Nornir in Old Norse Mythology

Karen Bek-Pedersen
PhD
The University of Edinburgh
2007
Declaration of Authorship

I hereby certify that I have written this thesis and that the work is entirely my own. The work presented here has not been submitted for any other degree.
Abstract
The primary object of the thesis is to discuss a particular group of female supernatural beings called ‘nornir’ and their relationship to the Old Norse concept of fate. Although well-known and often mentioned in scholarship dealing with Old Norse culture, these beings are all too often dealt with in overly superficial ways. The research presented in the thesis seeks to go much deeper in order to properly understand the nature and role of ‘nornir’ in the Old Norse world view, and the conclusions reached importantly overturn a number of stereotypical conceptions that have long dominated our understanding of ‘nornir’. The discussion of these beings fall into four main chapters:

- A discussion of the similarities and differences between ‘nornir’ and several other kinds of female supernatural beings.
- A discussion of certain symbolic aspects relating the dwelling place of the ‘nornir’ to their strongly feminine nature.
- A discussion of the well-established image in which fate is represented through different kinds of textile work, and the problems that surround this metaphor in the Old Norse sources.
- A discussion of the Old Norse vocabulary relating to fate and the quasi-legal aspects of the ‘nornir’.

The thesis focuses on Old Norse culture and uses predominantly Old Norse source material. Comparative material, especially Celtic, Anglo-Saxon and Classical, is, however, employed when this is thought to be relevant.
For Derek,
Who would probably never have read it,
but who would have been so proud.

Din sjæl er
din skæbne.

Karen Blixen
Contents:

Acknowledgements
Abbreviations
List of Manuscripts
List of Illustrations

I. Introduction

II. Sources
II.1. Edda
II.2. Snorra-Edda
II.3. Skaldic Poetry
II.4. Sagas
II.5. Other
II.6. Evaluation

III. Some Questions of Definition
III.1. Nornir, Disir and Valkyrjur
   III.1.1. Nornir
      III.1.1.1. Nornir and Death
      III.1.1.2. Nornir and Life
   III.1.2. Disir
   III.1.3. Valkyrjur
III.2. More Supernatural Women
   III.2.1. Mothers and Fylgjur
   III.2.2. Swan Maidens?
III.3. Greek Moirai and Roman Parcae
III.4. Summary: Borderlines and Grey Areas

IV. The Women in the Well
IV.1. Urðr, Verðandi, Skuld
   IV.1.1. The Names
   IV.1.2. Three Nornir?
   IV.1.3. Good and Evil Nornir?
   IV.1.4. ‘meylar margs vitandi’
IV.2. Dark and Humid Places
   IV.2.1. In the Water
Acknowledgements

I owe my gratitude to so many people, many more than I can mention here, for supporting and encouraging me throughout this project.

I am especially grateful to Jón Hnefill Áðalsteinsson for untiring support as well as valuable comments and suggestions, and I also want in particular to thank my supervisors, John Shaw and Emily Lyle, for their patience, tolerance, encouragement and not least faith in their assumption that I knew what I was doing.

Thanks is also due to Vilborg Daviðsdóttir for dedicated help with translations from Old Norse, to Chris Yocum for assistance with the Latin and Irish material, to Patricia Boulhosa for a thorough commentary and to Jens Peter Schjødt, John Lindow and Jürgen Einhoff for reading through the drafts of the thesis. I am further indebted to Ian MacKenzie for much guidance regarding the illustrations, and to everyone else who has been there for me at Celtic & Scottish Studies in Edinburgh as well as at Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi in Reykjavík.

I am grateful to Stofnun Árna Magnússonar for awarding me two grants that enabled me to spend time in Iceland in connection with my research.

Many thanks to Terry Gunnell without whose support I might never have finished this (and would certainly never have started on this); thanks for the time and inspiration – and for assuring me that ‘the norns have ways of getting at you!’ I would also like to thank Howie Firth and Eldar Heide for sharing many ideas with me, Rósa Borsteinsdóttir for reminding me that I had enough to do with one PhD, and my dad for still allowing me home at Christmas.

A big ‘Thank you’ to Cuillin for being a friend, to Hamish and Freda for taking me out to play, to Erik and Marieluise for providing a study-proof retreat, and to everyone else who occasionally dragged me away from the books.

Lastly I would like to thank Bel for reading dictionaries with me into the wee, small hours, but mostly simply for being there – you were in my thoughts all the way through this and there you remain.
Abbreviations

AeW – Jan de Vries: Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch
ATU – H-J Uther: The Types of International Folktales (numbers indicate tale-types)
ÄBM – Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon: Íslensk Orðsifjabók
C/V – Cleasby and Vigfusson: An Icelandic-English Dictionary
CSI – The Complete Sagas of Icelanders I-V.
DIL – Dictionary of the Irish Language
FSN – Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda I-IV.
Frzt – Johan Fritzner: Ordbog over det gamle norske Sprog I-III.
IeW – Alexander Jóhannesson: Isländisches etymologisches Wörterbuch
ÍEO – Arngrímur Sigurðsson: Íslensk-Ensk orðabók
ÍF – Íslensk Fornrit 1-35
ÍS – Íslendinga sögur 1-12
KLE – Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda 2-5
MS/MSS – manuscript/manuscripts
OED – Oxford English Dictionary
LP – Finnur Jónsson: Lexicon Poeticum.
Skj – Finnur Jónsson: Den Norsk-Íslandske Skjaldedigtning A I+II and B I+II.
List of manuscripts

AM 45 fol c.1300-1325 / Codex Frisianus
AM 61 fol c.1350-1375
AM 122 a fol c.1350-1370 / Króksfjarðarbók
AM 132 fol c.1330-1370 / Móðruvallabók
AM 162 A ð fol c.1300
AM 162 A ð fol c.1250
AM 242 fol c.1350 / Codex Wormianus
AM 334 fol c.1300 / Staðarhólsbók
AM 285 4° c.1600-1700
AM 291 4° c.1275-1300
AM 448 4° c.1686
AM 468 4° c.1300-1325 / Reykjabók
AM 519 a 4° c.1280
AM 544 4° c.1300-1325 / Hauksbók
AM 556 a 4° c.1475-1500
AM 556 b 4° c.1475-1500
AM 557 4° c.1420-1450
AM 559 4° c.1686
AM 586 4° c.1450-1500
AM 593 a 4° c.1400-1500
AM 748 I 4° c.1300-1325
AM 748 I b 4° c.1300-1325
AM 748 II 4° c.1400
AM 757 a 4° c.1400
AM 166 b 8° c.1600-1700
DG 11 c.1300-1325
Gks 1005 fol c.1387-1395 / Flateyjarbók
Gks 1009 fol c.1275 / Morkinskinna
Gks 2365 4° c.1270 / Konungsbók
Gks 2367 4° c.1300-1350 / Codex Regius
Gks 2845 4° c.1450
Gks 2870 4° c.1300 / Gráskinna
Holm perg 6 fol c.1275
ÍB 226 4° c.1680-1700
Nks 1824 b 4° c.1400-1425
Trajectinus c.1595
Upps UB R 715 c.1650
List of Illustrations


Fig.3: Borgund runic inscription IV. Re-drawn from Olsen (1957:149).

Fig.4: Schematic representation of a dyngja. Reproduced from Zimmermann (1982:129).

Fig.5: Sorpe, 12th century Spanish icon of the Annunciation. Kindly provided by Florentina Badalanova-Geller.

Fig.6: Schematic representation of plying, my drawing.

Fig.7: Spinning with distaff and spindle. Drawing by Kate Sævåg, reproduced from Hofseth (1990:103).

Fig.8: Schematic representation of braiding, my drawing.

Fig.9: Weaving tablets. Reproduced from Østergård (2004:113).

Fig.10: Bayeux tapestry. Reproduced from Rud (2000:75).

Fig.11: The Greenlandic skeið. Re-drawn from Roussell (1941:276; cf. Østergård 2004:57).


Fig.13: Oseberg tapestry. Reproduced from Fitzhugh and Ward (2000:80).

Fig.14: Upper Rhenish Master c.1400, icon of the Annunciation. Kindly provided by Florentina Badalanova-Geller.

Fig.15: Rila Monastery, 19th century Bulgarian icon of the Annunciation. Kindly provided by Florentina Badalanova-Geller.

Fig.16: Spinning with distaff and spindle. Re-drawn from Embla Ýr Bárudóttir and Ingólfur Órn Björgvinsson (2004:47).

Fig.17: Spinning nornir, drawing by Ernst Hansen, 1925. Reproduced from Hansen (1925:65).
I. Introduction

The thesis concerns the nornir in Old Norse mythology and its aim is to provide a better understanding of the role played by nornir and other beings like them. Although the nornir are well known, even to people who have only a superficial knowledge of Old Norse mythology, there is as yet no in-depth discussion of them available amongst the literature dealing with Old Norse beliefs. This thesis is an attempt to redress that situation.

I came upon the topic some five years ago when I was asked to give a talk about fate in Old Norse beliefs. It surprised me to find how little had been said specifically about nornir – a few pages here and there, mostly in books of a general nature, and scholars on the whole seemed satisfied to go over the same few features that others had already gone over. This made me wonder whether there would not be more to say about nornir if one looked at them in detail. Would there really be nothing but the stereotypical three nornir who spin? I decided to find out, and what follows is the result of my research.

Nornir are not prominent figures in Old Norse mythology. Turning up only a handful of times, they remain shadowy background figures and most of their appearances consist of brief references to their secretive dealings behind the backs of human beings. We rarely get clear presentations of what nornir really are, but we do see enough of them to understand that they played a role in people’s conceptual world at the time. They are there, looming somewhere in the background, intangible and mostly out of focus – intriguingly difficult to grasp hold of. This means that it is also difficult to obtain a clear focus for a full discussion of all references to nornir.

By necessity, I discuss a range of other beings and characters who in some way or other overlap with nornir, most of which deserve much more attention than I am able to devote to them here. My focus has been on the nornir, which means that other beings are discussed predominantly in relation to them rather than in their own right.

From the outset, three specific questions have been fundamental to my research:

1) Why is fate so often feminine?
2) What is the connection between nornir and spinning?
3) What do nornir actually do?

These questions have provided the framework for the thesis from the beginning but have not been allowed to constrain the research where sources seem to categorise material differently or present material that is of a different nature. I try
to make the discussions clear and systematic but also realise that I am unable to introduce perfect consistency; discussions are guided primarily by topic rather than by a desire to discuss text passages in full before moving on. This approach naturally has disadvantages as well as advantages, but that would be the case with any approach. I have thus largely let my initial questions subdivide the discussions for me; as a result of this, the thesis falls into four main chapters, each dealing with certain aspects of the normir. They are preceded by a discussion of the source material in Chapter II.

Chapter III: 'Some Questions of Definition' discusses normir according to mentions of them in skaldic and heroic poetry, but in particular it concerns similarities and differences between normir and other groups of beings like them, especially disir and valkyrjur, along with shorter discussions of fylgjur and ancestress figures.

Chapter IV: 'The Women in the Well' concentrates predominantly on the references to normir found in Völsunga and Snorra-Edda but also once again looks at related supernatural beings. A central theme is the place of origin of the beings involved, and this chapter also suggests a reason why the concept of fate has such a strong tendency to be portrayed in feminine guise.

Chapter V: 'Fate and Threads' explores the well-established image of fate represented through spinning and weaving. It is found that the Norse material itself provides very few examples of supernatural textile workers, and the discussion centres on whether this image was native to Norse tradition and how it relates to normir.

Chapter VI: 'Fate, Prophecy and Law' delves into the relationship between normir and völur and also discusses their connections to issues of law and the spoken word. The notion that fate, represented by normir, can be likened to a kind of law is discussed here, as are the etymologies of various words surrounding the concept of fate in Old Norse.

Chapter VII contains the concluding remarks.

As suggested above, the four main chapters of the thesis treat subject areas that intertwine in numerous ways; I have attempted to establish a clear focus for each chapter, yet allowing overlaps where these seemed unavoidable.

Quotations from the Edda follow Neckel 1936, and those from Snorra-Edda follow Faulkes 1982 and 1998; chapter numbering of Gylfaginning and Skáldskaparmál follow Faulkes 1982 and 1998 respectively. Where nothing else is stated, translations
are my own. For eddic poems my starting point has always been Carolyne Larrington’s translation (1996) but in most cases I have felt the need to make some changes to the passages I quote. For skaldic poetry, Den Norsk-Islandske Skjaldedigtning and the Skaldic Project home page: http://skaldic.arts.usyd.edu.au/db.php have been my starting point, although translations have been checked and amended when this was thought to be necessary. When possible, I quote from editions of texts that contain the relevant poetry.

As English is the primary language of this thesis, all quotations in languages other than English appear also in translation. Old Norse words are used for several concepts and beings as suitable English equivalents are often difficult to come by.

Old Norse distinguishes between ǫ and ǭ; modern Icelandic uses ð for both.
II. Sources

Dealing with nornir means working primarily, although not exclusively, with literary sources. The present topic is the nature of nornir within Old Norse\(^1\) mythology and beliefs - that is, the 'old nornir' - but it is evident that the term 'nornir' can refer to quite different types of beings depending on the dates and contents of the manuscripts; not all nornir are mythological nornir. Although it must be granted that it is not the date of the manuscript but the date of its contents that is relevant, there are strong indications, as will become clear below, that generally speaking nornir referred to in manuscripts later than c.1400 are of a somewhat different nature from those in earlier manuscripts. These beings undergo some development from their earliest appearances in eddic and skaldic poetry and into later medieval texts.

This means that understanding the nature of the different poems and texts that mention nornir is of some importance. Some of these might be as early as 900AD (Dronke 1969:42-45, 214-217; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1962:406) whereas others are close to 1200 (Dronke 1969:111; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1962:528), though none were written down until 1300 or later, leaving some 400 years or more during which people might have changed their ideas many times over about what nornir are, what they do and what they represent.

In modern Icelandic, two types of nornir can be distinguished from one another in the words örlaganornir 'fate-nornir' and galdranornir 'witch-nornir' or töfranornir 'sorceresses' (ÍEO:235, 812, 919) and this is a useful distinction roughly corresponding to 'old nornir' who deal with fate and 'modern nornir' who are more concerned with witchcraft and magic. It should be made clear that the thesis concerns örlaganornir. No doubt interesting insights can be gathered from looking at what the idea of a norm developed into but I am more interested in what it developed from. In addition to nornir, the word urðr will be treated as a central concept due to the close semantic links between nornir and Urðarbrunnr (see IV.2.1.) and because urðr is at times employed directly as a name of one of the nornir or as a word almost synonymous with the word norm (see III.1.1.2. and IV.1.1.).

This chapter discusses the sources that refer directly to nornir and which must therefore be regarded as the main sources, that is, texts that employ the words norm

\(^1\) By Old Norse I mean pertaining to the Scandinavian cultural area during the period roughly 800-1200AD. I use the term Scandinavian in a linguistic sense, covering the areas where Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, Icelandic and Faroese are the dominant languages.
and urðr or any forms thereof. Relatively few texts contain these words and those of significance to the arguments presented in the thesis have been listed below.

Most of the literature relevant to the present exploration stems from medieval Iceland. The vast majority of references to nornir occur in the Poetic Edda (referred to here as Edda), Edda Snorra Sturlusonar (referred to here as Snorra-Edda) and skaldic poetry. Íslendingasögur (Sagas of Icelanders), Konungasögur (Sagas of the Kings) and fornaldarsögur (Legendary Sagas) are also relevant but mostly in less direct ways.

II.1. Edda

The Edda is an anonymous collection of Old Norse mythological and heroic poetry found in a number of different manuscripts. The earliest preserved manuscript, Gks 2365 4° or Konungsbók, is from c.1270, but the Edda is also preserved in AM 544 4° or Hauksbók c.1300-1325, and parts of it in the MSS AM 748 I 4° c.1300-1325; AM 242 fol c.1350; Gks 1005 fol or Flateyarbók c.1387-1395 and others.

In editions of the Edda, the poems generally follow the order in which they appear in the Konungsbók MS with the mythological ones coming before the heroic ones; additionally, a number of poems considered eddic in nature although not found in Konungsbók are often included in modern editions of the Edda: Baldrs draumar (AM 748 I 4°), Rígsþula (AM 242 fol.), Hyndluljóð (Flateyarbók), Grottasongr (Gks 2367, 4° c.1300-1350) and sometimes also Grógaldr and Fjölsvinnsmál. These last two poems (sometimes regarded as one, under the title Svipdagsmál) are preserved only in paper manuscripts from the 17th century (Gísli Sigurðsson 1998:xii), and they have been disregarded by many scholars as too late to be considered of value to studies of the Edda. However, I have chosen to include Fjölsvinnsmál and other late material as a valid sources for the present study, based on the arguments presented by Heide (1997).

The Edda is invaluable to our understanding of Old Norse mythology. It contains poems about ancient heroes, the beginning and end of the world, the heathen gods,

---

2 By Konungsbók (also known as Codex Regius) I mean specifically Gks 2365 4°; other parts of Codex Regius will referred to by their numbers.
3 All MS dates (except for Konungasögur) are from Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog (1989).
4 By Hauksbók I mean specifically AM 544 4°; other parts of this collection will be referred to by their numbers.
5 See Codex Regius 1937 for this; the order is different in other MSS.
6 See Gísli Sigurðsson 1998:xii for an overview of which eddic poems occur in which MSS.
their adventures and interactions with other kinds of beings; but the number of
stories about the gods was never finite and the *Edda* is not a holy book like the
*Bible*. In the oral tradition that went before the *Edda*, there would have been variant
versions of any one story with each storyteller telling it in their own way to suit each
this way the stories did not necessarily have one solid form. They received their
exact shape only as they were being told and this might have been a slightly
different shape every time. Over time, stories are likely to have changed, migrated,
been adapted, have taken on board new ideas as well as preserved or dropped old
ones and, alongside this, new stories could always be added to the repertoire
(McKinnell 1994:20-27). Influences from other places probably came in during all
stages of both pre-Christian and Christian beliefs through trade, travelling and
general interaction between different areas and cultures. We should not imagine that
Old Norse mythology was static; culture is a continuous process rather than a
finished product.

The *Edda* presents us with a number of stories that seem to contain narrative
motifs and linguistic forms from various periods of time, which means that they are
difficult to date precisely. Although language can be dated to certain periods, this
tells us little about the age of the contents of a given story and discussions about the
age of eddic poems are ongoing. The stories that have been preserved may be but a
fraction of what once existed – we will never know how much has been lost.7

Eddic references to *nornir* are the following:8

**Nornir:**

*Helgakviða Hundingsbana* I 2-4 – Nótt varð í bæ, nornir kvómo
*Helgakviða Hundingsbana* II 26 – þó kveð ek nokkvi nornir valda
*Reginsmál* 2 – aumlig norn skóp oss í árdaga
*Fáfnismál* 11 – Norna dómr þú munt fyr nesiom hafa
*Fáfnismál* 12 – hveriar ro þær nornir, er nauðgonglar ro
*Fáfnismál* 13 – Sundrbornar miðk segi ek at nornir sé
*Fáfnismál* 44 – fyr sköppom norna
*Sigdrífumál* 17 – á nornir nagli
*Sigurðarkviða in skamma* 7 – liótar nornir skópo oss langa þrá

---

7 Further on eddic poetry, see Harris 1983 and 1985; Jónas Kristjánsson 1988; Einar Ól.
8 Numbers following titles of poems indicate which stanza is discussed; following titles of
prose texts numbers indicate chapters, page numbers in specific editions follow in brackets.
II.2. Snorra-Edda

Snorra-Edda is somewhat different in nature from the Edda, although it treats some of the same material. It is ascribed to Snorri Sturluson who supposedly wrote it down around 1220 (Gunnell 2005:83), but the earliest surviving MSS date from the 14th century (Faulkes 1993:601). Snorra-Edda is a sort of handbook of Old Norse poetics that falls into four parts: Prologue, Gylfaginning ("The Delusion of Gylfi"), which retells a lot of mythological tales, Skáldskaparmál ("The Language of Poetry"), which discusses various poetic forms, and Háttatal ("List of Verse Forms"), a poem in praise of king Hákon and Skúli hertogi. Gylfaginning and Skáldskaparmál are particularly relevant here. Three MSS contain the complete Snorra-Edda: DG 11 c.1300-1325, Gks 2367 4° c.1300-1350 and AM 242 fol c.1350. It also exists in the later Codex Trajectinus, c.1600 though probably copied from an earlier MS (Faulkes 1982:xxix). Three other MSS contain parts of Snorra-Edda: AM 748 Ib 4° c.1300-1325, AM 748 II 4° c.1400 and AM 757 a 4° c.1400.10

---

9 The idea that Snorri was the author, which goes largely unquestioned in scholarship, is based on a comment in DG 11 (Faulkes 1987:vi; Krömmelbein 1992:113); for the purposes of this thesis I will assume that he was indeed the original author.

10 Generally speaking, modern editors of Snorra-Edda silently correct and amend the text from various MSS.
This is a valuable source for Old Norse mythology because Snorri's intention with his book was to preserve knowledge of the old vernacular poetry for young poets (Faulkes 1982:xvii; Krömmelbein 1992:113). In particular, he goes some way to explain several kenningar or poetic metaphors by telling the stories behind them (in Gylfaginning and Skáldskaparmál), and in many cases we would not otherwise have been able to understand what these kenningar refer to nor would we have known the stories. Snorra-Edda is not, however, an uncomplicated source because, although it preserves much knowledge about heathen matters, it was set down by a Christian over two centuries after Christianity became the state religion of Iceland in 999 or 1000 (Jón Hnefill Æðalsteinsson 1999:9-10). This means that we are getting an outsider's view – Snorri did not have direct contact, so to speak, with his material as it had been handed down to him through an increasingly thick layer of Christianity. At times, it becomes evident that Snorri is rationalising his material, organising it into systems that fit in with his own way of thinking without necessarily representing any kind of heathen system. This is something to be aware of – that Snorri may have put his material together in a way which is radically different from how it was conceived of two or three centuries before him (Faulkes 1982:xxvii). The sensible approach to Snorra-Edda is a critical one.11

Snorri's mentions of nornir are these:

**Nornir:**

Gylfaginning 15 – þær kollum vör nornir. Enn eru fleiri nornir
Gylfaginning 15 – góðar nornir ok vel ættanar skapa góðan aldr
Gylfaginning 36 – norn in yngsta er Skuld heitar

**Urðr:**

Gylfaginning 15 – brunnr sá er mjók er heilagr er heitar Urðar brunnr
Gylfaginning 16 – þær er byggja við Urðar brunn
Gylfaginning 16 – Fuglar tveir fæðask í Urðar brunni

**II.3. Skaldic Poetry**

Skaldic poems were composed by poets of the Viking and early medieval period, c.800-1300, of whom we often know both their names and roughly when they lived and died. These differ from eddic poems by being non-anonymous and occasional rather than traditional (Frank 1985:159; cf. Turville-Petre 1976:xvi-xvii). The poems

---

that survive were preserved in oral memory, sometimes for centuries, before being committed to writing. Although the tight rules of composition for skaldic poetry, such as alliteration, rhyme and metre serving as an aide mémoire (Clunies Ross 2005:13-39; Jónas Kristjánsson 1988:84-88) must have helped to preserve many original features, we should not assume that we have the words exactly as the poet himself composed them (Jónas Kristjánsson 1992:109).

Skaldic poems are found in a variety of manuscripts as they have not been written down purely for their own sake but as parts of longer narratives. In Skáldskaparmál, Snorri mentions a number of skaldic verses and stanzas as evidence for the use of certain kenningar, but he also quotes some poems of specifically mythological interest in full, or at least extensive, forms. Others are found in manuscripts of Konungasögur and Íslingasögur where they are often presented as spoken by the poets themselves in the context where they supposedly composed them.

