth applied to the death ritual of the inscription. Even if one accepts this carefully constructed argument, certainly now a minority view (Ralph 2007; Holmberg 2015; Holmberg et al. 2018-19; Williams 2021), Þórr is not a ritual practitioner.

certain times and places, notions of Þórr included his conferring blessings at weddings—these too are passage rites—, and in connection with the carving of runes. In the mythological world, however, Þórr is simply not a conspicuous performer of ritual.

At a minimum, the difference in the association of Óðinn and Þórr in death ritual shows the difference in mythological spheres that we already can reconstruct from any number of other indicators; numinous knowledge, the semantic center of Óðinn (Schjødt 2012; 2013 on the concept; 2020a on Óðinn), is essential for the proper conduct of ritual. But I would like to stress that the difference implies more hierarchy, in this case within the community of the Æsir. Here I am assuming that conducting ritual in connection with death (as does Óðinn) confers higher status than leaving dead bodies alone, as does Þórr, more or less explicitly.²⁵ Or to put it in a more binary fashion, with ritual we are closer to culture and therefore to what is human, and without ritual we are closer to nature.²⁶ With his numinous knowledge and ability to enact ritual, Óðinn stands far closer to culture than the other gods, even the apparently widely worshipped Þórr. Þórr may have challenged Christ to a duel (*Njáls saga*, ch. 102), but he would probably have had to consult Óðinn to determine the rules—and Óðinn would certainly have been foremost among the Æsir in understanding the cosmic consequences.

In this essay I have examined the use of ritual in the imagined world of Old Norse mythology in two different aspects: the presence or absence of ritual, as exemplified in death ritual, for the two major classes of mythological beings, and the practice of ritual or ritual-like activity, resembling sacrifice, within the class of the Æsir. Both are important indicators of hierarchy.

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²⁵ To avoid an *arumentum ex silentio*, I would point to the *stef* ending st. 6 in *Húsdrápa*, mentioned above. And for what it is worth, my view is that the ambiguous “sökkðisk síðan sá fiskr í marr” in st. 24 of *Hymiskviða*, also mentioned above, is more likely than not to indicate that the serpent’s body sank dead into the sea.

²⁶ In support of her larger argument about the social world of Old Norse mythology, Margaret Clunies Ross wrote: “...the Kvasir and Mímir myths underscore an often-repeated theme of Norse mythology: the higher value of culture, represented by the Æsir, over nature, represented by the Vanir and the giants, and of males over females” (1994, 218).

Dent.

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