Two very recognisable features of skaldic poetry are the language of kenningar or poetic metaphors and the extensive use of heiti or synonyms (Frank 1985:163-172). Kenningar can be relatively simple, as in referring to gold as 'Freyia's tears'. For this, we need to know that Freyia was said to weep tears of gold. But they can also be very dense, as in referring to gold as 'Fróði's servants' seed', where we have to know not only who Fróði was (a legendary king said to have lived during a period of great prosperity; Skáldskaparmál 43) but also who his servants were (two maidens descended from the jotnar, the traditional adversaries of the Old Norse gods; these maidens were the only ones that could work Fróði's magical mill) and what their seed was (the gold that the mill would grind out). (Both kenningar found in Skáldskaparmál 44.) Poets at the time seem to have had a fondness for thinking out complex kenningar with which to replace several nouns in the same stanza so that it is not unusual to get a whole string of such pieces of circumlocution, all following each other and all intertwining into one greater meaning. Similarly, the use of heiti serves to make the poetry less than easy to grasp, for example in the rather extensive lists of alternative names for Óðinn: Grímr, Gangleri, Bólverkr, Saðr, Fiðlnir and many more (Gylfaginning 20; Grímnismál 47).

The impression left by such poetry is of a certain register of speech almost akin to a code language where only those who were initiated in the craft could
understand what was being said. We understand many *kenningar* because we know the stories behind them, but many remain unintelligible, too.\textsuperscript{12}

Also relevant are the *pulur*. These are essentially metrical lists of names and words that supplement the section on *heiti* at the end of *Skáldskaparmál*, including lists of names and synonyms for man, woman, bird, ship, sword, *jötunn* and so on. The term *pulur* (f. pl.) is related to *pulr* (m. sg.), a word used in poetry to denote a wise man or poet (LP:650). The *pulur* preserved in *Snorra-Edda* vary between the different MSS.\textsuperscript{13}

*Nornir* occur in the following pieces of skaldic poetry:

**Nornir:**

*Ynglingatal*\textsuperscript{24}\textsuperscript{14} – norna dóms (AM 45 fol c.1300-1325)
Torf-Einarr – rétt skiptu því nornir (AM 45 fol c.1300-1325 and others)
Hallfreðr – fornhaldir skop norna (*Möðruvallabók* c.1330-1370 and others)
Kveldúlfur – norn erum grimm (AM 162 A ð fol c.1300 and others)
Egill – nestu norn (AM 162 A ð fol c.1250 and others)
Krákumál\textsuperscript{24} – fár gengr of skop norna (Nks 1824 b 4° c.1400-1425)

*Sólarljód*\textsuperscript{51} – á norna stóli (AM 166 b 8° c.1600-1700 and others)

*Ólafsdrápa Tryggvasonar*\textsuperscript{18} – skjaldar norn

*pulur* – Nornir heita þær es nauð skapa (*Skáldskaparmál* 75)

**Urðr:**

Eilífur – sunnur at Urðar brunni (*Skáldskaparmál* 52)
Kormákr – komsk Urðr ór brunni (*Skáldskaparmál* 49)

**II.4. Sagas**

Íslendingasögur and sagas in general are a different kind of source altogether. *Nornir* make extremely few appearances in the prose texts of the sagas, as is the case for similar supernatural beings. Nonetheless, the sagas contain much material that is relevant for an understanding of the culture that produced the concept of *nornir* in the first place, and for this reason they are important to the present exploration.

The word ‘saga’ covers a wide range of narrative styles, from historically realistic descriptions of people in recognisable environments to the more fantastic expeditions


\textsuperscript{13} Further on *pulur*, see Gurevich 1992; Simek (1993:331-332); Halvorsen 1976.

\textsuperscript{14} I follow the stanza numbering from the Skaldic Project homepage.
into mythical lands inhabited by supernatural creatures of various kinds. Of greatest interest for this thesis are Íslendingasögur, most of which were written down during the 13th and 14th centuries but which purport to describe the period from the settlement of Iceland until Christianity was accepted there, late 9th century until c.1100 (Vésteinn Ólason 1998:17-37; Jónas Kristjánsson 1988:203-298);\textsuperscript{15} and also fornaldarsögur, which were generally written down during later centuries, 14th and 15th, but tell legendary stories of great heroes from the ancient past often based on material similar to that of the heroic poems in the Ædda (Torfi H. Tulinius 2005:449).\textsuperscript{16} Whereas the Íslendingasögur, with moderate amounts of supernatural elements, give believable accounts of Iceland and its inhabitants during the country’s early history as well as accounts of events that take place in mainland Scandinavia\textsuperscript{17} and the British Isles, fornaldarsögur delve into much more fantastic accounts of superhuman heroes from bygone eras, their journeys into otherworldly places and meetings with trolls, giants, elves and the like. Both types of stories can tell us something about the customs and beliefs of the heathen past of Scandinavia, but it must also be said that information given in fornaldarsögur should generally be taken with a pinch of salt somewhat larger than that needed for Íslendingasögur. The former are much further removed from their material than are the latter, and so there are many centuries of imagination between what may once have happened to give rise to a story and the form of the extant saga. But neither is there any guarantee that information presented in Íslendingasögur can be taken completely at face value just because it asks us to do that.\textsuperscript{18}

Sturlunga saga is also relevant. It is a compilation of sagas that deal with the events taking place in Iceland during the 12th and 13th centuries, a period of great political upheaval on a national scale that resulted in the loss of Icelandic independence to the Norwegian crown in 1262-64 (Úlfar Bragason 2005).\textsuperscript{19}

References to nornir in sagas are the following:

Nornir:

Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks 19 – illr er dómr norna (Upps UB R 715 c.1650)

\textsuperscript{15} Further on Íslendingasögur, see Meulengracht Sørensen 1983; Miller 1990; Clover 1985; Gíslí Sigurðsson 2002.
\textsuperscript{17} By Scandinavia I mean Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Iceland and the Faroe Islands and by mainland Scandinavia I mean Denmark, Norway and Sweden.
\textsuperscript{18} Whenever possible, Íslendingasögur and Konungasögur will be quoted from the ÍF series. Fornaldarsögur are quoted from FSN unless otherwise stated.
\textsuperscript{19} Further on Sturlunga saga, see Jónas Kristjánsson (1988:188-202).
Urðr:

Eyrbyggja saga 52 – urðarmáni (AM 448 4° c.1686; copy of the Vatnsheyrna MS, apparently c.1390-1425, that burnt in 1728)
(One of the Íslingingasögur.)
Íslendingasaga 286 [141; 136] – Urðr mun eigi forðask (AM 122 a fol c.1350-1370)
(From Sturlunga saga.)

II.5. Other

In addition to the extant Icelandic literature, many other sources relating to the Old Norse conceptual world exist. I will not discuss all of them in detail here as they are not all of equal relevance to a study of nornir. Some, however, should be mentioned.

From the Danish area, we have the work of Saxo Grammaticus who was a clerk to archbishop Absalon in the latter part of the 12th century (Saxo Grammaticus 1979:4). Saxo was an educated man whom King Valdemar 1st den Store and archbishop Absalon commissioned to write a history of the Danish people. His work is generally known as Gesta Danorum ("The Deeds of the Danish People"), although we do not know what he himself called it.20 The first half of Saxo's book is interesting for the legendary history of Scandinavia that it gives; the latter half is a more historically reliable account of the early medieval kings of Denmark covering the period until the reign of Knud 6th Valdemarsen began in 1182.

Saxo's style shows that he was well versed in Roman literature (Petersen and Andersen 1929:75-77). He wrote in Latin, the language of the church, and therefore beings such as nornir are referred to under Latin terms; in effect, this means that it is often difficult to know exactly what Saxo is speaking of.21

Another interesting historical source is Adam of Bremen's History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen from c.1074 (Adam af Bremen 2000:10), also in Latin. This survives in a number of MSS from c.1200 (Adam af Bremen 2000:38-39).

---

20 The only surviving MS of the complete work is a version printed in Paris in 1512; exactly how much is Saxo's own and how much might be the work of later editors is somewhat uncertain (Boserup 1981:9-11).
In Book Four of his work, Adam describes some heathen rituals supposedly taking place in Uppsala but whether his is a first-hand account is somewhat uncertain. Moreover, as a good Christian church historian, Adam is more keen to make clear how horrible the heathen traditions are than to understand exactly what they consist of.22

Also of some relevance is the Roman historian and consul Cornelius Tacitus (c.56-117 AD; Tacitus 1970:9) who wrote about the Germanic tribes of his time in two of his works: *Germania* (98 AD; Tacitus 1970:25) and *Historia* (c.109 AD; Tacitus 1997:xl). These survive in MSS from, respectively, the 15th century (*Tacitus* 1970:153) and the 11th century (*Tacitus* 1997:xxxi). Tacitus did not have first-hand knowledge of his material but he probably obtained information from people who had visited the relevant regions or came from them. As with all the sources available to us, Tacitus wrote with a specific purpose in mind and his reasons for writing these accounts rarely coincide with our reasons for reading them.23

Some runic inscriptions and other archaeological evidence are also interesting to the present research.24

In these sources, only one direct reference to *nornir* is found, none to Urðr:

**Nornir:**

Borgund runic inscription IV: Bæði gerðu nornir vel ok ílla

**II.6. Evaluation**

Many of our literary sources for Old Norse mythology stem from Iceland, not from mainland Scandinavia, and therefore they might well give us a specifically North Atlantic slant on matters. It would be naïve to think that all ideas that existed in Iceland had exact equivalents across Scandinavia and that Iceland can therefore be taken as a general representative of what was going on in Denmark, Norway and Sweden; we are dealing with a vast geographical region with many different types of landscape, climate, geology and so forth, and also with a chronological period spanning some three centuries or more. Imagining any great degree of uniformity across the board or taking one specific place as a valid representative of what was happening elsewhere or even of the entire region would be a mistake. The Old Norse

---

22 Further on Adam, see *Adam af Bremens Krønike* (2000:9-41); Hultgård 1997.
23 Further on Tacitus, see *Tacitus* 1970 and 1997.
24 Further on runes, see Olsen 1957; Page 1987; Mckinnell, Simek and Düwel 2004; Arntz and Zeiss 1939.
belief system should probably be conceived of in the plural, as several systems, all of which were variations on similar themes. This is a point that has been made by several scholars recently (McKinnell 1994; Lindow 1997; DuBois 1999).

Among all the sources mentioned above, there are none that aim specifically at explaining in any neutral ethnographic sense the religious beliefs held by people in Scandinavia during the late Iron Age (c.600-800) into the early Middle Ages (c.1100-1300). We have some accounts that go in this direction, but they are all written from the perspective of another culture so that the authors themselves had difficulties understanding what they were writing about. Literature from inside Scandinavia all comes from the Christian period so that we are still not getting an actual insider perspective but a later, tinged recollection of what once was.

In terms of the value of the different sources, when the aim is a deeper and better understanding of nornir as these were conceived of in the Viking Age (c.800-1100), I have not found any one consistent method of treatment for all the information. So little is said about nornir anywhere that I have decided to take the information from the Edda and from the relevant skaldic poems mainly at face value – that is, read the word nornir as referring to nornir rather than read it as a heiti for something else, unless there appears to be good reason for doing so (for example Egill’s lausaviða; see note 77, and Ólafsdrápa 18; see note 51; see also the discussion of Fáfnismál 12, III.1.1.2.). Of course, one can doubt everything, and perhaps one should, but I feel that this would probably make for unnecessarily complicated judgements. I am not pretending that what I have to say will be anything like the final conclusions on nornir. The intention is to look at the beliefs that lie behind the extant source material in order to bring us closer to an understanding of these figures, and hopefully my findings can serve as a base for future scholars who may be able to take the material further than I have managed to do here.

III. Some Questions of Definition

Nornir make relatively few appearances in Edda and Snorra-Edda and even fewer outwith these. Partly because of this, partly because they overlap significantly with certain other kinds of supernatural beings, it makes little sense to look at the nornir in isolation and it would therefore be overly confining to focus exclusively on the word 'nornir'. This state of affairs contributes to the fact that they are often treated as a sub-section of a larger group of beings. Turville-Petre (1964:279-280) hardly mentions them at all but devotes a chapter to the more frequently occurring dísir, fylgjur, hamingjur and álmar. Ström (1985:201-202) gives them relatively more attention in a couple of pages, quoting several text passages and giving his thoughts on a number of aspects, though in an earlier work (1954) he deals extensively with dísir but with nornir in only a short passage, clearly treating them as a sub-category of dísir. Also works of a less general nature often opt for brevity; Raudvere (2003:61-69) puts fylgjur, nornir and dísir together under the heading 'agents of fate'. The focus is rarely on the nornir as a separate entity,²⁶ they are not often considered to merit much in-depth attention, and this in spite of the fact that they are said to be: kanske den mest välkända gruppen av kvinnliga gestalter med anknytning till ödet, 'perhaps the best known group of female beings attached to fate' (Raudvere 2003:62-63). The most sober account of nornir hitherto produced is Mundal's short description (1993).

It is not necessarily wrong to consider nornir as one division of a larger group of female supernatural beings and there are several reasons why this way of dealing with them is acceptable most of the time: nornir are not mentioned very often, there is but little evidence of any formal cult attached to them and, shadowy as they are, it is simply difficult to get a firm hold on any substance which might be lurking behind the term nornir. Yet, it may still be possible to reach a deeper understanding of these beings if we treat them in a thorough manner and as our central subject.

III.1. Nornir, Dísir and Valkyrjur

In past scholarship, it has been common to group several classes of female supernatural beings together as though the different terms were all more or less

²⁶ Dísir and valkyrjur have received relatively more attention as separately conceived groups of beings (Warmind 1997; Ström 1954; Gunnell 2004a; Strömbäck 1949; Damico 1984; Mitchell 2004).
interchangeable and virtually identical. For example, Finnur Jónsson, in 1913, refers to nornir as örlagadísir, 'fate-disir' (1913:25-26), a word occurring only in scholarship but one which nevertheless forms a convention that is echoed by Ásgeir Blöndal (1995:1090). Ellis (later Ellis Davidson), in 1943, says about fylgjur, hamingjör, disir, nornir and valkyrjur that: "All these terms for supernatural women ... are liable to be freely interchanged" (1943:137). More recently, such generalisations have most often been avoided; for example Dronke, in 1969, talks about nornir, mentioning their valkyrja-like and their troll-like features (1969:238), the implication being that they bear resemblances to both valkyrjur and troll-women whilst remaining distinct from them. The situation leaves us with the difficulty of disentangling these similar yet different terms from one another, but the least we can do is to try to approach the material without being too caught up in our own preconceptions about what we are going to find.

This chapter is intended to discuss some of these various groups of beings and explore their similarities and differences with a view to discovering whether there are any ground rules as to where lines can be drawn between nornir, disir and valkyrjur, with some attention also given to ancestress figures, fylgjur and swan-maidens. It is important to keep in mind that the material is diverse and that meanings of words and concepts may well have varied over time and across space; for example the word nornir in some of the oldest skaldic and eddic poems (supposedly from as early as the 10th century) may refer to something very different from nornir in medieval fornaldarsögur from two, three and even four centuries later (cf. Gunnell 2004a:118-120). In modern Icelandic, norn is used to refer to a 'witch' or a 'hag' (IEO:567) and has very little to do with fate. As indicated above, the nornir treated here are the örlaganornir who concern themselves with fate, not the galdranornir who are concerned with witchcraft. Similarly, the term dis conveys rather positive notions in

---

27 While I appreciate that heiti and the notion of a set of interchangeable words constitute a principle in skaldic poetry, I maintain that, at root, these terms refer to different semantic contents.

28 The thesis will not treat the witch-nornir of later periods and continental stories: Jarlmanns saga ok Hermanns 21, AM 556 b 4o c.1475-1500, features nornir playing the harp in the company of acrobatic dwarves and other weird and wonderful beings (I am grateful for Jonas Wellendorf, Universitetet i Bergen, for the reference); Hrölls saga kraka 48, AM 285 4o c.1600-1700, refers to álfrar ok nornir ok annat dótluligt illpyöll, 'álfrar and nornir and countless other malicious beings'; Barlaams ok Josaphats saga 136, Holm perg 6 fol c.1275 (translated from the Greek), mentions Pörr's nine daughters who are nornir; and Buslubaen 8, from Bósa saga 5, AM 586 4o c.1450-1500, mentions töfornir, 'nornir skilled in magic'. Such passages remain of some interest, but are taken to be of secondary importance to an understanding of örlaganornir.
modern Icelandic (IEO:120) but this tells us equally little about what the word meant prior to the adoption of Christianity over a thousand years ago. Once Christianity became dominant, it seems there was relatively little need to distinguish closely between different groups of heathen supernatural beings and so the tendency was for them to be classed together simply as some sort of supernatural women with less attention paid to the terminology used in describing them. So the notion of a set of more or less interchangeable words is by no means new. This complicates our dealings with the source material somewhat because the mere fact that the same word is used in different texts does not guarantee that separate mentions of *nornir* or *dísr* or *valkyrjur* actually refer to the same semantic content, especially not if the texts belong to separate time periods or come from different areas.

The present work, admittedly, does not treat every category of beings that intertwine with *nornir* exhaustively – it is an almost inevitable consequence of the extensive overlapping between such groups and is simply very hard to avoid. Here, as mentioned, the *nornir* form the central focus and, while it is important for the purposes of this thesis also to have an understanding of what is covered by several other terms, particularly *dísr* and *valkyrjur*, I do not pretend to do complete justice to these other beings in what follows.

### III.1.1. Nornir

*Nornir* are a collective group of feminine beings who in some way represent the notion of fate. A few sources appear to present them as creators or personifications of fate (for example Kormákr and *Völuspá*) but there is generally precious little 'person' or 'personality' to be found behind the concept and they most often seem to be completely intangible. Although *nornir* are rather in the mythological background, fate, as they represent it, is apparently the highest power in the universe to which even the Old Norse gods are seemingly subject (Jón Hnefill Áðalsteinsson 1997:51; Clunies Ross 1994:246). The following quotations mentioning *nornir* comprise the majority of direct references to these beings in Old Norse literature, that is, occurrences of the word *norn* or *nornir* or any form thereof. I have attempted to organise the cited material in a roughly chronological order, yet without adhering fully to this principle as discussions of specific aspects have at times been given priority over perceived chronology.
III.1.1.1. Nornir and Death

What quickly becomes clear is that references to nornir have a tendency to turn up in very strained situations, often carrying connotations of death and suffering. One person deeply regretting the involvement of nornir in human affairs is Kveldúlf, as is shown in a verse (in Ægis saga Skallagrimssonar 24) which he supposedly composed in 880 or 890 (ÍF 2:lii) after his son Börólf died.29

Nú frák norðr í eyju,
norn erum grímm, til snimma
þundr kaus þremja skyndi,
þórólf und lok fóru;
þéttumk þung at þingi
þórs fangvina at ganga,
skjótt munat heftn, þótt hvettimk
huðr, malm-Gnáar-brugðit.
(ÍF 2:60)

I’ve heard that up north in an island,
[the] norn is grim to me,30
Óðinn31 chose him much too soon
þórólf has met his end;
the heaviness of old age has
robbed me of my fighting strength32
revenge will not come quickly
though not for the lack of wanting.

The verse shows a singular norn connected to death in battle33 and we get a clear impression of the emotional cost involved. Significantly, Kveldúlf says that the norn is ‘grim’ to him, leaving it unsaid whether the death has positive or negative value for þórólf, who died in the battle himself. What is stressed in this verse is the emotional cost on the part of the grieving father who is left behind. Kveldúlf’s verse is a typical example of the situations in which people remind themselves that they are at the mercy of the nornir, namely tragic situations.34

Kveldúlf says [the] norn; but whether he believes there to be only one norn or whether he is singling one out from a larger group is uncertain. He then mentions Óðinn as being equally responsible for þórólf’s death, thus grouping Óðinn and the norn together, involved in the same death in similar ways. They are clearly thought

29 AM 162 A ð fol c.1300 and other MSS.
30 The Old Icelandic has neither definite nor indefinite article here, but the English sounds somewhat strange without any article at all.
31 Pundr, an Óðinshett, one of many synonyms for Óðinn (Grímnismál 54).
32 Þórs fangvina, ‘þórr’s female fighting friend’, a kenning for old age (Gylfaginning 46; LP:121).
33 Þórólf died in a struggle against Haraldr hárfagri (Ægis saga 22; ÍF 2:53-54).
34 Apart from the heroic reputation a warrior would leave behind and which would spur him on during a battle, some supernatural female beings, for example valkyrjur, may be seen as an alluring aspect of death in battle (see III.1.3.); cf. also the good draumkona in Gísla saga 30 (see III.1.2.). The norn mentioned by Kveldúlf, however, does not come across as particularly desirable, although it must, again, be taken into account that the stanza is spoken by the grieving father, not the warrior himself.
of as closely connected here, perhaps representing a male and a female aspect of or even personification of death, particularly violent death.\textsuperscript{35}

As will become clear, nornir rarely appear in person but mostly indirectly. Typically, a person refers to something as being the work of the nornir, primarily in the context of death, but we do not actually see them as being present or as carrying out actions in such contexts. The choice of words surrounding nornir is often negative, centring on the harshness of life and death. \textit{Fáfnismál} 11 provides an example:

\begin{verbatim}
Norna dómr
þú munt fyr nesiom hafa
ok ósvinnz apa;
i vatni þú drukknar,
ef í vindi rær:
allt er feigis forad.
\end{verbatim}

The judgement of the nornir
you will have out at sea
the way stupid men die;
you will drown in the water
if you row in a wind:
all is dangerous for one who is fey.

The threat of \textit{norna dómr}, which appears in fact to be a blind motif, is the threat of death, the final and inevitable decision that the nornir make with regard to any human life.\textsuperscript{36} This sort of reference to nornir is typical – brief and threatening.

\textit{Hamðismál} 30 gives a similar example:

\begin{verbatim}
Vel hǫfom vit vegit,
stóndom á val Gotna,
ofan, eggmóðom,\textsuperscript{37}
sem ernir á kvisti!
Góðas hǫfom tírar fengit,
þott skylim nú eða í gær deyia
kveld lifir maðr ekki
eptir kvíð\textsuperscript{38} norna!
\end{verbatim}

We two have fought well,
we stand on Goth corpses
that are weary of the sword-edge,
like eagles on a branch!
We have won great renown
whether we die now or yesterday\textsuperscript{39}
no man lives out the evening
after the nornir give their verdict.

There is a strong sense of inevitability here. The phrase \textit{kvíðr norna} can only mean death, that final decision of the nornir, and both heroes of the poem, Hamðir and Sǫrli, die in the following stanza so that, although they win the fight, their lives are in the hands of the nornir with fatal consequences for them. It is noteworthy that the stanza describes a great victory on the part of the two brothers, hinting at the heroic reputation they have gained from this, and the reference to nornir, whilst coming across as somewhat doomladen, almost has a feeling of satisfaction over a job well

\textsuperscript{35} Johansson (2000:52-53) also sees Óðinn and Urðr as parallel figures, though in a different context: as creators of human beings.

\textsuperscript{36} Kragerud 1981 offers a different interpretation of the nornir in \textit{Fáfnismál}.

\textsuperscript{37} Eggmódum probably means tiredness from loss of blood rather than from fighting.

\textsuperscript{38} Kvíðr has two meanings (both masculine): ‘stomach’ or ‘verdict’, particularly in court cases (Frtz II:374). The image is of a well-digested decision resulting from some consideration.

\textsuperscript{39} Gísli Sigurðsson (1998:364) suggests this should perhaps be understood as ‘tomorrow’ in spite of the use of an expression meaning ‘yesterday.’
done. It may even be that Hamðir, who appears to be the one speaking this verse, finds that it is worth paying with his life for this reputation.

The similar phrase *Urðr mun eigi forðask*, 'no one can escape fate', in a verse in *Íslingenda saga* 286 [136; 142],40 conveys the feeling of something ominous and unavoidable. The verse, which is obviously spelling death for many men in the coming battle, is spoken by a seemingly supernatural woman and occurs as one of many dream visions prior to the battle of Örlygsstaðr.

The context of war and death is strong in *Hamðismál* of which stanza 29 also mentions *grey norn*, 'dogs of the nornir', referring to wolves, and describes how ferocious and uncivilised these 'norn-dogs' are (Dronke 1969:238). Line one in stanza 29 reads: *Ekki hygg ek okkr vera úlfa daemi*, 'We are not ones to follow the example of wolves', yielding the impression that as human masters command their dogs, so nornir command people as though they were dogs.41 Sórlí considers the whole affair less than humane in emotional terms and he seems to feel that he is not in charge of his own actions but that he acts like a dog obeying its master; here the masters are the unyielding nornir and he objects in vain. Nornir are not normally portrayed as giving orders directly to people, but their influence on human life is often described as decision-making or the passing of judgement which may be interpreted as processes similar to giving orders. No other instances link nornir to dogs or wolves42 but the 'norn-dogs' rather recall the *Vöðris grey*, 'Óðinn-dogs', in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana* I 13 and they may simply be beasts of the battlefield.

The phrase *kviðr norna* occurs only in *Hamðismál* 30 yet the metaphor comes close to that of a stanza by Torf-Einarr jarl, supposedly c.890, in *Haralds saga ins hárfagra* 30:43

Rekit hefk Rögnvalds dauða,  
rétt skiptu því nornir,  
nú's folktuðill fallinn,  
at fjóðungi mínun.  
Verpið, snarpir sveinar,  
því sigri vér rððum,  
skatt velk hønum hárðan,  
at Háfætu grjóti.44

I have avenged Rögnvald's death,  
the nornir settled it right,  
my quarter-part in it;  
now the warrior has fallen:  
Brave men, throw –  
for victory is ours;  
it is a hard tax that I take from him,  
– stones up around Háfætr.

41 I am grateful to Vilborg Davíðsdóttir, Háskóli Íslands, for this suggestion.
42 Troll-women are often portrayed with close connections to wolves: *Gyfaginning* 49 has Hyrrokkin riding a wolf to Baldr's funeral and in *Hynndlafljótt* 5 Hynda rides a wolf, recalling the Hunnestad picture-stone in Skåne (Raudvere 2003:34-35). *Gyfaginning* 12 echoes the same idea. Perhaps we are to understand norn in grey norna as a heiti for a supernatural woman, but whatever we make of these references our knowledge is incomplete.
43 Codex Frisianus and others.
The verb in line two, *skipta*, cognate with English 'shift', has several nuances of meaning: 'to change, exchange; to shift, replace' but it can also mean 'to bring to an end' (Frz III:342-344) or 'to share equally' (LP:507). This last meaning occurs in modern Danish in the legal context of inheritance, namely the noun *et skifte*, 'administration or distribution of a deceased person's estate.' This aspect of the word may be highlighted by the fact that Torf-Einarr refers to his quarter-share in avenging his father, possibly to be equalled by a quarter-share of the inheritance.45

In Torf-Einarr's stanza we again see *nornir* bringing death. The attitude in the stanza is uncommon in the sense that the poet appears to have the *nornir* on his side and therefore finds their decision an unequivocally good one; although the stanza is typical by presenting *nornir* in the context of death – Einarr's victory is another man's death – it is untypical in its approach to that fatal judgment of the *nornir*. To agree with the decision of the *nornir* is quite unusual and, although Einarr is obviously the victor, one wonders exactly what he might be saying about himself; clearly, he is not to be taken lightly because where people most often find the decision of the *nornir* hard to accept, he agrees with it.

Some other poems use phrases very similar to Einarr's rétt skiptu því nornir, namely *Atlamál* 36, where the last two lines read: þá hygg ek skop skipto, skildoz vegir peíra, 'then, I think their fates were settled, when their ways parted', and also lines 1 and 3 of stanza 4 of Ingjaldr Geirmundarson's *Brandsflokkr* in *Póðar saga kakala* 17:46 *Skiptu skop sem optar ... ósvífr fira lifi,* 'Fate, unkind as more often, parted the men from their lives'.47 In both cases, the verb *skipta* is employed by the subject *skop*, that is by 'fate' rather than by *nornir*, but the meaning is similar. However, it is possible that Ingjaldr, living in a much later and, not least, Christian period, may be imagining something quite different from the *nornir* when he says *skop*. If Dronke (1969:111) is correct in dating *Atlamál* to the 12th century, perhaps the same could be said for that poem. What happened to the notion of fate as a powerful supernatural force after the coming of Christianity is a separate study altogether; the Anglo-Saxons appear to have successfully christianised some aspects of fate by turning it into 'the will of God'. It seems, however, that Old Norse to a

---

44 The name refers to a man called Hálfdan háleggir.
45 Dronke (1969:215) discusses the parallels between Torf-Einar's stanza and *Hamðismál* 15. The verb *skipta* is also employed in *Hákonarmál* 12 (see below).
46 Króksfjardarbók c.1350-1370. Ingjaldr lived in the 13th century.
larger extent established a new vocabulary with Christianity rather than recycle heathen concepts (Green 1998:374-391).

It is noteworthy that of the phrases encountered so far, *nornir skiptr*, *kvíðr norna* and *norna dómir*, all carry a legal or quasi-legal gloss. Also belonging to this group is stanza 24 of Þjóðóllfr Ór Hvini’s *Ynglingatal*, apparently from the 9th century, found in *Ynglingasaga* 47:

```
Ok til píngs
þríðja jofrí
Hveðrungrs mær
ór heimi bauð,
þás Halfdan,
sás Holtum bjó,
norna dóm.
of notit hafði,
Ok buðlung
á Borrói
sigrhafendr
sídan fólu.
(IIf 26:79)
```

The phrase *þás Halfdanr ... norna dóms of notit hafði* seems odd at first because *norna dóms* refers to his death but makes an unusual combination with the verb *njóta* ‘to have use for, to benefit from’ (Frtz II:827). Exactly how the king ‘benefits’ from his death is unclear but it is quite possible to understand *Hveðrungrs mær* as an alluring otherworldly woman who is inviting the king to her abode, thus conjuring up a set of positive connotations relating to death in battle. *Hveðrungr* is mentioned as an Óðinsheiti in *Pulur*, making it possible to read *Hveðrungrs mær* as a description of a valkyrja; but in *Valuspá* 55, *mogr Hveðrungrs* ‘Hveðrungr’s son’ is understood to be a *kenning* for Fenrisúlfir, whose father is Loki, and *Ynglingatal* 24 would then refer to Loki’s daughter who is, Hel, the female ruler of the underworld (Simek 1993:166). Either way, she is an otherworldly woman strongly associated with death and the positively loaded description of her seems to draw on the enticing aspects of desirable otherworldly women (Quinn 2006:54-57). Furthermore, *njóta* should probably be understood in a more neutral sense of ‘experienced’ or ‘passed through’ rather than with the positive connotations normally conjured up by it.49 The best

---

48 *Píng* is an ‘assembly’ or a ‘meeting’ but can also mean a ‘love-relationship’ (Frtz III:1020).
49 *Njóta* can also mean ‘to have sexual relations with a person of the opposite gender’ (Frtz II:827). For death as a sexual relationship with a supernatural woman, see Steinsland 1997 (especially 97-123).
translation may be that he 'embraced death', as one might say if death is thought to come at the appropriate time.

Another example of this legal vocabulary comes from the legendary *Hervarar saga ok Heidreks* 19:50

We two have been cursed, brother,
I have become your slayer,
that will always be so,
evil is the nornir's judgement.

The situation here is that the two sons of Heidrekr have battled against each other and Angantýr has killed Hlóðr, his brother. Angantýr expresses deep regret for the outcome and he blames the *nornir* for arranging their lives so that they would fight although they were brothers. Underlying their difficulties are issues concerning the right to inherit from their father and when Angantýr refuses to share the inheritance with his brother, Hlóðr feels this as an attack on his honour and sees armed retaliation as the only solution. The *dóm r norna* is again connected to the violent death which has become the inevitable outcome of the brothers' relationship. In our sources, it is common for *nornir* to be blamed when people experience this type of deep crisis brought on by the heavy obligations prescribed by heroic codes of honour.

The 'judgement' or 'legal decision' of the *nornir* appears to be a well-established metaphor for death. One recalls here the legal meaning of a 'sentence' as a punishment imposed by a court, but simultaneously the word has the grammatical meaning of a statement with a subject and a predicate or object. Although these legal references may function primarily as poetic images, it is interesting that even such quasi-legal powers should be put in the hands (or mouths) of feminine figures because women could not sit on a jury or otherwise participate in legal decision-making in ancient Scandinavia. Jesch (1991:190) mentions that: "women took no part in the legal process" and Miller (1990:24) gives a couple of examples: "a chieftaincy [godord] could pass to a woman via inheritance; she was, however, disabled from discharging its duties. Should a chieftaincy fall to a woman, she was to transfer it to a male who was a member of that local Thing who was then to fulfil the duties associated with the position (Grágás Ia 142)" and also that: "The legal affairs of a woman were to be conducted by her *lográðandi*, or legal guardian" (1990:27; cf. 50 Upps UB R 715 c.1650. Earlier MSS (AM 544 4° c.1300-1325; Gks 2845 4° c.1450) do not contain this stanza, which occurs in chapter 14 of the saga in FSN II:67.
Jochens 1993). The relative powerlessness of human women might, on the other hand, in some way contribute to the ideas of very powerful supernatural women, of whom we encounter so many, which perhaps establishes a perceived balance between this world, dominated by masculine power, and the otherworld, dominated by feminine (cf. Price 2002:390-391).

Of the above-quoted stanzas, both Hamðismál 30 and Torf-Einarr mention the nornir in the context of weapon fighting\(^{51}\) while at the same time apparently paraphrasing legal language. The martial aspect combined with the idea of making choices is something they share with disir and valkyrjur but the legal vocabulary seems to be much more pronounced for nornir.\(^{52}\)

The weapon fighting continues in the supposedly 12\(^{th}\) century Krákmál 24:\(^{53}\)

\begin{quote}
Hjoggum vёр meё hjǫrvi.
Hitt sýnisk mёр raunar,
at forþgum fylgjum,
fёр gengr of skǫp norna
(1905:156/6)
\end{quote}

The combination skǫp norna corresponds closely to kviðr norna in Hamðismál, both refer to death in battle, but it leaves out the quasi-legal aspect of nornir. Skǫp (n. pl.) translates as 'fate', that which is 'shaped' or fated for one, and it is cognate with English 'shape' (see also VI.1.2.). The word is a plural form of skap which means a 'shape' or 'form' but also has connotations of 'state', 'condition' or 'state of mind' (C/V:537; AeW:483), just as English 'shape' does. Skǫp does not in itself appear to have any legal semantic content but can mean a 'curse' or 'fatality' (C/V:537), adding a negative slant. The idea of a shaping power seems to convey that fate, in this word, works with a purpose, organising, shaping and arranging things in some coherent order or following some sort of pattern, although the pattern may not be discernible to human eyes (see also VI.).

III.1.1.2. Nornir and Life

The strongly death-related side of the nornir is rather dominant but by no means does it constitute the only significant thing there is to say about them; it is intriguing

\(^{51}\) Alongside these references should be mentioned skjaldar norn, 'norn of the shield', a kenning for 'axe' in the apparently 12\(^{th}\) century Olafs drápa Tryggvasonar 18 (Skj:B1:572-A1:576-7); the sense seemingly being that the axe brings 'death' to the shield.

\(^{52}\) Though see notes 374 and 380.

\(^{53}\) Nks 1824 b 4\(^{o}\) c.1400-1425; the poem itself has been dated to c.1200 (Krákmál 1905:183/33).
that some phrases discussed above can have quite a different semantic content. The phrase *skop norna* turns up also in Hallfreðr vandráðaskáld’s *lausavísur* 10, supposedly c.996, from *Hallfreðar saga* 6.\(^{54}\)

Sás með Sygna raesi
siðr, at blót eru kviðjuð;
verðum flest at forðask
fornhaldin skop norna;
látar allir ýtar
Óðins blót fyr róða;
verð ok neydr frá Njarðar\(^{55}\)
nidjum Krist at blöja.
(ÍF 8:159)

Such is the custom at the Sygna-
king’s, that sacrifice is forbidden;
most of us must avoid
the ancient norn decisions;
all men leave behind
Óðinn’s sacrifice;
I, too, will be forced from Njorðr’s
kin to worship Christ instead.

It is interesting that Hallfreðr, on deciding — reluctantly, judging by the tone of the verse — to become a Christian, describes his former faith by reference to *nornir* as well as to *æsir* (Óðinn) and *vanir* (Njorðr), because *nornir*, unlike *æsir* and *vanir*, apparently did not constitute a group of deities which people would worship or direct cult activities towards.\(^{56}\) Nonetheless, *nornir* must have had a prominent place, certainly in Hallfreðr’s consciousness, as he seems by *skop norna* to refer to his pagan faith as such (Whaley 2003:241-242; Lindow 2001:245). The idea recalls Eilífr Guðrúnarson’s stanza,\(^{57}\) allegedly c.1000, in *Skáldsókur* 52. It is about the ‘king of Rome’, Christ, who sits at Urðarbrunnr, a central place for *nornir* in *Völuspá* and *Snorra-Edda*:

Setbergs kveða sitja
sunnr at Urðar brunni,
svá hefr ramr konungr remðan
Rómbs banda sík lóndum.
(Faulkes 1998:76)

His seat is said to be
south at Urðr’s well,
Rome’s strong king has
strengthened his grip on the
lands.\(^{58}\)

This almost direct parallel between Christ and the *nornir* probably relates to the images of law that surround *nornir* (see IV.2.1. and V.2.).\(^{59}\) The parallel finds some explanation in the fact that there seems to have been a particular liking for the

---

\(^{54}\) Móðruvallabók c.1330-1370 and other MSS.
\(^{55}\) AM 61 fol c.1350-1375, and other MSS of Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar heim, has Njorðr; Móðruvallabók has Freyr.
\(^{56}\) Our knowledge of heathen ritual is incomplete. It is not impossible that some form of worship of *nornir* did take place but the evidence is limited to the *nornagraut* from later traditions, mentioned below.
\(^{57}\) I am grateful to Vésteinn Ólason, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, for references to this passage.
\(^{59}\) Vésteinn Ólason (2000:486-487) presents an interesting argument that it might relate to baptism.
image of Christ in judgement on the part of the Christian Church in the early medieval period of Scandinavia. DuBois (1999:61-62) writes: "Christian theology of the period possessed its own particular views of Jesus as well: In prayer, legend, and iconography, the North European in general favored an image of Christ in judgement, drawing on the imagery of the Gospel of Matthew [25:31-46]." That this Christian legal notion was the one most often employed by early Christianity in Scandinavia would seem to indicate that it was considered a particularly suitable one, which is hardly a surprise given the Old Norse preoccupation with law. When Christ, by Hallfreðr and Eiðfr, is compared by implication to, or even acts as a direct replacement for, the *nornir*, this may point to the strong sense of some quasi-legal aspect of these female supernatural creatures. The heathen beings were replaced by the image of Christ in judgement. Thus, the legal mode of thought was maintained, only in a changed Christianised guise provided by the Gospel itself (see also VI).

One of the most common contexts of *nornir* are situations where people complain about the harsh situations that life presents them with; *Sigurdarkvida in skamma* 5-7 provides an excellent example of this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hon sér at lífi</th>
<th>She had not known</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>lóst ne vissi</td>
<td>any shame in her life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ok at aldrlagi</td>
<td>and no harm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ekki grand,</td>
<td>that would cause death,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vamm þat er væri</td>
<td>no disgrace that was</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eðða vera hýgði</td>
<td>nor that she could think of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gengó þess á milli</td>
<td>the terrible fates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grimmar urðr!</td>
<td>intervened in this!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ein sat hon úti</th>
<th>Outside she sat alone</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>aptan dags,</td>
<td>in the evening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nam hon svá bert</td>
<td>then she began</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>um at mælaz:</td>
<td>to speak openly:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Hafa skal ek Sigurð,</td>
<td>'I shall have Sigurð,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eðða þó svelti</td>
<td>or I shall die,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mög frumungan,</td>
<td>the young man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mér á armi!</td>
<td>in my arms!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Orð mæltak nú – | The words I spoke now, |
| lórómk eptir þess: | I will regret later |

---

60 Green (1998:387) gives a similar example from Old English: "How suitable [*metod*] was for Christian use is clear from its formation from a verb signifying judgment or decree, for this qualified it admirably as an epithet for God as a judge over men, meting out reward and punishment for their deeds."

61 Miller (1990:221), as an example of this preoccupation, states that: "Law played a role in more than the definition and processing of disputes. ... Norms of good kinship provided the basis for imposing legal obligation, which in turn buttressed the norms and so on in continual feedback of mutual influence."
The stanzas describe Brynhildr’s reaction following the deception of herself and Sigurðr, also portrayed in Völsungasaga 30-32, where the promises they have given one another are broken through the treacherous actions of the Gjukungar. In the above-quoted stanzas, Brynhildr blames the nornir for the negative turn of events, calling them liótar nornir, ‘loathsome nornir’; she does not at all blame human actions for what has happened to her, almost as though the people involved could not have acted otherwise or had no control over their own actions. She herself now embarks on a horrific revenge expedition, spreading death all around her and in a sense perhaps emulating the liótar nornir or even fulfilling their work, feeling that she herself does not have a choice of action either. In some way, this goes well with Hallfreðr’s conception of nornir as central to the heathen way of life; he equates them with heathen faith as such and Brynhildr apparently holds them responsible for the heroic code of honour that forces her to act the way she does. It was Christianity that brought about the changes to the Old Norse conception of what was morally correct behaviour.

The first line of stanza 6: Ein sat hon úti mirrors exactly the first line in Völspa 28 where the völva appears to be in the middle of a prophesying ritual and begins to speak in line four of the stanza, as does Brynhildr. Furthermore, the first two lines of stanza 7: Ord mælak nű - idromk eptir þess, ‘the words I spoke now - I will regret later’, add to the feeling that Brynhildr is in fact conducting a ritual prophecy, albeit one that is painful to herself as she notes already now that she will regret it later on. Caught in a situation from which there is no pleasant way out, she feels forced to do terrible things and she blames the nornir for it.

Another interesting word here is urðr in stanza 5, which is quite unusual, seemingly a plural of urðr ‘fate’. The word rarely occurs in the nominative form: urðr (this happens mainly when it is used as the proper name of one of the nornir: Urðr), but mostly in the genitive form: urðar, attaching itself to something which is a source

---

62 All references to Völsungasaga are to Grimstad 2000, from Nks 1824 b 4° c.1400-1425.
63 In Völsungasaga 21-22 (Grimstad 2000:146-155) Brynhildr plays the role attributed to Sigrdrífa in Sigdrifumál. She also has a past as a valkyrja.
64 Útiseta is the practice of sitting outside in the night in order to conduct magic; Norges Gamle Løve I:19, II:497; Finnur Jónsson 1892; Ström (1985:227); de Vries (1956:328-330); Price (2002:168-169).
or form of fate (Urðarbrunnr, 'well of fate' – Völuspá 19; urðar megin, 'power or force of fate' – Guðrúnarkviða II 21; urðar orð, 'words of fate' – Fjölsvinnsmál 47; urðar lokur, 'fate's or woman's calling song' – Grogadr 7; urðar máni, 'fateful moon' – Eyrbyggja saga 52). The above quoted stanza probably provides the only example of the plural form urðir and it seems to be synonymous with nornir. There is no doubt about how Brynhildr feels here either, calling them grimmar urðir, much as she refers to liótar nornir a little later. The situation is not an untypical one for nornir to appear in – when life takes a harsh turn they are there to be blamed for it, but what is also clear here is that one cannot argue or negotiate with them. The decision of the nornir operates in ways akin to laws of nature; they are unbendable.

A similar situation of emotions running high draws on the same image, namely in Guðrúnarhvölt 13:

Gekk ek til strandar,  I went to the shore,
gróm vark nornom,  I was furious at the nornir,
vilda ek hrinda  I would not accept
stríð grið beira –  their harsh truce offering.
hófo mik, né drekþo,  The great waves lifted me,
hávar báror:  did not drown me:
því ek land um sték,  so that I came to land,
at lifa skyldak.  I was supposed to live.

This poem opens with Guðrún urging her sons to avenge the death of their sister but after she has successfully seen them off she breaks into a long list of woes, recounting all her past sorrows. The situation recalls that of Brynhildr in that Guðrún feels both forced into horrible acts of revenge and feels tremendous grief even as she does it, caught in a tragic combination of necessity and inhumanity. She clearly feels the nornir have given her too many negative experiences and decides to end her own life, only to realize that the nornir have more in store for her, and her suicide attempt is unsuccessful. In this case, it seems that the hard decision of the nornir consists of not taking away life but, indeed, keeping Guðrún alive, as she appears to be of the opinion that this will simply prolong her suffering. The nornir's decision here maintains a negative colouring.

A somewhat enigmatic reference to nornir occurs in Guðrúnarkviða II 38:

Svá mik nýliga  So recently the nornir
nornir vekja,  have awakened me,
vílsinnis spá  he wanted me to interpret

65 Finnur Jónsson suggests 'unyielding decisions of fate' for urðar lokur (LP:427); I lean more towards 'woman's calling song', suggested by Mitchell (2004:69-70), but see also Jón Hnefill Adalsteinsson 2001.
vildi at ek réða:  
prophecies of harm:  
hugða ek þik, Guðrún,  
"I thought that you, Guðrún,  
Giúka dóttir,  
daughter of Giúki,  
læbløndnom híor  
rán me through  
leggia mik í gögnom.  
with a treacherous sword."

The context is one of impending death. Atli asks Guðrún to interpret his dreams and she deliberately misinterprets them so that he thinks they are not so bad after all. To find nornir involved in the scene is not surprising, though the meaning of the phrase that they 'have awakened' Guðrún is unclear. Perhaps it is a way of describing her extreme state of mind, thinking of nothing other than how she can avenge Sigurðr and how little she cares for Atli. At any rate, to be awakened by nornir is not something that seems to produce gentle thoughts, quite the contrary if we are to judge by Guðrún's reaction to Atli's dreams.

Until now, nornir have been discussed almost exclusively in terms of their negative aspects but, although it may be lopsided, the image of nornir is not one-dimensional (see also IV.).

These feminine beings are attached not only to death but also to birth so that they really encompass transition as such: both the beginning and the end. Fáfnismál 12 mentions nornir apparently in connection with birth:66

Segðu mér, Fáfnir,  
Tell me, Fáfnir,  
alz þik fróðan kveða  
as men say that you are wise  
ok vel mart vita:  
and know a great deal:  
hveriar ro þær nornir,67  
who are those nornir  
er nauðgonglar ro  
who go to those in need  
ok kiósa mæðr frá mœgom?68  
and separate mothers from sons?

On the one hand, the phrasing in line 4 'who are those nornir' combined with the fact that very similar lines occur elsewhere (see note 67), referring to meyjar, 'maidens', makes it possible that the word 'nornir' is being used as a heiti here. It is quite possible to read the line as: 'who are those supernatural women', asking more generally. The reply in stanza 13 (see IV.1.2.) emphasises that there are different

66 That Fáfnismál 12 does actually refer to birth is not incontestable but hinges on our understanding of the word nauðgonglar. It could probably also mean separation at death; I am grateful to John Lindow, University of California, Berkeley, for this observation. This stanza is the only old evidence for nornir as potential helpers at birth. In Helgakviða Hundingsbana I (and the late Norna-Gests þátti) they are present to determine the child's fate, not to assist during the birth (KLE 5:431).

67 Very similar lines occur in Baldurs draumar 12 and Vafþrúnistsmál 48.

68 Völuspassesaga 18 has: hveriar er þær nornir er kíosa maug(u) fra mœðrum (Grimstad 2000:140). Both phrases strongly recall Sigdrifumál 9: leysa kind frá konom, where separation also seems to be the issue (see III.1.2). The phrases are probably formulaic.
kinds of nornir, which may also simply be taken to mean that there are differences between separate categories of supernatural women. However, the information given in Fáfnismál 13 is not easily matched with information supplied by other sources. On the other hand, the consistent use of the word 'norn' in stanzas 11, 12 and 13 of Fáfnismál does make it plausible that it does actually refer to nornir.

The role attributed to nornir in Fáfnismál 12 is somewhat ambiguous and sums up their double-sided nature rather well: they bring life but they also take it away. The combination kiösa frá is unusual and it is not entirely clear what the nornir do in this stanza, making translation of it difficult, but two options look possible: either it simply means that at birth nornir separate the child from its mother, making them into two individual beings (KLE 5:431-432), or it means that nornir determine whether the mother or the child will live (Gísli Sigurðsson 1998:233), leaving the option of translation as either 'choose' or 'separate'.

As noted above, the literature shows little evidence of worship or any sort of cult attached to them but, in spite of their stern qualities, it is hard to imagine that people did not at least attempt to influence decisions made by nornir. A few references from later traditions speak of a special food, nornagraut, 'norn-porridge', which had its place in relation to childbirth. Apparently, a custom involving this food existed in folk tradition until fairly recent times in certain areas of Scandinavia: Setesdal in Norway (Skar 1909:120; Reichborn-Kjennerud 1933:63; 76) and the Faroe Islands (Olsen 1957:156; Lid 1946:18; de Vries 1956:272). Ström says about nornagraut: Den tillreddes vid ett barns födelse och har ansetts vara ett ursprungligt offer till nornorna, 'It was prepared when a child was born and has been considered to have originally been a sacrifice to the nornir' (Ström 1985:202). Noteworthy here is that Bäckman (1984:31-32) mentions what may be the very same tradition

---

69 This strongly recalls the name of the Saami birth-goddess Sarakka, supposedly deriving from a verb sarét, 'to cleave', who is said to separate the child from its mother at birth (Ränk 1955:21-22).

70 In Oddrúnagrátar 9 Frigg and Freyia are called upon to help at birth (see IV.2.1. on Frigg), in Sigdrifumál 9 disir. On Frigg and Freyia, see Ingunn Ásdisardóttir 2007; Grundy 1996.
amongst the Saami, involving a group of female supernatural beings known as the akkas.\textsuperscript{71}

Furthermore it is said that when the woman’s time has come Madder-Akka and her daughter Sarakka will stay at the woman’s side and aid her. For this assistance they get offerings from the mother in the form of animal sacrifices. Immediately after the birth a meal will be prepared, called Sarakka-porridge which the mother will eat together with her married female friends. Three pegs are put into the porridge, one white, the other black, and the third with three rings carved on it. After the porridge is eaten the pegs are placed under the threshold for three nights and if the black one disappears the mother or her child will die soon, but if the white one is gone the mother knows that both of them will stay alive.\textsuperscript{72}

Ränk adds the following:

In this porridge three wooden matches were stuck, one of them with a cloven end, which evidently had some meaning connected with the health of the mother and child.

(Ränk 1955:24)

Troels Lund, speaking of 16\textsuperscript{th} century Denmark, also knows the custom:

Hos mange gammeldags var der anbragt tre Pinde i den [Barsel-Grøden], der maaske oprindelig havde haft Hentydning til de tre Norner, Skæbnens Gudinder; Barnets Lykke antoges i hvert fald at staa i et vist Forhold til disse Pinde.

(Lund 1908:53)

"In many old-fashioned homes there were three sticks placed in it [the childbirth-porridge], which may originally have alluded to the three nornir, goddesses of fate; at any rate, the child’s fortune was placed in a certain relationship to these sticks."

(My translation)

The descriptions given by Bäckman and Lund are interesting as it seems that Fáfnismál 12 gains some further explanation from the Saami tradition.

Jacobsen and Matras’ Faroese-Danish dictionary (1961:299) lists both nornagreytur, ‘norn-porridge’: det første Maaltid, som en Kvinde nyder efter en

\textsuperscript{71} I am grateful to Tom DuBois, University of Wisconsin, Madison, for this reference.

\textsuperscript{72} Nothing is said about what happens if the third peg is gone. It is interesting to note that one peg is black, one is white whilst the third one is different (see also III.1.2. and III.2.2.). Saxo uses a similar idea in the story of Ericus and Rollerus, Gesta Danorum Book 5 (2,6-2,7), where Craca prepares a meal for her son Rollerus and stepson Ericus. Rollerus (though logically it should be Ericus) happens to see her: "Surveying the interior, he spied his mother stirring an ugly-looking cauldron of stew. He looked up and saw also hanging aloft from a thin rope three snakes, from whose jaws putrid saliva dripped steadily to provide liquid for the recipe. Two of them were pitch black, the third had whitish scales and was suspended a little higher than the others" (Saxo Grammaticus 1979:124). As a result, one half of the food is black, the other white; the dark food contains special powers and Craca intended it for Rollerus, but Ericus eats it and thereby gains knowledge, eloquence, magical protection in combat as well as the ability to understand animal languages.
Barnefødsel, 'the first meal taken by a woman after giving birth' and nornaspor, 'norn-print': hvid Plet på Negl (siges at forkynde et Menneskes Skæbne), 'white spot on a nail (is said to prophesy the fate of a person).’ Olsen comments on this: Disse ord synes henholdsvis & sikte til offer som tilkom nornene, og til den hjelpende nornehånd ved forløsning, ‘These words appear to indicate, respectively, a sacrifice to the nornir and the helping norn’s hand at birth’ (Olsen 1957:156). This seems oddly parallel to the cutting of runes on the norn’s nail in Sigdrifumál 17: á nornar naglr. In the light of how nornir are described in the poetry, one might wonder whether their hand is indeed a helping one, but at the same time we must keep in mind that births merit a lot less attention in the sources than do deaths. Somehow, birth seems to fall under a heading of everyday activities whereas death is something to talk about, especially, of course, heroic or violent death. This might partly explain why we hear so much more about nornir in the context of deaths: only few births are described.

The one image that keeps reoccurring with nornir is that of making choices, making decisions or passing judgement, always in transitional situations: birth, death, battle – typically situations where people feel that matters are not in their own hands. Whether there is such a thing as a choice which is not in one way or another intermediate seems doubtful; is that not the nature of a choice – that it represents some sort of threshold? At such crucial times, people appear particularly prone to feel the influence of nornir on their lives.

The picture seems somewhat lop-sided: nornir are in charge of both birth and death but the tendency is to remember them primarily when lives are ending rather than beginning. It further seems that they are there to be blamed when events take rough turns (Guðrúnarhvöt 13, Sigurðarkviða in skamma 5-7, Kveldúlf). In terms of human emotion, this is not an uncommon type of reaction, for example lots of people will admit that they pray only when they are in trouble and that as long as things are going well they do not think much about praying. What it means in Old

---

73 Sigdrifumál 15-17 lists many strange things to cut runes on, including Sleipnr’s teeth, wolf’s claw, owl’s beak. The purpose of the runes is not stated but they would seem to be cut for protection.

74 However, we must keep in mind that, of the older sources, only Fáfnismál connects nornir directly with birth, if that reading is even correct, though see also III.2.1.

75 Nornir appear to be beyond physical presence or actions; their decisions, judgements, words are manifested in human actions whilst they themselves remain intangible. So it is also with spoken words, they do not have a physical form, they only exist at the moment of speaking but their effects will continue to be felt long after, especially if they are malicious words.
Norse literature is that the nornir have a tendency to appear almost as a metaphor for emotionally taxing events and circumstances that are often tragic from the point of view of those involved: “The natural inclination to look for reasons when things go wrong burdened the norns especially with the responsibility for cruel fate” (Mundal 1993:626). This is certainly true, it is rare to hear someone say that the nornir were good to him or her because the portrayal of them often is so sinister. Still, we should be careful about jumping to easy conclusions; there are many more things to say about nornir.

Also interesting to note is that, like dfsir and valkyrjur, they hardly ever turn up in mythological poems. Outwith Völuspá (which probably describes them, but does not use the word ‘nornir’), they are mentioned almost only in heroic and skaldic poetry.

III.1.2. Dísir

Dísir, like nornir, are a collective group of female beings connected to issues of birth and death but also to fecundity. The situation surrounding them is somewhat different because there are so many more references to them; the word dísir turns up in the literature, both prose and poetry, far more frequently than does the word nornir. This means that it is not possible in this thesis to give a complete overview of these beings; the scope has to be limited to pointing towards differences and similarities between dísir and nornir as well as attempting to give a description of the general nature of dísir. The texts quoted in this chapter have been selected with the aim of achieving a basic understanding of the nature of dísir and the semantic content of the word.

It can be difficult to gauge which text passages concern actual dísir and which use the term as a kenning because kenningar based on the word dís are so much more frequent than ones based on the word norm. Therefore, dís may refer simply to a woman or a female character of some kind but it can also refer to this special group of supernatural women; these supernatural ones are regarded here as the ‘proper’ dísir, the ones to whom the semantic content of the word originally refers.

---
77 The word norm occurs as a kenning for woman: nesta norm, ‘norm of the brooch’ in one of Egil Skallagrímsson’s lausavísur (Egils saga 56; IF 2:156), as does possibly the name Urðr: urðar lokur, ‘woman’s calling song’ or perhaps ‘magical incantation’ in Grógaðr 7 (Mitchell 2004:69-70). In Skáldskaparmál 31 Snorri says: Kona er ok kend við allar Ásynjur eða nornir eða dísir, ‘Kennings for woman can be any of the ásynjur or nornir or dísir’(Faulkes 1998:40).
The attempt to avoid quoting texts which use the word merely as a *kenning* is deliberate.

The etymology offered by de Vries (AeW:77) suggests that the word simply refers to a 'goddess, feminine divine being', *weibliche götterwesen*, a very general definition, but mentions that it might be related to Old Indic *dhiṣanyant* - 'attentive, devout'. Pokorny (1959:955) does not mention Old Norse *dis* but derives *dhiṣanyant-* from an s-form of *dhī* 'to see' from which derive also words for wisdom, thought, and insight, which could be relevant to our understanding of *disir*. Gunnell (2004a:130), on mentioning *fylgjur*, says:

*Dīsir*, on the other hand, seem to have been more powerful. Like the *valkyrjur*, these were female spirits with male characteristics (they ride horses, and ... "hunt" down victims). ... Unlike the other two types of beings [*fylgjur* and *valkyrjur*], however, the *disir* sometimes receive sacrifices, have place names dedicated to them, and appear to protect not only individuals but also families and even nations.

Raudvere (2003:68) holds a similar opinion:

Disernas funktion verkar närmast ha varit att värna äring och produktion på en viss plats. De är mer förbundna till landskapet och har en mer utpräglad beskyddande roll än de mer abstrakta fylgjorna. De senare är relaterade till en individ eller familj, medan diserna verkar vara primärt kopplade till en bestämd plats.

'The function of the *disir* seems to have been the protection of the crops and production in a certain place. They are more closely related to the landscape and have a more markedly protective role than the more abstract *fylgjur*. The latter are connected to an individual or family, while the *disir* seem primarily connected to a certain place.'

(My translation)

*Dīsir* appear to have been a kind of protective spirits, possibly female ancestor spirits, and in the times of Old Norse beliefs they were surrounded by a cult. People would sacrifice to them at the *disablot* (it may be telling that we never hear of any *nornablöt*), which were festivals held at certain seasons, namely at the beginning of winter and seemingly also in spring (Gunnell 2004a:131-134). Such festivals are mentioned in several sources but people would apparently also call on the assistance of *disir* in certain other less predictable situations, including childbirth, as in *Sigrdrísumál* 9:

```
Biagrúnar skaltu nema
ef þú biarga vilt
```

Helping-runes you must know
if you want to help

---

78 *Egil’s saga* 44 and *Víga-Glums saga* 6 mention *disir* in connection with the Winter Nights celebration; *Ynglinga saga* 29 seemingly in connection with spring.
ok leysa kind frá konom;\textsuperscript{79} and release children from women; 
á lófa þær skal rísta\textsuperscript{10} they should be cut on the palm
ok of lóð spenna and put around the joints
ok biðja þá dísir duga.

In this stanza, they, like nornir, act as givers and takers of life and in this particular instance they appear to provide protection at the beginning of a new life. They also seem rather practically minded, able to step into the middle of the situation in order to lend their assistance. That one should ask for the help of the dísir reveals that they were, in fact, considered willing to help, and this might give them a more positive image than that of the nornir, whose involvement people would rather prefer to avoid and never seem to ask for. Having said this, the “association with impending death seems to be a common place of the usage of the term ‘dísir’ in eddic poetry”\textsuperscript{(Lindow 2001:95)} and, like nornir, they are rarely mentioned in the mythological poems.

\textit{Atlamál} 28 speaks of dísir in connection with ‘dead women’ who came at night and wanted to ‘choose’ Gunnar:

\begin{quote}
Konor hugóak dauðar 
  I thought that dead women
koma í nött hingat, 
  came here in the night
værit vart búnar, 
  they were scantily clad
vildi þík kiósa, 
  invite you very soon
byði þér bráliga 
  to their benches:
til bekía sinna: 
  I say that useless
ek kveð aflima 
  the dísir have become for you!
orðnar þér dísir!
\end{quote}

In this particular instance, certain aspects common to dísir, nornir and valkyrjur seem to merge into one: ‘dead women’, those supernatural women who choose the time of death for people. Certainly, the mood in this stanza is ominous; yet, we may also detect a kind of opposition between the ‘dead women’ – whoever may hide behind the label – and the dísir who are unable to help Gunnar against the ‘dead women’. The impression is that dísir are protective spirits of some sort, perhaps even guardians of life in opposition to the figures that represent death here. However, it is also possible that the ‘dead women’ are themselves dísir so that the stanza may hint at some sort of opposition between one group of dísir and another or between conflicting aspects of what the dísir stand for (cf. \textit{Þiðranda þáttr ok Pórhalls}

\textsuperscript{79} This line strongly recalls \textit{Fáfnismál} 12: kiósa maedar frá megum (see III.1.1.).
\textsuperscript{80} Cutting runes on the palm of the hand at birth is also referred to in \textit{Sigrdrífumál} 16: á lausnar lófa, ‘on hands that deliver.’
discussed below). Konor dauðar is not a common term; taken literally, it might refer to ancestress figures but also recalls the draumkonor of Gísla saga Súrssonar\textsuperscript{81} (see below). Clearly, their purpose here is to signal Gunnar's impending death and bring him to the realm of the dead, and the idea of a choice is again emphasised as is otherworldly female power.

A somewhat similar reference to disir crops up in Hamðismál\textsuperscript{28}:

\begin{verbatim}
Af væri nú haufuð, Off his head would now be
  ef Erpr lifði, if Erpr were alive,
  bróðir okkarr inn þóðfrækni, our brother the battle-bold one
  er vit á braut vógum whom we killed on the way
  verr inn þvífrækni the man courageous in battle
  - hvótumk at disir -, disir encouraged me -
  gumi inn gunnhelgi the man untouchable in battle
  - górdómz at víglí. we prepared to kill him.
\end{verbatim}

We encounter here that very sinister aspect of disir in which they seem to overlap quite significantly with the dark sides of nornir. Hamðir says that the disir urged him to kill his brother Erpr and now he regrets it because it means that Erpr cannot help him and Sǫrrli in their fight against Íormunrekkr. This would seem an entirely fitting context for nornir to appear in but for the fact that, apparently, nornir simply decide, they do not urge people to carry out certain actions.\textsuperscript{82} Still, disir embody the duality more clearly than nornir do because disir often appear in clearly benign roles as well as clearly sinister ones; the portrayal of nornir is less balanced, weighted more towards the negative end.

The term spáðís is at times used in fornaldarsögur, for example Völsungasaga 11, where it is said of Sigmundr: Enn sva hilfðv honum hans spáðísir at hann varð ecki sár. ok engi kunni taul hversv margr maðr fell fyrir honum (Grimstad 2000:116), 'But his spáðísir shielded him so that he was not wounded, and no one could count how many men fell at his hand' (my translation). Raudvere (2003:68) suggests that the term refers to a völva but that seems unlikely in this case where they act more like protectresses than seeresses. Byock (1990:53) translates the word as 'spaewomen' and notes: "Spáðísir is often used in a generalised or metaphorical sense to refer to valkyries, Norns, or goddesses. Here it would seem to be Norns, deciding men's fate" (Byock 1990:116). Also Grimstad translates as 'norns' (2000:117). I agree that the term is vague but I disagree with the translation 'norns'. These spáðísir, protecting

\textsuperscript{81} All references to Gísla saga are to the shorter of the two versions; AM 556 a 4° c.1475-1500.

\textsuperscript{82} Unless this is how we are meant to understand the verb veðia in Guðrúnarkviða II 38 (see III.1.1.2.).
their chosen hero, act more like fylgjur, valkyrjur or galdranornir, but not like örlaganornir.83

This extended use of the term makes it doubly difficult to discover the exact nature of these beings because the word disir itself is no guarantee that the talk is actually of disir at all. The word can be employed simply in the meaning 'woman', particularly in kenningar, but some instances look as if they indicate more than just femininity. The epithets Vanadís for Freyia (Gylfaginning 34) and Qndurðís for Skaði (Háleygiatal 4, allegedly c.985; Gylfaginning 23) are interesting because both of these are highly independent and highly honoured goddesses. Freyia 'chooses half the slain' (Grímnmál 14), thus seeming to appear as a female counterpart of Ódinn (perhaps recalling the norr in Kveldúlf's verse?; cf. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 2006), and Vanadís could be a name drawing on the connection between fecundity and death twice over – through vanir and through disir. Similarly, Qndurðís, 'Skiing-dis' may show Skaði as a female counterpart of Ullr (Simek 1993:286-287), god of archery and skiing (Gylfaginning 31), her connection to disir provided by her fiercely independent and masculine behaviour when she turns up among the gods, weapons and all, seeking revenge for her father (Skáldskaparmál G56). This blend of independent femininity and clearly masculine elements is mirrored in the female disir who ride horses and carry swords.

The cult of the disir, mentioned above, appears to have been a fertility cult, portraying two sides of these supernatural women, one of which is a life-enhancing and life-giving side while the complementary other side relates to death and the taking of life. This double nature is clearly pictured in the story of Þiðrandi þáttr ok Pórhalls.84 In this tale, Þiðrandi, against the advice of his father, answers a knock on the door during the Winter Nights. The text continues:

Hann tók sverð í hönd sér ok gekk út. Hann sá engan mann. Kom honum þat í hug, at nökkurir boðsmenn mundu hafa riðit fyrir heim til bæjarins ok riðit slean aftir í móti þeim, er seinna riðu. Hann gekk þá undir viðarkostinn ok heyrði at riðit var norðan á völlinu. Hann sá, at þat váru konur niu ok váru allar í svörtum klæðum ok hoffu bragðin sverð í höndum. Hann heyrði ok at riðit var sunnan á völlinnu. Þar váru ok niu konur, allar í ljósum klæðum ok á hvíttum hestum. Þá vildi Þiðrandi snúa inn aftir ok segja mönum sýnina. Þá bar þar at fyrir konunum, þær inar sverkklæðdu, ok sóttu at honum, en hann varðist vel ok drengilega.
(ÍS 10:376)

83 Sigmundr, incidentally, is killed at the intervention of Ódinn in the next sentence.
84 From Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar hin mesta in Flateyjarbók c.1387-1395.
'He took a sword in his hand, and went out. He could see no one. It struck him that some guests might have ridden ahead to the farm, and then ridden back to those who were riding more slowly. He then went under the wood pile, and heard the sound of riding coming into the field from the north. He saw that there were nine women, all of them in black clothes and with drawn swords in their hands. He also heard the sound of riding into the field from the south. There were another nine women, all of them in light clothes, and on white horses. Then Thidrandi wanted to go back in and tell people about the sight, but the women, those dressed in black, got to him first and they attacked him. He defended himself bravely.'

(CSI II:460-461)

In spite of his defence, Piðrandi is killed by the mysterious women.85

The incident is interpreted in the text itself as an approaching change of religion where the black riders symbolise the old faith and the white ones represent the new faith, Christianity, which is not yet strong enough to save the life of Piðrandi, lending the story a very strong Christian flavour.86 While this could be a later, rationalising interpretation of the disir, who are also referred to as fylgjur in the text (ÍS 10:377), dividing them into two groups of which one is dark and evil whilst the other is bright and benign, it still conveys their double-sided nature: disir have the potential of being both, just as nornir have.

In Piðranda þátr the disir come riding, indicating their connection to horses and possibly portraying the horse in a role of mediator between the living and the dead.87

In Gísla saga 30, while Gisli has his nightly visitations from a good and an evil dream-woman, the good dream-woman appears to him one night, riding a grey horse and showing him the otherworld:

85 A remarkably similar incident occurs in Laxdæla saga 37 (ÍF 5:105-106) where Kotkell and Grima carry out a seiðr ritual in order to harm and insult Hrútr. Hrútr tells everyone on his farm that they must stay indoors during the night when the ritual is performed, but his favourite son Kári goes outside and walks towards the seiðr which kills him. The text says that Kotkell and his family sing beautifully; it also says that they come from the Hebrides (Laxdæla 35) and so they are possibly Christians. Their unfamiliar Christian singing might be interpreted as malicious magic by their heathen neighbours who are clearly at odds with them (Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 2001:104-105). Whatever the case, the ritual involves human beings (of both genders) and there are no supernatural women involved. For a discussion of the Kotkell episodes, see Sayers (1992b:133-140); Raudvere (2003:147-152).

86 The Scottish legend of Michael Scot contains a detail extraordinarily similar to Piðrandi’s death. About Michael Scot it is said that: “On his death-bed he told his friends to place his body on a hillock. Three ravens and three doves would be seen flying towards it; if the ravens were first the body was to be burned, but if the doves were first it was to receive Christian burial. The ravens were foremost, but in their hurry flew beyond their mark” (Campbell 1900:288). The black and white birds are interesting insofar as ravens in Old Norse tradition are associated with Óðinn, battlefields and corpses. The doves are a Christian symbol, but they are significant as white birds in opposition to, yet somehow equal to, the ravens (see III.2.2.).

87 Loumand 2005 discusses the horse in this role.
Einhverja nótt er þat enn, at Gísla dreymir, at konan sú in betri kom at honum. Hon sýndisk honum ríða grám hesti ok býdr honum með sér at fara til síns innis, ok þat þekkisk hann. Þau koma nú at húsi einu, því er nær var sem höll væri, ok leiðir hon hann inn í húsí ok þóttu honum þar vera heggendi í pollum ok vel um búit. Hon bað þau þar vera ok una sér vel, - "ok skaltu hingat fara, þá er þú andask," sagði hon, "ok njóta hér fjár ok farsaelu."

(IF 6:94)

'One night, Gisli dreamt again that the good dream-woman came to him. She was riding a grey horse, and she invited him to come home with her, to which he agreed. They arrived at a house, which was more like a great hall, and she led him inside. He saw cushions on the raised benches and the whole place was beautifully decorated. She told him they would stay here and take their pleasure - "and this is where you will come when you die," she said, "and enjoy wealth and great happiness."

(CSI II:38)

The evil dream-woman has quite different ideas in mind in chapter 33:

"Pat dreymóði mik enn," sagði Gíslí, "at sjá kona kom til mín ok batt á hófuð mér dreyra húfu ok þó áðr hófuð mitt í blóði ok jós á mik allan, svá at ek varð alblóðugr."

(IF 6:103)

'Then in a second dream,' he said, 'this woman came to me and tied a blood-stained cap on my head, and before that she bathed my head in blood and poured it all over me, covering me in gore.'

(CSI II:42)

These draumkonur are clearly otherworldly messengers and the appearances of a good and an evil dream-woman bear some resemblance to the black and white disir in biðranda þáttir as well as to the double-sided nature of many kinds of supernatural women. The grey colour of the horse recalls Sleipnir, the eight-legged horse that can cross the borders to the otherworld, and the disir on their horses seem to belong to this in-between area, the borders of this world and the next, supernatural women in control of human life and death who mediate between the known and the unknown worlds.

Disir appear to have been some kind of protective spirits and, like nornir, the tendency is for them to appear and act as a collective whole rather than as individually named beings and, like valkyrjur, they seem at times attached particularly to one specific person. The fact that there was a cult of them gives the disir at least a sheen of being approachable – if people sacrifice to them then this must be because they hope somehow to influence them. Disir are seemingly relatively easier to reach and to enter into some sort of dialogue with than are
nornir, and it is possible that the extensive use of the word dis is indicative of a type of being with whom people felt more comfortable, who were somehow present in everyday life and who therefore seemed much more familiar than the unapproachable nornir whom, as has been indicated, one could hardly hope to influence anyway.

III.1.3. Valkyrjur

Valkyrjur are a third group of related but nevertheless separate beings. The word valkyrja is generally taken to have quite a specific meaning, namely: 'chooser of the slain' (from valr [m] 'men slain in battle', and kiósa 'to choose'). This interpretation goes a long way in explaining how they are most commonly understood: they are female supernatural battle spirits deciding who will be slain in battle (Simek 1993:349; Lindow 2001:95; Stefánsson 2005:252; Price 2002:331; Damico 1984:44). They are mentioned in heroic and skaldic poetry and also fornaldarsögur but not in Íslendingasögur; like nornir, they apparently belong in some mythical realm. As will be seen, however, a curious aspect of this explanation is that choosing the slain rarely seems to be what they actually do.88

Like disir, valkyrjur are mentioned more frequently in the sources than are nornir, which means that a small selection of references to them will have to suffice here.

Three skaldic poems clearly mention valkyrjur and as these are probably our earliest references to this type of being they are particularly relevant to an attempt at understanding what they really are. Þorbjörn hornklofi's Haraldskvæði (Hrafnsmál) 1-3, supposedly c.900, in Noregs konungatal 2, is in all likelihood the oldest:

| Hlýði hringberendr, | Listen, ring-carriers, |
| meðan ek frá Haraldi segi | while of Haraldr |
| odda ípróttir | I will tell his many deeds, |
| enum afar-auðga; | the very wealthy one; |
| fra möllum munk segja, | I will tell of the words |
| þeim es ek mey heyrða, | which I heard from a maiden, |
| hvíta haddbjarta | white, with very fair hair, |
| es við hrafn dæméli. | who was talking to a raven. |

Vitr þóttisk valkyrja, The valkyrja seemed wise,
verar né óru þekkir men were not dear to,
svá enni fránleitu, the keen-eyed one,
es foglsrœdd kunni; who understood bird speech;
kvaddi en glæshvarma she of the fair eye lashes

The poem gives an interesting portrayal of a *valkyrja*: she is a fair maiden who talks to a raven about a recent battle.\(^9\) She asks the raven why it has blood on its beak, flesh in its claws and a stench of death about it; the bird then begins to describe the events leading up to the battle. She herself is not involved in the fighting at all, neither is she present on the battlefield and she only speaks to the raven afterwards. In fact, she appears to be a literary construct or an otherworldly mediator: Þorbjörn displaces the perspective to her, who understands the language of birds, and she in turn displaces it to the raven. It is an elaborate introduction, taking up three stanzas before the action begins, and this strange woman figures only as a linguistic interpreter between Þorbjörn and a talking raven, she apparently has no direct connection to the fighting.\(^9\)

The next reference is in *Eiríksmál* 1, supposedly c.950 (Skj BI:164), in *Noregs konungatal* 8 and *Skáldskaparmál* 2, where *valkyrjur* appear as bar-maids in Valhöll, bringing wine to the warriors there:

```
Hvat er þat drauma       What dreams are these,
Ek hugðumk fyr dag rísa  I thought I got up before day
Valhöll at rýðja          to clear up Valhöll
fyrir vegn folki,         for slain warriors,
vekða ek einherja,        that I woke the Einherjar,
bæða ek upp rísa          asked them to get up
bekki at stráa,           to strew the benches
björker leyðra,           and fill the beer casks,
```
valkyrjur vín bera
sem viši komi.
(ÍF 29:77-78)

asked the valkyrjur to carry wine
as if a prince were coming.

Here, the valkyrjur are clearly placed in the otherworld, in Valhöll where they serve beer for the einherjar, the fallen warriors. Where the valkyrja in Haraldskvæði is described in terms of her fair looks, ability to communicate with birds and wisdom, the ones in Eiríksmál are described in terms of their social function: they are serving-maidens. In both instances, the word valkyrja is used but in neither poem do these beings 'choose the slain', which gives the impression that the term is either applied broadly or that its semantic content is more extensive than what can etymologically be understood from it.

In Eyvindr skáldaspillir's Hákonarmál, supposedly c.960 (ÍF 26:xci), however, the situation is different, firstly because these valkyrjur have names: Góndul and Skógul, secondly because the description of them is quite different from those quoted above. The poem occurs in Hákonar saga góða 32; stanza 1, also in Skáldskaparmál 2, reads as follows:

Góndul ok Skógul
sendi Gautatýr
at kíösa of konungu,
hverr Yngva ættar
skyldi með Óðini fara
ok í Valhöllu vera.
(ÍF 26:193; Faulkes 1998:8)

Furthermore, stanzas 10-13 read as follows:

Góndul þat maelti,
studdisk geirskapti:
Vex nú gengi göða,
es Hákoni hafa
með her mikinn
heim bond of boði.

Góndul and Skógul
did Óðinn send
to choose from the kings
who of Yngvi's descendants
should go with Óðinn
and stay in Valhöll.

92 This also means that they are under male control, as are valkyrjur who act at the orders of Óðinn. The valkyrja in Haraldskvæði appears different in this respect (unless we are to understand her as acting at the instigation of the male poet).

93 Góndul looks like a female version of Góndir, an Öðinsheiti (Grímnismál 49); both relate to gandr (m), 'magic wand; male organ' (ÆW:199) and to gandr (m), 'stick, staff; magic; wolf' (ÆW:155; LP:170). McKinnell (2005:151) says that: “Gandr has traditionally been translated 'magic staff', but probably means 'magic spirit' and/or 'wolf' ... gandr is a heiti for 'wolf', perhaps because wolves were regarded as the embodiment of spirits.” For a thorough discussion of gandr, see Heide 2006; cf. note 387. Skógul translates as 'battle' (ÆW:511; LP:517) and relates to the verb skaga, 'to jut out, project from the surroundings' (Frøt 111:274; ÆW:480).

94 An Öðinsheiti.
Viði þat heyrði,
hvat valkyrjur mæltu
mærar af mars baki.
Hygglíga léti
ok þjálmaðar sötu
ok hofðusk hliðar fyrir.

The prince heard that,
what the valkyrjur said,
maidens on horsebacks,
they acted wisely
and sat wearing helmets
and held shields before them.

Hví þú svá gunni
skiptir, Geir-Skögul?
Vórum þó verðir gagns frá göðum.
Vér því voldum,
es þú velli helt,
en þínir fandr flugu.

‘Why do you decide the battle
in this way, Spear-Skögul?
We were worthy of victory from
the gods.’ ‘We made it so
that you held the battlefield
and your enemies fled.’

Ríða vit skulum,
kvæð en ríkja Skógul,
greina heima göða
Óðini at segja,
at nú mun allvaldr koma
á hann sjalfan at séa.
(ÍF 26:195)

‘We shall ride,’
said the powerful Skógul,
‘to the green home of the gods,
to tell Óðinn
that the king will now come
himself to see him.’

The poem talks specifically about these two valkyrjur and portrays them in a much more active way than do the previous two poems – they are present during the battle, sent by Óðinn to choose between the two warring kings which of them will go to Valhóll. They carry weapons and ride horses (stanza 11) and their connections to dead warriors, to Óðinn and to Valhóll are clear – thus, they act much like the ‘classic’ image of valkyrjur, those fierce female supernatural battle spirits who possess power over the life and death of warriors and who actively exercise those powers on the field of battle, choosing from among the living who will die (Warmind 1997:91; Price 2002:331).

In these three descriptions, the valkyrjur share certain otherworldly qualities and a clear connection to warfare and the dead, but it is also clear that we need to go beyond the etymology in order to gain a fuller understanding of them. Valkyrjur often appear in groups but many of them have names, even if this in most cases lends them only a token individuality. Generally, their names seem to be little more than poetic words for battle, indicating strength, force, weaponry or noise: Hlókk (‘Ringing’, ‘Battle’), Góll (‘Noise’), Prúðr (‘Force’), Hildr (‘Battle’), Hjálmprimul (‘Causer of Helmet-noise’), Gunnr (‘Battle’) and more. In skaldic poetry, such names often seem to occur as mere stock phrases with absolutely no hint of personality hiding behind them and it may be that they were employed simply as a literary device on the same level as battle-kennings involving ravens and wolves.
In heroic poetry, valkyrjur are typically daughters of kings who, for reasons mostly unknown, are leading a warrior-type of life. At times they travel through the air, at times on horseback, indicating again a connection between supernatural women and horses (see III.1.2.). Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar shows a valkyrja apparently travelling through the air in the prose passage between stanzas 9 and 10: "Eylimi hét konungur. Dóttir hans var Sváva. Hún var valkyrja og reið loft og lög."

'There was a king called Eylimi. His daughter was Sváva. She was a valkyrja and rode the air and the sea.'

The same is said of Sigrún in the prose between Helgakviða Hundingsbana II 4 and 5 and rather recalls a description of the special horse Höfvarpnir in Gylfaginning 35 where it is said of the goddess Gna:

Hon á þann hest er rennr lopt ok lög, er heitir Höfvarfnir.
(Faulkes 1982:30)

‘She has that horse, which runs in the air and across the sea, and which is called Höfvarpnir.’
(Faulkes 1987:30)

In Helgakviða Hundingsbana I 17 we encounter Sigrún again, this time on horseback: "En af hesti Hógni dóttir ... ræsi sagði, 'From horseback Hógni’s daughter ... said to the prince’, and it is tempting to make the assumption that ‘riding the air’ actually means ‘riding a horse through the air’ but this is not necessarily what we are meant to think. There could be other valid explanations.

These valkyrjur of apparently human origin also have clear personalities, Sigdrifí and Brynhildr (who seem to be the same character, cf. Sigdrífumál and Volsungasaga 21-22) being the most prominent examples. They are young, unmarried women who, for some reason, have become warriors and taken on an entirely masculine role and who then undergo dramatic changes back into a feminine role when they encounter love (or at least encounter the hero who loves them) and

---

95 Saxo says that some women themselves have chosen this way of life, although their reasons for doing so are rarely clear, for example Lathgertha in Gesta Danorum Book 9 (4,2). Aluilda in Book 7 (6,3) became a warrior through the malicious influence of her mother who disliked her suitor.
96 Cf. the description of Gerðr in Skírnismál 6 and the mention of a horse that carries a person um myrkvan, ‘through the dark’ in Skírnismál 8-9.
97 In later folk tradition, beings such as witches may ride just about any object through the air. A horse is not a requirement for doing so (Price 2002:119-122).
become married or betrothed to him. Rather than choosing the slain, they appear as protectresses of their chosen heroes (Quinn 2006). Whether these human valkyrjur have their origins in social reality is questionable. Although Íslendingasögur provide some evidence for the acceptance and even approval of women occasionally stepping into the masculine realm of behaviour, there are clear indications that they can go too far in this; we have but little historical evidence for women actually fighting as warriors. What is presently significant about such women is that supernatural powers to grant or destroy life is conceived of in the female form of valkyrjur whose war-like and unruly nature lends them a type of double identity: they are feminine in gender but masculine in behaviour. It is not the intention here to discuss the cultural politics potentially involved in such portrayals of women but rather the double-sided nature of powerful supernatural or mythical women.

It is not so widely applied as dis but the term valkyría is used in such different contexts that it is difficult to grasp what the exact semantic content of the word actually is. Warmind says that: "The word valkyrie seems also to be useable about any magical, active female" (1997:196) and distinguishes between several kinds of valkyrjur, primarily those who carry valkyría-type names that typically denote battle in some way or other, and those that are 'romantic' or 'heroic' valkyrjur carrying names of a more ordinary type (Sigrún, Kára, Sváva, Brynhildr) which he also describes as shield-maidens. This distinction between ethereal, supernatural valkyrjur and more human shield-maidens makes sense. Warmind further says: "I would argue that shield-maidens and valkyries have been thoroughly confused in the Fornaldarsögur – or rather that the distinction was not meaningful to the authors" (1997:196), which appears a valid judgement also for Saxo's descriptions of similar characters.

---

99 Fóstbrædra saga 1 introduces Pörbjórg digra, who governs the district while her husband is away; she rides to the ping and saves a man from hanging; Laxdæla saga 1-7 tells the story of Unnr (elsewhere Auðr), who acts as the head of her family and travels to Iceland where she claims land and settles.
100 Tacitus (Germania 7-8, 1970:107-8) mentions that women (and children) would accompany men to the battlefield and encourage them from the sideline but without partaking in the fighting.
101 Ney 2004 provides a discussion of women, mythical and historical, who cross the gender barrier in such ways.
102 Jochens 1996 and Helga Kress 1993 and 2002 discuss such issues.
103 Similar difficulties of interpretation surround the Old English wælcyrie, etymologically identical to Old Norse valkyrja, which is said to gloss a Fury, a Gorgon, the Roman goddess of war Bellona, or may be used generally about a witch or sorceress (Bosworth 1898:1153).
If ‘choosing the slain’ is what we should expect of them, then there are several valkyrjur who act in an ‘unauthorised’ manner, serving beer or talking to ravens instead; the explanation ‘chooser of the slain’ is only a partial description of the semantic content of the term valkyrja, which complicates our attempts to detect sensible distinctions between them and other classes of beings.

III.2. More Supernatural Women
A few more kinds of female supernatural beings are also of relevance to the present exploration of the nornir. The next two sections discuss some groups of beings whereas a number of other individual figures will be discussed in chapter IV.

III.2.1. Mothers and Fylgjur
One such group seems to lurk behind the references to a mother-cult in the area now known as Germany. Roman-inspired votive stones and altars, originating between the 1st and 5th centuries AD and found in the areas then occupied by the Romans, speak of such cults, but they seem to represent cults of native ancestress figures, not Roman ones. The iconography shows almost exclusively groups of three female figures variously dressed as married women (wearing headdresses) and unmarried women (with loosened hair), carrying attributes relating to fertility, childbirth and occasionally warfare. There are more than 500 votive stones with well over 100 different Germanic names or epithets, some of which relate to specific Germanic tribes, while others refer to them as ‘helpers in need’ (recalling the nauðgonglar in Fáfnismál 12) and a few as warrior goddesses (Simek 1993:204-208). The blending together of birth and warfare is significant: “The idea behind this association lies in the old belief that the mother or deity that brings one to life is also responsible for all good or evil that the individual experiences in his life” (Giannakis 1998:25). Apart from the votive stones, most of which are found on the Lower Rhine, Bede, in De Temporum Ratione 15, c.725, makes a reference to an Anglo-Saxon heathen festival called modranect, ‘night of the mothers’, which was a midwinter celebration (1999:53).

the latter usage, however, Mitchell (2004:70) objects: “this gloss on late Anglo-Saxon uses is debatable, as there is no information other than the association with witch (i.e. the collocation itself) to imply that the word means ‘sorceress’ or anything like it”, and goes on to discuss whether the concurrence of waelcyrie with ‘witch’ is due to a fondness for alliterative pairs in Old English text sources rather than to shared semantic content.
These pieces of cult evidence are often seen as related to the cult of the disir (Simek 1993; McKinnell 2005), and the matronae or mothers share concerns for fertility, childbirth and war with disir as well as with nornir. Although the evidence spreads out over large geographical areas and spans a period of about a millennium, it seems plausible that we see in these mother-figures some degree of continuity from much earlier periods into the Old Norse sources relating to the nornir. They fit into the present discussion even if it is difficult to describe the relationship between disir, mothers and nornir from the evidence we have. The idea of a triad, each 'mother' apparently with her own area of concern, strongly recalls the idea of three individually named nornir (see IV).

Also fygljur, another type of female supernatural being, share certain traits with valkyrjur and disir. The word fyglja is etymologically comprehensible. Raudvere says about them:

Benämningen kommer från verbet fyglja, att följa och är också besläktat med ordet för efterbör, fulga; alltså något som kommer med det själva och vidhäftar individen. Dessa varelser uppträder som tydligt synliga i djur- eller kvinnogestalt, och deras uppenbarelseform har ofta en metaphorisk innebörda som de kan agera som ett slags dubbelgängare.
(Raudvere 2003:61)

'The designation stems from the verb fyglja, 'to follow' and is also related to the word for afterbirth, fulga, that is, something which comes with life itself and is attached to the individual. These beings occur as clearly visible in animal or female human form, and their appearance often has a metaphorical meaning as they can act as a sort of doppelgänger.'
(My translation)

It is the female human, rather than the animal, version which is of interest in the present context. Like disir, they act as guardian spirits but, whereas disir were the object of a cult, there is no evidence of such in connection with fygljur (Turville-Petre 1964:227-228; Ström 1985:195-196). They occur sometimes as single beings, sometimes in groups, and they seem to be closely connected to the individual, embodying that person's luck or destiny, but can also be attached to a family. Often they are spoken of, even seen, shortly before someone's death as in Hallfredar saga where Hallfredr falls ill on the way to Iceland:

Þá sá þeir konu ganga eptir skipinu; hon var mikil ok í brynju; hon gekk á bylgjum sem á landi. Hallfredr leit til ok sá, at þar var fygljukona hans.

104 Animal fygljur are mentioned in Njáls saga 23 where Gunnar's fyglja is a bear, and in Vatnsdæla saga 42 where Porfell slipfr's fyglja is a red horse signalling his impending death; both are seen in dreams. Mundal 1974 shows that whereas animal fygljur embody the qualities of the person to whom they are attached, the women fygljur act as protectresses.
(IF 8:198)

Then they saw a woman following the ship. She was tall and dressed in a mail-coat. She walked on the waves as if on land. Hallfred looked and saw that it was his *fetch*.
Hallfred said, "I declare myself finally parted from you."
She said, "Will you take me on, Thorvald?"
He said he would not.
Then the boy Hallfred said, "I'll take you on," at which she disappeared.'
(CSI 1:252)

The element of transition is clear in this passage, both Hallfreðr's transition from the living to the dead and the transition of the *fylgja* from one person to another, which, however, is not imposed on the person by the *fylgja* but by his own choice. This could be an indication that she personifies a person's luck or fate and we see that, whereas þorvaldr will have nothing to do with her, the young Hallfreðr accepts her as his own, as though she belongs with him as some inevitable consequence of being named after the older Hallfreðr.

The term can be used in more extensive senses (as in *Pitranda pætr* where the words *disir* and *fylgjur* are both used to describe the same group of supernatural women) but, unlike *disir*, valvejur and also nornir, fylgjur as such do not appear to make decisions or choices and they may simply be embodiments of conceptual features (especially good luck or strength) of the person to whom they are attached.105 It may be coincidental that all the *fylgjur* we hear about are attached to men, not to women.

III.2.2. Swan-Maidens?
Having attempted to draw some lines between nornir, disir, valvejur, matronae and fylgjur, one last group of female supernatural beings merit some attention. These are the three women in *Völundarkviða* 1:

105 For a fuller discussion of *fylgjur* see Mundal 1974.
Maidens flew from the south across Myrkviðr, the strange young creature, to fulfill fate. They sat on the lake shore to rest, southern ladies, spun precious linen.

Significantly, it is only the prose introduction, not the verse, which labels the women valkyrjur and the term ‘swan-maidens’ occurs only in scholarship, not in the eddic text. The poem simply calls them meyiar, ‘maidens’, revealing nothing more than their gender. The women also have names and lineages; the prose says:

‘Two of them were daughters of King Hλðver, Hλðguðr swanwhite and Hervgr all-knowing [or ‘strange creature’]; the third one was Qlrún, Kiarr’s daughter from Valland.’

Should they really be valkyrjur, they certainly belong with the more human kind rather than the purely metaphorical, war-related ones (see III.1.3.).

The poem applies two sets of names to the women: Hervgr, Hλðguðr and Qlrún on the one side with Alvitr and Svanhvit on the other. Hervgr and Hλðguðr appear to belong to the battle-related names of valkyrjur. The name Hervgr, from the noun herr, ‘army’ and Vor, listed as a goddess in pulur (Faulkes 1998:114), probably means something like ‘goddess of the army.’

For the name Hλðguðr, several interpretations are possible. Guðr means ‘battle’ and hλð could be a feminine version of the masculine noun hλðr, ‘slayer or killer’ (LP:268), meaning something like ‘killing battle-goddess’, not an unlikely name for a

---

106 ‘Mirkwood’ or ‘dark wood’, apparently a legendary forest in heroic poetry; Lokasenna 42 connects it to Ragnarok.
107 The swan in the swan-maiden story is unlikely to be native to the Scandinavian area (Hatto 1961:349), though the story pattern is well known, cf. mare-stories (Tang Kristensen 1928:154-158) and selkie-stories (Jón Arnason 1954:629-630 [632-3]; Simpson 1972:100-102).
108 This also goes for the nomir in Völuspá 20 (see IV.1.4.).
109 This information is repeated in stanza 15.
110 Dronke (1997:290-292) discusses the names as two sets, arguing that the valkyrja names are a later interpolation that belong neither to the swan-maiden motif nor to the story of Völundr.
111 Hervgr is the name of the main character in the legendary Hervarar saga ok Heidreks konungs, but she appears to be unrelated to the eddic Hervgr.
112 It is an element in many compound names: Glaumvor, Grjótvör, Leirvör, Oddvör (LP:629).
valkyrja. As a verb, *hlaða* can mean to make a pile, or to kill, to bring down a person (LP:260). But it could also be the noun *hlað*, an embroidered band or ribbon for tying round one’s head or onto items of clothing. Simek (1993:151) interprets *hlaða* as ‘to weave’, reading the name as ‘weaver of battles’ which he then relates to *Darraðarjóða*. This interpretation is perhaps not impossible but it hardly seems an obvious one; in the combination *hlaða spigldum*, *hlaða* refers to what is probably tablet weaving: ‘putting tablets of wood next to one another’ (LP:260), as is referred to in *Guðrúnarkviða II* 26: Húnscar meyjar, þær er *hlaða* *spigldom*, ‘Hunnish maidens, who do tabletweaving’ (it occurs in the context of the precious and costly contents of a house and is unlikely to refer to anything supernatural). If she is a *valkyrja*, Hlaðguðr’s name seems more likely to refer to killing; that it should relate to weaving is a stretch of the imagination for which there is not much support.

The name Qlúrn looks different from the previous two in that it does not conjure up the same kind of war-related images. That it should consist of the nouns *q̆l*, ‘ale’ and *rún*, ‘rune, secret wisdom’, giving ‘ale-rune’, is a somewhat doubtful interpretation but could relate in some way to the *q̆lúnar* in *Sigrdrifumál* 7 and 19: runes carved onto a drinking horn in order to protect against deceit from another man’s wife. This idea would combine well with the information given in stanza 15: that she is skilled in magic, and it could refer to certain protective aspects. It is more likely, however, that the root etymology of the name refers to good luck. “Qlúrn is Egill’s swan-maiden wife in *Völundarkviða*, and *q̆lúnar* must originally have been connected with Primitive Old Norse *alu* ‘good luck’” (McKinnell 2005:212).

The other names, Alvitr and Svanhvít, seem to be of quite a different kind. There are two possible readings of *alvitr*; it can mean ‘fully wise’, ‘all-knowing’ (this meaning occurs in *Háttatal*99) or it can mean ‘strange creature’, favoured by Dronke

---

113 The name is strikingly similar to that of Lathgertha, first wife of Ragnarr Loðbrók (whom Saxo calls Regnerus) in *Gesta Danorum* Book 9 (4,2). Lathgertha, whose name would be Hlaðgerðr in Old Norse, acts like a valkyrja or shield-maiden. The name might relate to the place name Hlaðir in Norway or to the Frankish female name Leutgarde, attested in 942 (*Saxo Grammaticus* 1880:151).

114 Tablet weaving (or card weaving) is done with very thin, often square, tablets of wood or some other durable material with little holes in them (typically one hole in each corner). The warp is threaded through these holes, and the shed is created between the threads in the upper holes and those in the lower holes; the weft is carried across between the upper and lower warp threads, and the shed is changed by turning the cards, so that other threads are brought to the top and to the bottom. Only quite narrow things can be woven in this way (straps, belts etc.); they can, however, be very long (Collingwood 1996).

115 In *Egils saga* 44 (IF 2:109) Egill carves runes onto a horn containing a poisonous drink; then he cuts his hand and when he grips the horn with his bloody hand, the horn breaks asunder.
and taken by Finnur Jónsson to refer particularly to swan-maidens (LP:11). In Helgakviða Hundingsbana II 26, Helgi addresses his valkyrja-lover Sigrún as alvitr but whether he means to call her 'very wise one' or 'strange being' ('strange' perhaps in the sense of supernatural) is not clear; she could well be both.

Svanhvít means 'swan-white', 'white as a swan' and is remarkably easy to interpret compared to the other names; so much so that one is tempted to think it must have a deeper meaning as well. In stanza 2 she is said to 'wear swan feathers', which has given rise to the widespread practice of referring to all three women as swan-maidens (cf. Larrington 1992:145-146), but the poem actually speaks of only one of them in this way.

'Swan-maidens' are not otherwise known as a separate category of beings in Old Norse mythology.116 This does not in itself mean that they were not known but it makes it difficult to say much about them. Brymskviða mentions Freyia’s magical feather cloak, fjaðrhamr, and Skálds kaparmál 19 states that Frigg was able to assume the shape of a falcon (drottning valshams, 'queen of the falcon skin'117 is a kenning for her), so the 'wearing of swan feathers' is not as such unique, it is just a

---

116 They recall the white dove-maidens of Friedrich von Schwaben, a Middle High German epic that shows remarkable parallels and contrasts to Völundarkviða (Bonsack 1983; Dronke 1997:286; Nedoma 2000).

117 Valshamr means 'falcon skin' (Frz III:847), but the noun valr (m) has three meanings: 1) falcon, 2) name for a horse and 3) those who have fallen in battle (LP:590-1).
different species of bird. That exactly this species of bird is employed may, however, not be entirely arbitrary because Guðrúnarkviða II 14 mentions svani danska, 'Danish swans' as part of the picture which Guðrún is embroidering – a picture also depicting saili suðræna, 'southern halls' and skatar léko, 'men's (who) played (at war)'. In Völundarkviða, the women arrive from the south, as migrating swans do, and valkyrjur are associated with 'men's war-play'. Furthermore, swans occur in a number of battle-related kenningar in skaldic poetry, seemingly as doubles for ravens and eagles, birds often associated with war,118 and there is some evidence that black ravens as well as white swans are connected to valkyrjur. The swans are somehow equivalent to as well as opposites to ravens, a kind of 'white ravens'.119

Gylfaginning 16 connects swans to Urðarbrunnr:

Fuglar tveir faðask í Urðar brunni. Þeir heita svanir, ok af þeim fuglum hefr komið þat fugla kyn er svá heitir.
(Faulkes 1982:19)

'Two birds feed in Urðarbrunnr. They are called swans, and from these birds has come that species of bird that has that name'.
(Faulkes 1987:19)

The association between swans and Urðarbrunnr might simply be due to the whiteness of either but it does tenuously link the birds to ideas about fate.120

Taking all of these factors into account, what can we make of the women in Völundarkviða? That they are supernatural beings is beyond doubt, their borderline nature reveals this: they span the human and animal worlds, they are found on the shore of a lake121 early in the morning. We encounter them just at the time when

---

118 Eyvindr skáldaspillir’s Háleygjarðatal 11: svanir Farmatýs, ‘Óðinn’s swans’ and Einar Skúlason’s Óxarflokkr 5: Gautreks svana, ‘Óðinn’s swans’, which are ravens; Gopðormr sindri’s Hákonardrápa 1: Jaffðs svangaðir, ‘Óðinn’s swan-feeder’, a warrior (who feeds the ravens, ‘Óðinn’s swans’, by killing men).
119 The complex etymology of ‘black’ (OE blæc) is interesting: "In OE. found also (as metres show) with long vowel blæc, blæcan, and thus confused with blæc shining, white ... as is shown by the fact that the latter also occurs with short vowel, blæc, blæcum; in ME. the two words are often distinguishable only by the context, and sometimes not by that." (OED 1:889). This is reflected in the two meanings of ‘bleach’; a derivative of ‘black’ but also having the meaning ‘pale, shining’ (OED 1:910), which recalls Danish bleg ‘pale’ and blæk ‘ink’. These words stem from the Indo-European root *bhleg- ‘burning’, and it seems the meaning depends on whether one focuses on the bright flames or on the scorched ashes resulting from the burning flames.
120 Why Snorri connects swans to the well in the first place is unclear.
121 The lakeshore goes well not only with aquatic birds but also with the idea of spinning linen; linen consists of very long fibres with no elasticity so that keeping the fibres moist helps the process along. One would have a cup of water to dip the fingers in to keep the fibres damp whilst spinning them. (Personal communication from Freda Bayne, Holmwood Textiles, Orkney.) Cf. note 244.
everything about their situation is in an in-between state; they are between water and land, between night and day, between human and animal. Of the beings discussed above, they seem to fit most easily with the shield-maidens, having names and lineages whilst being very tangible beings, but at the same time there is remarkably little 'shield' about them – they show no attachment to warfare, they carry no weapons, they ride no horses, in short they are neither shield-maidens nor valkyrjur (and Ælundr is not a warrior). They seem simply to occupy that grey area where fylgjur and valkyrjur overlap with one another, as the poem itself seems to span the mythological and legendary heroic worlds.\textsuperscript{122}

It is noteworthy that the one instance in Old Norse literature where the words 'spinning' and 'fate' occur together in the same text passage does not concern nornir, those looming manufacturers of fate, but innocent-looking swan-maidens instead.\textsuperscript{123} Fate in the poem is not something imposed on the men by the strange women, it rather seems to be a fate to which the women themselves are subject, namely that they must act like swans and return to whence they came after a certain period. There is little indication that they are in charge of fate, their fulfilment of fate apparently consists of being what they are, namely of a different nature from their husbands. The prose may refer to them as valkyrjur but, unlike valkyrjur, they leave their husbands and, although swans might have links to valkyrjur and perhaps nornir, the women themselves are neither valkyrjur nor nornir.

III.3. Greek Moirai and Roman Parcae

Before moving on to further discussions of the Norse material, it is worthwhile taking a look at comparable material from Classical tradition. Nornir, where conceived of as spinners, are often compared to the Greek moirai and Roman parcae (Simek 1993:237; Bæksted 1965:181); while such comparisons are in many ways justified it should not be overlooked that the moirai are by no means the only Classical women involved with fate. Greek mythology presents a bewildering array of female supernatural beings, all of whom in some way or other concern themselves with issues of fate, and systematising the relationship between these into a logically

\textsuperscript{122} Their brief role as visiting otherworldly women recalls the folktales about selkies found in Scotland, Norway and Iceland or the tragic nightmare-women of Danish folk tradition (Tang Kristensen 1928:154-158), yet there is no indication that the men steal their garments or in other ways force them to stay, as is common in the folktales.

\textsuperscript{123} Dronke (1997:255, 305) suggests that their spinning constitutes a reference to their marriages to the three brothers.
coherent description is likely to result in unhelpful generalisations. For the purposes of this thesis, the most prominent Classical beings will be discussed briefly but no attempt will be made to describe them fully, only to establish relatively concise outlines of the keres (Κήρες), erinyes (Ερινύες), moirai (Μοίραι) and Nemesis (Νέμεσις) as comparable figures. Neither is it the intention to draw actual parallels but, in anticipation of the discussions of fate and textiles in chapter V, it would seem necessary to devote a certain amount of attention to the Classical tradition. I have concentrated firstly on the idea of fate and spinning/weaving, secondly on Homeric literature; that is, some of the earliest Classical literary sources dating from the 8th century BC. While it is relevant to concentrate on the early evidence, as is also the approach adopted for the Norse material, it is also convenient to limit the scope to specific sources as this is not intended to be an exhaustive study of the development of Classical figures relating to fate.

The keres (Κήρες) seem to be imagined as evil, bloodthirsty female spirits with sharp claws and teeth who bring all sorts of bad things to people – old age, ravaging disease and violent death. They are often described with the adjectives 'black' and 'dark' or they haunt the battlefields in gruesome forms like some kind of vultures. A passage from the Iliad 18:535 describes them thus:

Then they formed for battle and fought it out by the banks of the river, casting at each other with their bronze-tipped spears. And Strife [Eris] and Confusion [Kydoimos] were in their company, and cruel Death [Ker] – she gripped one man alive with a fresh wound on him, and another one unwounded, and was dragging a dead man by the feet through the shambles: the cloak on her shoulders was deep red with men's blood. The figures closed and fought like living men, and dragged away from each other the bodies of those who were killed.

(1987:308)

The word ker (κῆρ; plural keres) occurs frequently in Homer, mainly with reference to an ominous manifestation of death rather than as a reference to fate as such; in other literature, keres may refer to all kinds of harm that man may encounter. The word is often translated into English somewhat simplistically as 'fate', though it never portrays a good fate, the simplicity probably arising from the difficulties of distinguishing between different chthonic beings in translation but perhaps also because keres and moirai overlap and both are strongly associated with death (Dietrich 1965:243). Keres seem at times to have been conceived of as the souls of dead people but then always with the added implication of being harmful (Hjortšø 1984:93; Dietrich 1965:242).
The erēnyes (Eπιυμ; Latin 'Furies') are another group of female supernatural beings associated with the moirai. The etymology of the word erēnyes (singular erēny [Eπιυμ], plural erēnyes) is uncertain and its original meaning seems to have been lost already to the scholars of antiquity, a fact perhaps revealing that they are very ancient figures; the word probably alludes to chthonic and angry beings "capable of penalizing the transgressions of men and gods" (Dietrich 1965:98). Often, they are said to bring madness or overwhelming feelings of guilt to murderers, especially for the crimes of matricide or patricide; in Homer they are sometimes synonymous with or personified forms of curses spoken by people (Dietrich 1965:234). They look horrifying, their hair and bodies intertwined with snakes and they often wear black robes. They never let go of their prey but are, on the other hand, not interested in catching it either, as their primary function is to follow criminals continuously wherever they go. In this respect, they are related to Nemesis who is not only strongly chthonic but also has a highly moral function (Dietrich 1965:167-168). As with the keres, the number of erēnyes tends to be unspecified, although the latter are at times regarded as a triad and in later periods names were attached to them: Alekto (Αληκτω) 'Untiring One', Megaira (Μεγαιρα) 'Envious One' and Tisifone (Τισιφον) 'Avenger'.124 The erēnyes were, interestingly, called upon when taking an oath (Hjortsø 1984:93-94; Dietrich 1965:232), as in the Iliad 19:257: "Let my witness now be Zeus first of all, highest and greatest of gods, and Earth and Sun and the Erinyes who punish men below the earth, when any has falsely sworn" (1987:317). This aspect would appear to relate closely to their chthonic identity and otherworldly powers.

Moirai (Μοιραι) are the female supernatural beings most often mentioned when the talk is of fate in ancient Greek mythology but they clearly overlap and intertwine with both keres and erēnyes. Like these, they are imagined as gloomy figures bringing death. "This in all likelihood was the early 'lot' they gave to man, while their functions at births and marriages and their presence throughout life might well have been later additions" (Dietrich 1965:64). In many later sources they are said to spin, occasionally to weave or bind, or reference is made simply to their threads; however, in Homer we hear of this only once, namely in the Iliad 24:209 where Hekabe says about Hektor: "So strong Fate must have spun for him with her thread as he was

124 Damico (1984:44) notes that: "Latin equivalents for the term wāclýrge (...) found in Anglo-Saxon glosses and vocabularies of the eighth through the eleventh century refer to the Erīynes (...) Allecto, Tisiphone, Parcae, and the Roman goddess of war, Bellona."
born, at the moment I gave birth to him, that he should be food for the quick-running dogs" (1987:393). The word used in the Greek here is *moira*. When we hear of spinning in the *Iliad* 20:127-128: "he will suffer what Fate spun for him with her thread as he was born" (1987:325), Homer uses the word *aisa* (αισα) rather than *moira*, and in the *Odyssey* 7:195, where Alcinous says of Odysseus: "[He] must suffer whatever Destiny and the relentless Fate spun for him with the first thread of life when he came from his mother's womb" (1991:100), the word used is *klothes* (κλωθες) 'spinners'. Exactly how the terms *aisa* and *klothes* relate to *moirai* is difficult to gauge. *Klothes* could refer to the *moirai* or the gods alike as both are said elsewhere to spin fate; *aisa* means 'fate'\(^{125}\) and seems at times to be synonymous with Alekto. It cannot be said with certainty that these words refer to the *moirai* but neither is it certain that they do not. Other instances of spinning occur in Homer, though always attributed to the gods: *Iliad* 24:525: "This is the fate the gods have spun for poor mortal men" (1987:401) and *Odyssey* 11:139: "the threads of destiny which the gods themselves have spun" (1991:163). Thus, the image of spinning is common when describing births whilst descriptions of death may refer to the cutting, crumbling or tightening of threads (see note 266); but the action is not attributed exclusively to *moirai*.

Otherwise, *moirai* are found as agents of verbs, such as 'to give', 'to prophesy' and 'to decree'. They appear in both the singular, one *moira*, and in the plural, several *moirai*, and, while they are often un-named and un-numbered, when a number is given it is always three. Hesiod, in *Theogony*, says (217-219) that Nyx, Night, gave birth to the *moirai* without specifying anything, but later (904-906) states that the *moirai* are the offspring of Zeus and Themis, that their names are Klotho (Κλωθώ) 'Spinner', Lakhesis (Λάχεσις) 'Apportioner of Lots'\(^{126}\) and Atropos (Ἄτροπος) 'Unchangeable One' (Lampe 1961:261, 759, 794), and that they give mortal men both good and ill in life. Thus, *moirai* are associated with positive as well as with negative things.

The term *moira* contains several nuances of meaning ranging from 'share' or 'portion' in quite a spatial, physical sense (in Modern Greek it can refer to latitude

---

\(^{125}\) *aisa* supposedly derives from ἰασα (Dietrich 1965:11), meaning 'equal, equality, balanced' (Lampe 1961:677).

\(^{126}\) Interestingly, ἀνθέσις refers to a fleece of unspun wool (*Odyssey* 9:445), and Onians (1951:416-419) suggests that the three names refer to different stages of the weaving process: Lachesis for the wool itself, Klotho the spinning process and Atropos the actual weaving.
and longitude; Stavropoulos 1988:558) to ‘lot’ or ‘share of good and bad’ in a more metaphysical sense relating to fate. It seems to correspond in both of these meanings to English ‘lot’ and Old Norse hlutr which also have concrete as well as more metaphorical meanings. Hlutr (m) describes the individual lot used for lot-casting (Frantz II:17) but also a kind of amulet or oracle as well as a share or part of a whole (Frantz II:18).

As is evident, keres, erínyes, moirai and Nemesis share many features, especially their association with death, and drawing dividing lines between them is about as easy as it is to distinguish clearly between their Norse counterparts. At the risk of over-simplifying we might say that, in Homer’s portrayal, moirai represent the inevitability of death, keres its horrifying aspect, whilst erínyes and Nemesis incorporate certain notions of otherworldly judgement.

With respect to the Roman parcae, these appear to be the exact same figures as the Greek moirai; though referred to under a Latin name in Latin sources. Parca is explained as: “A Roman goddess of birth, identified (app. by false etymology) with the Greek Moirai and then pluralized to correspond with them” (Oxford Latin Dictionary:1294). The false etymology would seem to be pars, ‘share, part’ for Parca, associated with moira, ‘share, lot.’ Her name originally came from the verb parere, ‘to give birth to; to create.’

That nornir and moirai have a lot in common cannot be doubted but we see now that the situation is not uncomplicated: moirai are not the only Greek figures to share features with nornir, nor are the nornir the only Norse figures to share features with the moirai. We cannot simply transfer Greek ideas about fate and moirai onto nornir or the Old Norse situation in general but through comparisons we gain a broader perspective onto the topic. The fact that moirai spin does not in itself mean that nornir do the same; it may, however, serve as our starting point for an exploration of the idea.

---

127 Lewis (1999:298) describes an intriguing parallel from Chinese tradition: “This use of jing to indicate dividing lines that establish order or create structure is closely related to its sense as the warp of a fabric. Consequently, when indicating spatial demarcation it is sometimes paired with the character wei ‘weft’ ... These characters would ultimately be used to translate the terms ‘longitude’ and ‘latitude.’” I am grateful to Emily Lyle, University of Edinburgh, for this reference.

128 Homer seems to operate with several concepts of fate side by side and also uses individual words, such as moira, in more than one sense (Dietrich 1965:230, 327-337).
III.4. Summary: Border Lines and Grey Areas

It can be difficult to tell these different kinds of beings apart as they do tend to merge more or less into each other, yet without ever becoming entirely synonymous with one another. Simultaneously, confusion about which is what appears to have arisen at an early stage so that little guarantee is provided by the use of specific words – for example the words dis and valkyrja do not in themselves ensure that the women described as such should be grouped with these types of creatures. Disentangling such groups of beings from one another by means of logic would not only be impossible but probably outright wrong. In all likelihood, people at the time did draw some lines but not everyone everywhere drew the same lines at all times; this would make it doubly artificial to try to do this now. There may well have been significant differences in the semantic content attached to certain terms in different geographical areas as well as during different periods of time. Frustrating as this is, it is a situation which we can only accept.

Ström says about disir:

Det ligger i sakens natur, att väsen som råder över så oberäkneliga, skickelsedigra och livsavgörande skeenden som äring och missväxt, livsfruktens liv och död, seger och nederlag i strid måste erhålla drag av ödesmakter, av makten som håller människans hela livs öde i sina händer. Om valkyrjorna kan säges representera den heroiskt-mytiska aspekten hos diserna, representerar nomorna lika säkert deras ödesaspekt.
(Ström 1954:85-86)

'It is obvious that beings who control such unpredictable, fateful and life-deciding events as growth and failure of crops, the life and death of all living things, victory and defeat in battle must take on the character of powers of fate, of powers which hold the whole of human life in its hands. If the valkyrjur can be said to represent the heroic-mythical aspect of the disir, the nomir represent their fatal aspect.'
(My translation)

In scholarship, disir has sometimes been regarded as an umbrella term for female supernatural beings as such so that nomir and valkyrjur have been seen to form sub-groups of disir, as is the impression given by Ström. I agree to a certain extent, but many things speak against using any of the terms discussed here as an overarching description for all kinds of supernatural women and doing so quickly becomes an artificial approach to the study of supernatural women in Old Norse tradition. I do not think it advisable to say that valkyrjur are a type of disir any more than I agree with using the invented term örlagadisir to describe nomir; the differences are too great – even if the dividing lines must remain fuzzy. At best we can hope that our
endeavours will result in a little less confusion, but we must keep in mind that logically applicable rules are unlikely ever to have existed, especially considering that we are talking about a very large geographical area: the whole of Scandinavia, as well as an extensive period of time: the Viking Age into the early Middle Ages, with many texts stemming from even later periods.

Of nornir, valkyrjur and disir, the last-mentioned constitute the only group to which a cult was demonstrably attached. They might have been considered some sort of anonymous ancestress figures, although there is no direct evidence for this; their cult had to do with fertility and death and it contained certain legal aspects as is evident from the institution of the disaping (see notes 374 and 380).

Valkyrjur have a special connection to warfare and to the realm of the dead but have little to do with childbirth and fertility. Nothing speaks of a cult of valkyrjur. They turn up as individuals as well as groups, often have names and are at times attached to individual warriors. Although the term valkyrja would seem to indicate an act of choosing, this is not a consistent feature of these beings and the term appears to be used in rather a broad sense.

Fylgjur are essentially linked to birth situations and to ideas about protection but as embodiments of a person’s characteristics or good luck rather than as helping or choosing figures; they are the only ones who tend to appear only as singular figures.

Normir appear to represent notions of inevitability in a broad and unapproachable sense; they are strongly linked to death and to ideas concerning judgement but also to birth. The relative absence of nornir, even when this word is used, may be one of their most recognisable features: they rarely appear in person but are referred to as beings that are out there somewhere, generally as a collective whole of unnamed figures but sometimes also as individuals. Their less than physical presence may also contribute to the fact that they are not really described as being particularly alluring or enticing the way that disir and valkyrjur at times are. Normir often seem to disappear into conceptual background spheres.

Thus, nornir and disir would seem to come quite close to each other as collective groups attached to birth and death and with certain legal notions surrounding them, yet disir appear the more tangible of the two groups and are actually present in human life, while nornir are more abstract figures looming in the darker, often transitional, moments of life. Such dividing lines are valid even if they remain unclear; there are many overlaps and confusion easily arises in the grey areas in between. What unites them is the fact that nornir, disir, valkyrjur and fylgjur all
represent – in some way or other – an otherworldly power which both gives and takes life and which is conceptualised in female form.
IV. The Women in the Well

The sections in the following chapter explore especially the references to nornir found in Völdspá and Snorra-Edda which, in certain ways, differ from those discussed above. This is evident firstly because these two sources attach names to them or at least to some of them; secondly because they describe the work of nornir in remarkably positive or at least neutral ways; and thirdly because they pay particular attention to the well as a place of origin for nornir. These are the three main topics discussed below. Nornir are popularly conceived of as a group of three but, although there is some evidence for there being three of them, most sources do not specify their exact number but simply refer to nornir in the plural. This does not in itself mean that one can argue against the idea that there are three nornir, but the importance of actually reading what the sources tell us must be stressed and the lack of consistency regarding this point is noteworthy.

A major issue also raised here is the question of why fate is portrayed as being so decidedly and consistently female, either taking the form of female figures or being associated with feminine types of work.

IV.1. Urðr, Verðandi, Skuld

Much of what is said about nornir in scholarship focuses on Völdspá 19-20, Gylfaginning 15-16 and the names given in these two passages. For reasons that will become clear, it is obvious that both passages are important to our understanding of nornir but that they also raise several questions.

IV.1.1. The Names

In most instances, nornir are referred to simply as nornir – there are 29 direct mentions of the word in all of the source material – a collective group of beings who, like disir, are not called goddesses as such and do not seem to have individual personalities.

Völdspá 19-20 bring us face to face with three enigmatic female characters:

| Ask veit ek standa, | I know an ash that stands |
| heitir Yggdrasill, | called Yggdrasill, |
| hár baðir, ausinn | a tall tree, watered |
| hvita auri; | with white silt; |
| þaðan koma doggvar | from there come the dews |

66
This is the Konungsbók rendition of the poem, c.1270, and the version from Hauksbók, c.1300-1325, has slight variations. In Hauksbók, the third line of stanza 20 reads: *þriðr or þeim saer*, ‘three from that lake’ instead of *þriðr or þeim sæ*, ‘three from that lake’. Hauksbók thus gives a lake as the place that the nornir come from, whereas Konungsbók gives a lake; both are situated below the tree. Further, Hauksbók renders the last line as: *örlög at segia* where Konungsbók has: *örlög seggia*. This discrepancy will be discussed below (see IV.1.4.).

From the passage in Vélauspa, we learn that these meyiar are very knowledgeable, lay down laws, that they choose life for the children of men and choose men’s fate and that they are involved with some kind of carving on wood. These three women are most often taken to be nornir but the use of the unspecific noun meyiar leaves at least the option that they might be a different type of beings. The description given in Vélauspa 19-20 could, arguably, fit most of the female figures connected to watery places and fate that are discussed below (see IV.2.1. and IV.2.2.). The idea that they are nornir is, however, clearly the explanation given by Snorri in Gylfaginning 15:

129 This recalls Heigakviða Hjörvarðssonar 28 where sweat from the manes of valkyrjur’s horses falls as dew in valleys and as hail in forests on higher ground. The name Yggdrasilli also seems to indicate a horse (Stefánsson 2005:270; Simek 1993:375); drasill being a poetic word for ‘horse’ (Frtz I:261; LP:84).

130 The phrase is understood by some as dative singular (Holtsmark 1951:82), by others as accusative plural (Larrington 1996:6; Hermann Pálsson 1996:71). I follow the latter convention and, as an accusative, skíði may be either singular or plural. I am grateful to Sverrir Tomasson, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, for this information. (See IV.1.4.)

131 The term brunnr translates as a source of water, spring or well (Frtz I:200; LP:67); a sharp distinction between these meanings is not important to the argument presented here.
'There stands there one beautiful hall under the ash by the well, and out of this hall come three maidens whose names are Weird, Verdandi, Skuld. These maidens shape men's lives. We call them norns. There are also other norns who visit everyone when they are born to shape their lives ... Good norns, ones of noble parentage, shape good lives, but as for those people that become the victims of misfortune, it is evil norns that are responsible.'

Snorri's description falls in two parts, almost as if he is referring to two separate classes of nornir: first those who have names, then those who have parentage and are either good or evil. The impression is almost of a hierarchy with three 'chief nornir' at the top and further down 'lesser nornir' who do the footwork of visiting newborn children. Whatever intention lies behind such a division is hard to understand but Snorri may have rationalised the concept of nornir into subdivisions; the idea of nornir having parentage of some sort is supported by Fáfnismál 13, and that of good and bad ones is reminiscent of the black and white dísir in þiðranda páttr (see III.1.2.). Yet, this division is not evident in references to nornir beyond Snorra-Edda and Fáfnismál.\(^{132}\)

The names attached to the nornir on these two occasions form the present focus of interest: Urðr, Verðandi and Skuld – in that order. The three names occur together only in these two texts, which means that it is not that common a constellation, although the names Urðr and Skuld occur independently in a few other places. Urðr, or forms thereof (genitive urðar, plural urðir), appears in 11 instances, either as a name for one norn or in compounds where it has the meaning of 'fate' or 'fateful' (see III.1.1.2.); Skuld in 4, as a norn in Grógaldr 4, a valkyrja in þulur (Faulkes 1998:115), a kenning for a woman in alausávisa by Egill Skallagrímsson\(^{133}\) and an evil half-sister of Hrólf in Hrólfss saga kraka.\(^{134}\)

In English editions of the Edda, the names are often translated. Larrington (1996:6) calls them Fate, Becoming and Must-be, whereas McKinnell (1994:117), more convincingly, gives Fate, Existence and Debt. Faulkes (1987:18), with minimal

\(^{132}\) Kragerud 1981, however, bases his understanding of nornir almost entirely on Fáfnismál.

\(^{133}\) In Egils saga 56 (IF 2:149).

\(^{134}\) FSN I:1-105.
translation, calls them Weird, Verdandi and Skuld, and Byock (2005:26) gives both
the ‘original’ forms Urd, Verdandi and Skuld alongside translations: Fate, Becoming
and Obligation. All of these are valid attempts at translating the names whilst also
nearing some sort of explanation of the nature of the beings behind them, though
one must keep in mind that translation always involves some degree of
interpretation. The semantic content of a word is translatable but it is rarely possible
to convey the same set of associations as those conjured up by the word in its
original language. This means that difficult choices often have to be made in the
process of translation, not least because the semantic content of a word may
undergo significant changes over time so that it may in fact be quite far removed
from the etymological root meaning of the word:

Die Etymologie ist ein fragwürdiges Mittel zur Erschließung einer konkreten
religiösen oder weltbildhaften Vorstellung; sie kann stets nur Stütze, nie aber
Rückgrat der semantischen Interpretation sein.
(Weber 1969:11)

‘Etymology is a questionable means of accessing a concrete idea relating to
religion or world-view; it can only remain a supporting tool, never the
backbone of a semantic interpretation.’

It is not uncommon to read the three names as conveying a representation of past,
present and future, respectively, and a closer look at two Old Norse verbs reveals
how such interpretations are reached.

The noun urðr translates as ‘fate’ (f.) but can also mean ‘death’ (m.); it is
etymologically cognate with Old English wyrd (see VI.1.) and is probably connected
to the verb verða, ‘to happen, come to pass, take place’ (lew:145). The past plural
form of verða is urðu, describing those things which ‘came about’ or ‘did happen’,

---

135 Translation kindly provided by Jürgen Einhoff.
137 Winterbourne gives an in-depth philosophical discussion of the relationship between fate
and time. He argues convincingly that fate and time are not the same concept: “Fate cannot
be calculated, although it was often thought that it could be divined: for it has to do with
intuition, not calculation. Fate stands outside of all comprehended nature and hence outside
of time: ‘Time may show, / But cannot alter, what shall be. / Events will take their way. Even
as the prophet’s words foreshadowed all’ [Aeschylus, Agamemnon, 250-54; 1959:51]. This is
the message that we will find confirmed again and again in what follows, no matter that our
first intuition is to believe that fate and time must be related by some inner necessity. That
fate is, however, a supratemporal concept, seems to have been understood implicitly by
many mythologies. Since causality itself has nothing to do with time but instead gives
directedness to time for human consciousness, the ‘three-body problem’ reduces to no
problem at all: for time=fate, causality=time, and fate=causality. Causality’s concern is that
something happens – not when it happens” (Winterbourne 2004:18).
and the similarity between urðr, 'fate', and urðu, 'happened', is perhaps what has given rise to the interpretation of Urðr as 'Past'. 139 'Past' as a chronologically bygone period of time, however, does not seem to be especially close to the semantic content of the word urðr as it occurs in the literature (see below).

There is broad agreement on regarding the name Verðandi as a relatively recent addition to the triad. It, too, is connected to the verb verða of which it is the present participle form and thus translatable as 'happening, becoming, taking place now', yielding the interpretation 'Present' (LP:605-606; C/V:695-696).

The name Skuld is related to the noun skuld, meaning 'debt' or 'something owed', and in Christian interpretation it came to mean 'guilt' as well (LP:514). It is related to the verb skulu, cognate with English 'shall', and has a range of different meanings: 'shall, must; bidding, need, duty, obligation'. This modal verb carries, amongst other meanings, a sense of events to come and it can be used to create a periphrastic future tense (there is no non-periphrastic future tense in Old Norse), hence the interpretation 'Future' (Frzt III:394; LP:514; C/V:560). However, one might add that 'debt' certainly also indicates something in the past, when the debt was incurred, not just in the future, when it has to be paid back. 139 The noun skuld is rather far removed from the semantic content of 'chronological future'.

It seems to be this etymologically based interpretation of the three named nornir which gives rise to viewing them as representatives for, respectively, past, present and future. The most noteworthy aspect of this interpretation is that it probably goes back as far as both Snorri and the author of Völuspá; the inclusion of Verðandi and Snorri’s reference to one norn as the 'youngest' appears to indicate this (Simek 1993:237). The interpretation cannot therefore be discarded altogether, but it must be emphasised that it is a reading which is closely connected to the triad of names and that certain reservations arise concerning this understanding of the names.

The name Skuld appears elsewhere as the name of a valkyra; Völuspá 30 mentions her and five other valkyrja 140 and Gylfaginning 36 describes her as a cross-over figure, norn-and-valkyra, saying that: Guðr ok Rota ok norn in yngsta er

---

138 Ström (1985:203) and Stefánsson (2005:169-170) suggest that time was seen as the force of fate and that this is the origin of the Urðr-Past interpretation. I am not convinced by the fate-time equation.

139 I am grateful to John McKinnell, University of Durham, for suggesting this. John Lindow, however, is of the opinion that "The tangible value of a debt is wholly in the future" (personal communication 3.8.2007).

140 There is no indication in the poem itself that Skuld in Völuspá 20 is at all different from Skuld in Völuspá 30.
Skuld heitir ríða jafnan at kiósá val ok ráða vígum, 'Gunn and Rota and the youngest nor, called Skuld, always ride to choose who shall be slain and to govern the killings' (Faulkes 1987:31). Both names relate to battle activities, Gunnr (or Guðr) means 'war, battle' (Frzt I:665; 659) and Rota, 'heavy downpour' (Frzt III:131), usually of rain but as a valkyrjá-name probably of arrows or spears. Here, Skuld not only appears in a different group of three, consisting of valkyrjur, but is also seen to participate with them in the battle itself which, judging by the fact that Snorri specifies this, appears to be something that he regards as unusual behaviour for nornir in general: neither Urðr nor Verðandi are said to do this. Skuld is also given an age, being 'the youngest norn', a statement that seems based on an interpretation of her as the future, which is yet to come and is therefore 'younger' than the present and the past. But this is as close as she gets to the 'future' she supposedly represents. While it is possible to read a specific type of event that will happen in the future into the associations surrounding Skuld, namely death, there is no general sense of a 'time to come' attached to her.141 The notion of death would also go rather well with her concerns for the battlefield as one of the places where valkyrjur and nornir are likely to merge in issues of life or death. There is no reason to believe that skuld contains associations of a chronological period to come or represents the concept of future as such. To regard this figure as a representative for the 'Future' is a highly selective reading of the name and the way in which this figure is described. If anything, she comes close to Nemesis – a menacing, threatening figure representing the consequences of previous events or actions which will inevitably catch up with the individual in the end.

In the light of the varied occurrences and descriptions of a character called Skuld, it could be argued that the name or the figure has been borrowed from one group of beings into the other,142 or it may have to be granted that she simply spans that grey area where nornir and valkyrjur overlap. Warmind (1997:197) notes, and rightly so, that it is a little odd that only one norn is mentioned in the long lists of valkyrjur – why not the others? Skuld is singled out as being unlike other nornir because of this aspect of her behaviour, giving her an individuality in a group of predominantly faceless beings, and so it would seem fair to regard her as a somewhat unusual

141 Death, however, might equally well be regarded as belonging to the past, as those who have died are in neither the chronological present nor the future. I agree with Winterbourne (2004:15-18; 49-59; 115) that the whole idea that fate=time misses the point.

142 McKinnell (1994:107) suggests that the name was borrowed from the nornir into the group of valkyrjur; judging by the semantic content of the name and the noun this does seem the more logical option (see III.1.1. and III.1.3.).
nom, if a norn at all, possibly one that has metamorphosed into something else or has been incorporated from elsewhere. At the same time, this merging also shows that, certainly around the time when Völuspá was composed, nornir and valkyrjur were seen as very closely related and overlapping groups of beings.

The name Verðandi occurs only in these two texts, Völuspá and Snorra-Edda, Snorri having probably derived it from Völuspá. There is little to say about her as an independent character; the fact that her name is exactly the present participle form of verða definitely points towards a temporal interpretation of the Völuspá-nornir, but it also makes her appear as little more than a grammatical link between the ones that supposedly represent the past and the future. The transparent relationship between the name and the verb verða would seem to point in the direction of a relatively recent name rather than an ancient one, though this may say little about the age of the character hiding behind the name. Holtsmark (1951:88) suggests that the name has been made up ad hoc simply in order to complete an ideological triple figure and this may well be the case as nothing else is known about her.

The name Urðr, on the other hand, is certainly old and is closely linked to the concept of fate. As Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson says: "Urðr... is... without doubt the power of destiny in which ancient people generally believed" (1999:47). The name tends to occur in the genitive form, either with ominous content, such as the urðar máni, 'weird moon' in Eyrbyggja saga 52 that appears on the wall one evening and is regarded as a death omen, or with some other mysterious meaning, such as urðar magni, 'with weird power or fateful power' in Guðrúnarkviða II 21. It is etymologically cognate with Old English wyrd, "fate" and with Old High German wurt, both probably stemming from Indo-European *wert which means 'to twist' and is related to Latin vertere, 'turning' (de Vries 1956:270; IeW:145). As Giannakis says: "The semantic development of words meaning 'turn' into the semantic sphere of 'be, happen', also with reference to terminology pertaining to fate, appears to be quite

143 AM 448 4o c.1686 (copy of the lost Vatnsbyrna).
144 This recalls the English phrase 'the weird sisters' referring to 'the three fates', usually the Classical ones. This phrase is often used colloquially about the three witches portrayed by Shakespeare in Macbeth, but in fact Shakespeare uses the adjective 'weyward', not 'weird' (Act I, scene 3; Act III, scene 1; Act IV, scene 1). However, the account of the Macbeth story given by Andrew of Wyntoun in his Orygynale Cronikyl of Scotland, c.1420, does use 'wercd': "Him thocht, till he wes sa sattand, He saw thre women by ganggan, And pai thre women pan thocht he Thre werd sisteris like to be." (Amours 1906:274). The quotation is from the Wemyss text, chapter CXVIII, lines 1899-1908, but the Cottonian text, chapter XVIII, line 1862, also uses 'wercd', although it differs a little from the Wemyss text in its general orthography. These 'wercd sisteris' predict the future of Makbeth (as Wyntoun has the name).
common" (1999:100). What is interesting is that *wyrd occurs with conspicuous frequency in Old English literature, some 200 instances, with Old High German *wurt merely once and Old Norse urðr 15 times (Weber 1969:17). See also VI.1.1. and VI.1.2. below.

This etymological basis is often taken to provide a connection between fate and the image of spinning, a very prominent image not only in popular imagination but also in scholarship. It is, however, a connection which is in danger of bypassing the semantic development of both verbs, *verða and *spíanna, because it is uncertain when 'turning around rapidly' became the semantic content of 'spinning' (see also V.2.). The original meaning of 'to spin' was 'to draw out, pull out' (AeW:535; Pokorny 1959:988) - for example a spider 'spins' by 'drawing out', not by 'turning around.' The problem here is the relationship between etymology and semantic content. There is no evidence that a form of the verb *verða has ever been used to describe the activity of spinning as in 'creating threads', and if spinning was conceived of as 'drawing out' rather than 'turning around' then the urðr-*verða-spinning constellation falls apart. In English, the first recorded instance of 'spinning' used in the sense of 'revolving, whirling round' stems from 1667 (OED X:602-603), and such a late date indicates that we may have to revise our ideas about how urðr and *spíanna relate to one another in Old Norse. Spinning does seem to be related to fate but in ways other than through *verða, *vertere and *wert (see chapter VI). Moreover, the norn personified through the name Urðr is never portrayed as having links to spinning or to other forms of textile work at all. While it may not be possible to dismiss a link between Urðr and spinning altogether, the evidence for it is no more than tentative at best.

As an aside, a connection between fate and turning in a less specific meaning is hinted at in the English phrases 'to turn into' and 'to turn out to be', both using the turning motion to describe the act of becoming. This idea of a relationship between 'becoming' and 'turning' is employed in Hávamál 84:

Meylar orðom
skyli manngi trúá,
né því er kveðr kona;
þvían á hverfanda hvéli
vóro þelm hírto skópoð,
brigð í brióst um lagið.

The words of a maiden
no man should trust,
nor what a woman says;
because on a turning wheel
hearts were created for them,
unreliability placed in their breast.

73
The stanza says that women's hearts cannot be trusted because they have been made on a hverandi hvéli, 'turning wheel'. No association is made to spinning at all in the image. The idea conveyed is changeability so that the turning motion is associated with change, much as it is on a wheel of fortune. This would seem to point towards unpredictability rather than spinning which, as a work task, is anything but unpredictable.

However, while there seems to be a genuine etymological relationship forming the constellation urðr-verðandi-turning, there is no indication that urðr carries associations either of 'spinning' or of 'the past' in general. Urðr's relationship to 'the past' may well be similar to that of Skuld's to 'the future' because what was laid down or came into being in the past has obviously had some influence on events following on from that; in the same way a debt not only has to be paid later on, it has to be incurred first. Thus, these two names that, supposedly, divide into 'the past' and 'the future' do not actually cover the temporal concepts in a way which clearly separates them from one another – both can be seen to incorporate certain aspects of chronological past and future. The names Urðr and Skuld do not by themselves convey the temporal meaning of 'past' and 'future' and it seems that the idea of nornir as representatives of time hinges on Verandi, the one whose name looks like a recent addition and of whom we know so little. The triad of names is "in all likelihood not very old" (Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999:47).

The temporal interpretation can certainly be regarded as present in Völuspá although the names can obviously also be understood simply as 'fate', 'existence' and 'debt'. If Verandi is truly an ad hoc addition then it may be the poet's intention to create an additional layer of meaning to the names Urðr and Skuld, a connection that can (but must not necessarily) be made, namely the temporal understanding, without erasing their 'original' meanings, namely 'fate' and 'debt'.

The temporal understanding of the nornir does not seem to occur outside of Völuspá and Snorra-Edda and this makes it somewhat problematic. It does not

---

145 The stanza is followed by a whole list of things that one should be wary of, amongst them volo vilmael, 'sayings by a volva of what you would like to hear', stanza 87 (see also VI.4.2.).
146 How such different ideas can be accepted side by side seemingly without raising any questions in the scholarship remains baffling to me. What does 'the past' have to do with 'spinning'? How are these two ideas meant to relate to each other?
147 Again, this may be indicative of the problems that arise from attempts to correlate fate with time (Winterbourne 2004).
148 I am grateful to Patricia Boulhosa, University of Cambridge, for pointing this out.
appear to be the original underlying conception of nornir and its occurrence in Völuspá may be due to later interpretations, possibly Christian.\textsuperscript{149}

Returning briefly to the notion that these meyjar may not actually be nornir (see above), there is another way of regarding them as quasi-representatives of past, present and future.

That Urðr, who is almost certainly a norn, represents the past is supported by Hallfreðr's stanza where nornir are associated with the heathen beliefs that Hallfreðr is turning away from as he becomes Christian. Thus, the nornir are now in the past for Hallfreðr. It is at least possible that a similar association is made in Völuspá which is itself a product of the period of crossing over from the heathen to the Christian world view and is also on the whole very much concerned with the past, the present and the future.

That Skuld, the valkyrja, represents the future may be connected to the fact that the völva foresees the battle of Ragnarök; as a valkyrja she is closely connected to warfare and the war is coming. In Völuspá 30, the völva sees Skuld and other valkyrjur riding to the battle.

Then there is Verðandi, who represents the present. She could potentially be the völva herself who may be seen to determine the course of events as she speaks. That is, by speaking them out loud she is turning her prophecies into reality, making them happen — that is why she is Verðandi 'becoming' (see VI.4.1. and VI.4.2.).

Together, these three otherworldly women from the well determine the fate of human beings and they all bring otherworldly knowledge of some kind.

IV.1.2. Three Nornir?

Concerning the trinity of nornir, it is true that nornir have a strong tendency to appear in the plural as a collective group of beings instead of easily distinguished individuals, but the number of nornir in the group is rarely specified. We cannot tell for sure how many there are; three seems a good suggestion but so does nine.\textsuperscript{150} It is possible that Völuspá names three because this poem at several points concerns itself with groups of three, mentioning three also when the beings referred to clearly

\textsuperscript{149}Christianity might have found good use for the Skuld figure, presenting a notion of sin or guilt and emphasising the idea that past sins must be paid for in the future.

\textsuperscript{150}Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar 28 mentions þrennar niundir meyjar, 'three times nine maidens', apparently valkyrjur; the late medieval Barlaams ok Josaphats saga 136 mentions nine daughters of Þorr, whom the text calls nornir; Heimdallr is said to have nine mothers, all of whom are sisters (Hynduljóð 34-36; Gylfaginning 27), and Ægir has nine daughters. Nine seems to recur as frequently as three when supernatural women are counted.
belong to groups larger than three: in stanza 8 three pursa meyiars, ‘giant maidens’ appear and in stanza 17 three æsir, but it seems unlikely that we should understand from this that there are only three pursa meyiars and only three æsir. It is more probable that, in Volsunga-þap, such mentions consist of three very significant figures from those groups. The same is possibly the case for the three nornir who are given names in this poem, although this also recalls the votive altars dedicated to three mother-figures (III.2.1.).

It is interesting that Snorri mentions not only three named nornir but also states, almost as if changing his mind in mid-sentence, that there are other nornir, too; this may be due to an attempt to incorporate contradicting sources whilst maintaining that the information given in Volsunga-þap is correct. Fáfnismál 13 reflects both ideas: that there are three and that there are more than three nornir:

Sunndbrornar\textsuperscript{152} miðk
segi ek at nornir sé,
eigot þær ætt saman;
sumar ero Æskungar,
sumar álflungar,
sumar dætr Dvalins.\textsuperscript{153}

Of different origins
are nornir, I say,
they are not related;
some are of the æsir,
some are of the álfar,
some are the daughters of Dvalin.

The fact that Fáfnismál states in the plural that some are of this group and some of that group indicates that the poem considers there to be more than three nornir, otherwise one would expect there to be one of this kind and one of that kind. The formulaic sumar sumar sumar of this stanza strongly recalls the suma suma suma list of supernatural women found in the First Merseburg Charm (see V.7.; cf. Lindquist 1923:17-18). In fact, the impression given by Fáfnismál could even be that the term norn describes some sort of occupation rather than a separate class of beings as the nornir are said here to be of the æsir, the álfar and the dvergar,\textsuperscript{154} and therefore might not represent an independent class of beings. The stanza could refer to three families of nornir (Holtsmark 1951:88; Lindow 2001:245) so that dverga-nornir attend the births of dwarves, áss-nornir those of æsir and so on (although see also Kragerud 1981:14). However, it might also be that the term nornir has merged with vglur who emulate nornir by making prophecies and by being able to access knowledge hidden from most people (see VI.4.). It is furthermore possible that

\textsuperscript{151} These pursa meyiars are sometimes interpreted as nornir (Larrington 1996:264; Kragerud 1981:14).

\textsuperscript{152} Volsunga-þap 18 has sundrflausar, ‘unlike each other’ (Grimstad 2000:140).

\textsuperscript{153} A similar division, only four-part, occurs in Hávamál 143.

\textsuperscript{154} Liberman 2002 discusses the idea of female dwarves, a seemingly exclusively male race.
Fáfnismál lists three kinds of nornir due to some more or less vague recollection of the triple formula in the much older First Merseburg Charm.

Finally, the idea of three nornir in Völuspá and Snorra-Edda may be influenced by Classical tradition, which portrays a number of beings rather like nornir and often, though by no means always, as triple. The parallel most often drawn is to the moirai (see III.3.), but Greek tradition provides another rather striking example of a three-in-one figure in the form of Hekate. Although she belongs with the Titans, Hekate is accepted into the group of Olympian gods where she is a highly honoured, if somewhat uncouth, goddess. Her domain is the night, her animal is the dog and she is patroness of the Greek version of the Wild Hunt (Hjortsø 1984:19-20), but she was also worshipped as a goddess of fertility, which means that she encompasses a similar set of benign and evil associations as is attached to the disir and nornir. She is connected to roads and to journeying, possibly primarily journeying to the world of the dead (Rudebeck 2002:179). Statues of her were displayed at cross-roads and at times these consisted of three female bodies, at times of a pole with three masks, each of the three facing in a different direction so as to enable Hekate to look in all directions at once. She appears to have been

155 Brednich 1964 discusses female triads in folktales about fate, esp. ATU 930-934.
156 The Wild Hunt refers to a belief in a ghostly host riding through the stormy skies around midwinter. In southern Scandinavia the concept was, at least in later times, connected to Öðinn as god of the dead and of ecstatic fury (cf. the Swedish term Odens jakt, 'Öðinn's hunt'). It has been connected to the cult activities of warrior bands (Simek 1993:372-373).
worshipped primarily by women (Hjortsø 1984:19-20). This triple goddess recalls both the Old Norse Urðr and also Hel, who overlap with one another (see IV.2.2.). The Urðr-figure encountered in Völuspá may possibly also be seen as triple: the most dominant one out of a group of three.157

As mentioned above (III.1.1.), the Saami have a group of female beings sometimes regarded as a group of three, namely the akkas.158 The three daughters of Maderakka whose names are Sarakka, Juksakka and Uksakka (Bäckman 1984:32; Frils 1871:87). Of these four goddesses, one is the mother of the other three and so she is a figure who can in herself be seen as a three-in-one representation of them all. The three daughter-figures fulfil different but closely related roles: Sarakka gives an unborn child its appearance and physical skills and she appears to be closely connected also to the actual birth and to female children; Juksakka seems to be a goddess of masculinity and of hunting who is connected to male children (her name derives from juoks, 'hunting bow');159 Uksakka seems to be connected to doorways and her role is to protect the child after it is born. Her name derives from the word ukse 'door'. The name of Maderakka is etymologically related to words for ' ancestress' and 'great-grandmother', perhaps also to words meaning 'earth' and 'ground' (Ränk 1955:17-18).160

The group of three nornir found in Old Norse tradition seems to hint a little at the dominance of one of the three figures, namely Urðr, but simultaneously also at a functional differentiation in singling out Skuld as doing something different from the other two. In this way, both Urðr and Skuld may be seen to stand out from the group. It may be that the three nornir constitute an Old Norse version of beings

157 Although Völuspá does not portray her as more dominant than Verðandi or Skuld, the fact that her name means 'fate' arguably gives her more weight than the other two.
158 However, traditions about their enumeration vary: "The South Saami tradition has numerous aahka female divinities... In the North Saami areas of Finland, only Mättaråkkä was known, not her daughters" (Kulonen 2005:281).
159 In this respect she recalls the Norse Skaði.
160 Also interesting is the strong Celtic tradition of female deities in triple form, for example the three Brighids where Brighid is a goddess of poetry, divination and prophecy whilst her two sister Brighids are associated with, respectively, healing and craftsmanship (MacCana 1996:33-34). There are also the three Machas, all of whom are associated with war but who furthermore connect closely to the land, its fertility and cultivation (MacCana 1996:87-89; MacKillop 2004:412-413; ÓhÓgáin 2006:325-327). The triple form also comes across with male deities in Celtic tradition, for example the god Lug who is said to have two brothers (Sjoestedt 2000:43) – perhaps somewhat reminiscent of the Norse Øðinn and his two obscure brothers Vé and Vili. Also Celtic iconography shows "the frequent images of a three-headed divinity" (MacCana 1996:43) and one of the golden horns from c.400 AD found at Gallehus in southern Denmark depicts a three-headed figure, too (Page 1987:28). Clearly, there is much that can be said about triads, but this is a discussion which lies outwith the scope of the present study.
similar to Hekate, moirai and akkas. There are no exact cross-cultural parallels but neither would one expect this to be the case; each geographical and chronological entity conjures up its own figures with their specific associations. Even within the Old Norse cultural area and period we cannot be certain that ideas about nornir did not change from one region to another, even if the same word was used. There is a strong tendency for them to occur as a group consisting of an unspecified number of individual beings whereas the number three is only mentioned a few times.

The idea of three nornir may be very old, as the Germanic votive altars could indicate (see III.2.1.), though in text sources we have little to go by outside of Völuspá and Snorra-Edda; yet the three names: Urðr, Verðandi, Skuld, does not seem to be an ancient set (cf. de Vries 1956:272-273).

IV.1.3. Good and Evil Nornir?
As seen in Gylfaginning 15 above, Snorri focuses on the appearance of nornir at childbirth as well as on their ability to allot good and bad to human beings. This deviates strongly from the evidence of skaldic poetry and possibly points to some degree of Classical influence. His statement that good nornir allot good lives whereas evil nornir allot bad lives, so like the division into white and black disir in ðborganda þáttir, looks rather like a late, systematic rationalisation of their benign and terrifying aspects into two separate categories of nornir. If we accept this division, then it would appear that the nornir encountered in the poetry come almost exclusively out of the evil group, perhaps because it is easier to recognise their powers when these are employed with negative results but more likely because they always had strong connotations of death.161 Bæksted (1965:180) says about nornir: Det er gennemgående ikke lys tillid og glad forhåbning, der kommer til orde, hvor deres forhold til mennesket omtales, 'It is generally not happy confidence and cheerful hopes that are expressed when their relationship to mankind is mentioned.' An understatement indeed. There are precious few good and kind nornir to be found in the sources; I count only two examples of such outwith Snorra-Edda and Völuspá.162 Quite typical is the remark in þurír. Nornir heita þær er nauð skapa, 'Nornir they are called, who create necessity [distress]' (Faulkes 1998:115), underlining the notion

161 Kragerud (1981:12-13) discusses good and evil nornir as a traditional division, although it seems that all the examples he draws on portray the evil kind.
162 Helgakviða Hundingsbana I and Torf-Einarr being the clearest examples (see V.2. and III.1.1.1.).
that nornir represent all sorts of hardship that one may encounter in life and there is an air of unyielding inevitability about the phrase. The fate which they stand for is rarely a good one. Out of a total of 29 occurrences of the word nornir or forms thereof, a tiny majority of 15 occur with clearly negative value.\textsuperscript{163} This means that 14 occur with non-negative value. Most of these non-negative references are more neutral, some are enigmatic but few can be said to be directly positive, although such value judgements are obviously dependent on interpretation. When looking at the whole, the negative portrayals do not have a strong majority; more interesting is the fact that the positive portrayals have such a clear minority.

Whereas nornir are normally defined by their actions – by verbs describing what they do – some instances use adjectives to describe what they are. Sigurdarkviða in skamma 7 is an example, referring to lótar nornir, 'loathsome nornir' as well as grimmar urðir, 'grim fates' (see III.1.1.2.) and Reginsmál 2 mentions a norn of a similar kind:

\begin{align*}
\text{Andvari ek heiti,} & \quad \text{Andvari I am called,} \\
\text{Öinn hét minn faðir,} & \quad \text{Öinn my father was called,} \\
\text{margan hefi ek fors um farit;} & \quad \text{I have passed over many a waterfall;} \\
\text{aumílig norn} & \quad \text{a miserable norn} \\
\text{skop oss í árdaga,} & \quad \text{decided for me long ago,} \\
\text{at ek skylda í vatni vaða.} & \quad \text{that I should wade the water.}
\end{align*}

This norn is described as aumílig, which translates as 'pitiable' (Frz I:99), 'miserable' (AeW:19), 'poor, wretched' (C/V:34). According to the dictionaries, the word seems to encompass both meanings of 'miserable': it can mean that you feel pity for the person who is miserable but it can also mean that they are evil. Here, it seems to be the latter sense because Andvari evidently feels sorry for himself rather than for the norn. He appears to make a moral judgement on the norn, finding her decisions contemptible and therefore he considers her to be despicable.

In Atliakviða 16 we get a picture of nornir which initially looks remarkably humane:

\begin{align*}
\text{Betr hefðir þú, bróðir!} & \quad \text{It were better, brother} \\
\text{at þú í brynio faerir,} & \quad \text{if you'd come in armour,} \\
\text{sem hiálmom aringrey pom;} & \quad \text{like hearth-encircling helmets,} \\
\text{at síá heim Atla,} & \quad \text{to see Atli's home,} \\
\text{sætir þú í sǫðlum} & \quad \text{had you sat in the saddle}
\end{align*}

\textsuperscript{163} Clearly negative mentions are: Borgund; Norna-Gests þátr; Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks; þulur, Krákumál; Kveldulf; Ynglingatal 24; Hamálsmál 29,30; Guðrúnargyfd; Atlakviða; Sigurðarkviða in skamma; Fáfnismál 11; Reginsmál; Helgakviða Hundingsbana II.

\textsuperscript{164} Aringrey pom, 'hearth-encircling', an obscure word found only in Atliakviða 1, 3, 16.
The image here is that even the nornir would have wept over the tremendous number of men whom Gunnarr would have killed had he only come to Atli’s place prepared for war. Making nornir weep is, one would imagine after the description given, no easy matter and the allusion is indeed to some indescribable carnage. Thus, while it is revealed to us that nornir can feel pity for human life, this must be seen as a reference to their gloomy aspects given what it would actually take to make them feel that way. It is telling that, although Atlakviða 16 describes them as possessing humane feelings, this is made clear only in the context of death and battle. That is, although the emotion must be said to be a positive one it nevertheless requires a negative situation to produce it and so the nornir remain associated with the darker aspects of life and with death. The description makes it clear that nornir would not weep over one life, nor over two or three or a mere handful – one hesitates to imagine exactly what it would take to make them weep; indeed, Jón Helgason (1962:154) interprets the phrase as meaning no tears at all. Of interest is the alliterating combination of nornir with the word nauðr, ‘need, necessity, distress’, found also in the pulur and Fáfnismál 12; nauðr is used as the name for the N-rune, too (Frz II:794; LP:422), a connection evidently made between Sigdrífrmundl 7: ok merkia á nagli Nauð, ‘and mark your nail with nauð [presumably the N-rune]’ and 17: á nornar nagli, ‘on the nail of the norr’ (cf.

---

165 ÁBM:321 suggests hervi means ‘to harrow’, working the soil. The English metaphorical use of this, meaning ‘to ravage’, does not work in Old Norse because the words have separate forms: Herja, ‘to ravage’ and hervi, ‘to harrow’.


167 McKinnell, Simek and Düwel (2004:140) say about this: “The name of the rune n (nauð) seems to have meant originally ‘need; destitution’, but also ‘strong (sexual?) compulsion’, and probably also ‘fetter, captivity’. Whatever its meaning originally was (and in the charm it seems to involve some sort of negative compulsion, and elsewhere in ON literature some sort of danger to one’s existence or wellbeing), it clearly became associated through the name of the rune with the rune itself, and the alliterating formula niú nauðr ‘nine nauðs’ was used as a charm for warding off evil.” Could this mean that we have to revise our understanding of the word nauðgonglar (see III.1.1.2.) away from ‘women in childbirth’ to ‘people in deadly peril?’ (see also note 65).
This apparently close connection between nornir and nauð seems to emphasise that they were thought of primarily in relation to issues of distress, although this may have found positive (Fáfnismál) as well as negative (pulur, Atlakviða) expression. If anything, Atlakviða 16, despite its reference to emotional sympathy on their part, reinforces the stern aspect of the nornir.

This situation is reiterated in one of the runic inscriptions, c.1180 (Olsen 1957:150), from Borgund church in Sogn, Norway, which reads:

\[
\text{bôrir ræist runar píssar þan olaus messo æþpan } [e] \text{rhan for herum bæþegerpöno(r)ner } \text{uæl ok illa mikla } \text{mæþe } g \text{ skapaþu } \text{þærmer}
\]

(normalised: bórir reist rúnar þessar þann Ólausmessuaptan, er hann fór hér um. Bæði gerðu nornir vel ok illa; mikla mæði } [g]^{168} \text{ skopuðu þær mér}

(Olsen 1957:149)

'Bórir cut these runes on the Olav's mass evening\(^{169}\) when he came by here. The nornir decided on both good and evil, for me they have decided on much suffering.'

![Figure 3. Runic inscription no. IV from Borgund.](image)

This inscription, number IV of the Borgund inscriptions, has nornir in charge of both good and bad, after which it goes on to lament that they seem to have laid only evil things in bórir's path. The inscription, however, attaches both good and evil aspects to the same one group of nornir, it does not refer to two separate types of nornir the way Snorri does.

\(^{168}\) About this loose G-rune, McKinnell, Simek and Düwel (2004:130) say: "The single g ... may have been the beginning of the verb gerðu, with the carver then realising that he had already used this verb and that skapa would be preferable. The Christian context and the cruciform shape of the inscription make it seem unlikely that Thorir believed in the norns as more than a figure of speech."

\(^{169}\) Olav's mass evening falls on July 28 (Olsen 1957:150).
A systematisation into good and evil nornir similar to Snorri's is found in the late Norna-Gests pátr 11, but here it is difficult to distinguish between supernatural and human prophecy makers as the text employs a range of different words to describe the women in question. Although this story belongs to the relatively late medieval material, that is the fornalðarsögur, it is of some interest here for the very detailed account it gives:

Par för þá um landit völur, er kallaðar váru spákonur ok spáðu mönnum aldr. Því buðu menn þeim ok gerðu þeim veizlur ok gáfu þeim gjafir at skilnaði. Faðir minn gerði ok svá, ok kómu þær til hans með svelt manna, ok skyldu þær spá mér orlög. Lá ek þá í vöggú, er þær skyldu tala um mitt mál. Þá brunnu yfir mér tvau kertisljós. Þær mæltu þá til mín ok sögðu mik mikinn auðnumann verða mundu ok meira en aðra mín í prelóða eða hófölingja syni þar í landi ok sögðu allt svá skyldu fara um mitt ráð. In yngsta normin þóttist of fúils metin hjá hinum tveimr, er þær spurðu hana eigi eftir sílum spám, er svá várú mikils verðar. Var þar ok mikil ribbalda svelt, er henni hratt ór sæti sínu, ok fell hún til jarðar.

Af þessu varð hún ákafa stygg. Kallar hún þá hátt ok reiðiliga ok bað hinar hættu svá góðum ummælum við mik, - "því at ek skapa honum þat, at hann skal eigi lífa lengr en kerti þat brennr, er upp er tendrat hjá sveininum." Eftir þetta tók í ellri völvan kertit ok slókkta ok blór möðir mín varðveita ok kveykja eigi fyr en á síðasta degi lífs mín. Eftir þetta fóru spákonur í burt ok bundu ína ungú norn ok hafa hana svá í burt, ok gaf faðir minn þeim góðar gjafir at skilnaði.

(FSN 1:333)

"Then there were völur travelling about the country, who were called speywives and who foretold men's lives. People used to invite them to attend feasts and give them gifts when they left. My father also did so and they came to his place with a flock of people and they were to prophesy my fate. I lay in the cradle and they were to foretell my destiny. There were two candles burning above me. They then spoke and said that I would be a very lucky person and more so than both my parents or any chieftain's son in the country and they said that such would be the long and the short of my lot. The youngest norm thought she was not appreciated by the other two as they did not ask her to give a prophecy of such importance. There was also a group of thugs that pushed her off her seat so that she fell to the ground. Therefore she was very angry. She calls out loud and in an angry manner and told the other two to stop saying such favourable things to me, "because I lay down for him that he shall not live longer than the candle burns, the one which is lit beside the boy."

After that the older völva took the candle and put it out and bade my mother take care of it and not light it until on the last day of my life. After this the speywives went away and bound the young norm and then took her away like that, and my father gave them good farewell-gifts."

(My translation)

170 One of the þaettir inserted into Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar hin mesta in Flateyjarbók c.1387-1395.
The phrase: “There were vǫlur travelling about the country, who were called speywives” serves to underline the fact that the terminology employed is loose at best; in this text the women are referred to as vǫlur, as spákonur and also as nornir. Yet, it may not be quite as coincidental a use of terms as it first seems. Only one of them is referred to as a norn, namely in yngsta nornir, ‘the youngest norn’. The terms vǫlur and spákonur are used collectively and apparently entirely interchangeably for this group of three women so it is very hard to discover any useful distinction between these two words here. However, it may well be of some significance that the one who is singled out as a norn is also the troublesome one who wishes to shorten the boy’s life as much as possible; it is after all the word norn which takes on the meaning of ‘witch’ during the Middle Ages. It seems that the association of nornir with things such as death, suffering and bad luck was perhaps even predisposed to dominate their image, possibly because they carried these connotations even in heathen times, although later Christian demonisation of all types of heathen beings must also be allowed as influence. Vǫlur and spákonur have mostly affable associations in this text.

The one who is the norn is also said to be the youngest, recalling Snorri’s phrase in Gylfaginning 36: norn hin yngsta er Skuld heitir, ‘the youngest norn who is called Skuld’, and where Skuld is described as going off to the battlefield in the company of vækyrjur, so that she is singled out in relation to the other nornir. There is a correspondence between norn hin yngsta and in yngsta nornin and it may be that she is regarded as especially bloodthirsty and active when it comes to the taking of life. However, this can only be said for those few and fairly late sources that actually specify that the nornir are a group of three and regard one as younger than the

---

171 Norna-Gests þátrr is alone in employing the term norn; elsewhere such prophetesses are referred to as vǫlur, spákonur or selðkonur (cf. Eiríks saga rauða 4, IF 4:206; Órvar-Odds saga 2, FSN II:205) but not as nornir.

172 A section from Montgomerie’s Answer to Polwart, part of The Flying Betwixt Montgomerie and Polwart, c.1580, portrays three ‘weird sisters’, here the Classical Fates, supposedly making predictions at Polwart’s birth (Bawcutt and Riddy 1987:282-285). They are described as being like witches and unanimously agree on pronouncing only bad things for Polwart, culminating in an interesting description of a three-fold death for him; he should die “surely of a shot”, “of a running knot” and “by throwing of the thrort” (1987:284). That is, he will feel a sharp pain (which is the sense of the word ‘shot’ here), he will be hanged and drowned (cf. Gautreks saga 7 [FSN IV:31], c.1600-1700). I am grateful to Neill Martin, University of Edinburgh, for this reference. However, in The Flying, the three ‘weird sisters’ act “all in one voyce” (1987:284), whereas in Norna-Gests þátrr the third one is different from the first two (cf. the birth of Meleagros, see note 268).

173 Only one of these three women is evil, the other two are good; the benign ones prevail in the story, showing the mother how to combat the evil prediction.
It seems sensible to be very careful about what arguments can be based on Snorri's good nornir and evil nornir.

Gesta Danorum Book 6 (4,12) paints a similar picture of two women who make favourable prophecies about Fridleuus's son, Olauus, whereas the third one 'was evil' and therefore makes an unfavourable prophecy:


(Saxo Grammaticus 2005:378)

'It was a custom among the ancients to consult the oracles of the Fates concerning the future lives of their children. Fridlef intended to investigate the fortunes of his son by this ritual, and having offered solemn vows approached the goddesses' temple in prayer; here, peering into the shrine, he recognised the three maidens sitting in their respective seats. The first indulgently bestowed on the boy a handsome appearance and a plentiful share of men's good-will. The second presented him with abundant generosity. The third, a woman of rather petulant and jealous disposition, spurned the unanimous favours of her sisters and, in a wish to mar their blessings, implanted the fault of meanness in the boy's future character. That was how Olaf, when the others' benefits had been vitiated by the mischief of a gloomier destiny, received a name from the two types of offering, niggardliness mixed with liberality. So it was that this blemish, conferred as part of the gift, upset the sweetness of the earlier kindness.'

(Saxo Grammaticus 1979:169)

The words used by Saxo are Parcae and nymphis, 'Fates' and 'maidens' and the fact that he uses them suggests that people were at least aware of the Classical Fates at the time. The image is close to the folktale motif employed in stories of the Sleeping Beauty-type: The last of a number of supernatural women gives an evil prediction in an attempt to cancel out the good wishes bestowed by her sisters; the 'maidens' described by Saxo each have their individual character traits and the third, evil one is working against the two good ones. This may be what is slipping into Snorri's description of the 'third' norn, Skuld, as well as his division of nornir into subgroups...

---

174 This recalls the norna stóll, 'norn-seat', mentioned in Sólarþýð 51 (see IV.2.2.).
175 ATU 410.
of good ones and bad ones. As noted, Fáfnismál 13 (see V.6.) yields an image that allows for the interpretation that there are separate groups of nornir, but there is little evidence that the notion of certain nornir being particularly evil whilst others are particularly good should be regarded as a stable idea going back to ancient times (de Vries 1956:271).

Saxo’s account seems to be the only one that indicates any formal worship of nornir. Only the late Norwegian and Faroese, respectively nornagraut and nornagreytur, support this (see III.1.1.2.); the early Icelandic sources do not seem to know of it. It may be that Saxo is merging his idea of nornir with other figures such as disir or ancestress figures and we should probably allow for a certain amount of interpretatio christiana of whatever native traditions were still alive in Denmark at the time, but the dividing lines between different groups were most likely already blurred. Nornir do not normally seem to be regarded as ancestress figures, although they appear somewhat related to such figures (cf. the Saami akkas, see III.1.1.2.). Fridleuus offers ‘solemn vows’ after which the women ‘bestow’ on the boy, ‘present’ him with and ‘implant’ in him certain personal qualities; this is probably the most detailed description of the way in which nornir, if that is what they are, determine the life of a single individual. Presumably the scene is imagined as spoken, possibly accompanied by certain actions, but there is little indication as to exactly what Fridleuus does or what vows he offers. Accounts of volur in the Íslendingasögur at times refer to gifts offered to the prophesying women but these seem to be material gifts or gifts of food rather than verbal gifts.176

IV.1.4. ‘meyiar margs vitandi’

The gloomy vision of evil nornir is often the one brought to the fore and receiving most attention as it is also the one most easily detected in the literary evidence. It is, however, not the picture drawn by Völuspá 19-20 (quoted in IV.1.1.), and not by Snorri either in Gylfaginning 16:

Enn er þat sagt at nornir þær er byggja við Urðar brunn taka hvern dag vatn í brunnnum ok með aurinn þann er liggir um brunninn, ok ausa upp yfir askinn til þess at eigi skyli limar hans trúna eða fúna.
(Faulkes 1982:19)

176 For example Órvar-odds saga 2 shows material gifts, Víga-Glúms saga 12 and Eiríks saga rauda 4 show gifts of food.
'It is also said that the norns that dwell by Weird’s well take water from the well each day and with it the mud that lies round the well and pour it up over the ash so that its branches may not rot or decay.'

(Faulkes 1987:19)

Snorri describes the *nornir* as nurturing the tree of life, Yggdrasill, and the same appears to be implied in *Voluspá* 19, although here the *nornir* are not said to be actively tending the tree. It is a picture of their motherly, life-sustaining aspect, furthering life and ensuring its continued growth. The tree seems to represent the fate of the whole world and this is what the *nornir* are concerned with here; they nourish its roots in an image which conveys rather well the power and importance of these underground women – without them there would be no life.

*Voluspá* 20 lists several activities carried out by the three *meyjur*. That they are very knowledgeable recalls the *völva* who supposedly speaks the poem of *Voluspá* and in stanza 2 says about herself:

Ek man iðtna | I remember jöttnar,  
ár um borna, | born very early,  
þá er fromom mik | those who nurtured me  
fædda hóðo; | long ago;  
níð man ek heima, | I remember nine worlds,  
níð ívídís | nine giant women,  
mígviðí | the great measuring tree  
mérar | below the ground.

The impression is of an extremely old woman with strong connections to the jötunn race who possesses special knowledge about what has gone before and what will come. The *völva* says how she remembers the 'great measuring tree below the ground', perhaps understood in the sense of 'when it was still a mere seed' before it grew (Schjødt 1992:160), and at the end of the poem the tree tumbles and falls as the world disintegrates into the chaos of Ragnarök. The very last phrase of the poem is: nú mun hon sakkvaz, 'now she will sink', as if the speaker herself has come from a lower level, out of the ground or out of a spring (see IV.2.1. and IV.2.2.).

Perhaps these two phrases: fyr mold neðan and nú mun hon sakkvaz form a sort of reverse image of each other, a beginning and an end – of the prophecy, of the

---

177 Ívídí – an obscure word the meaning of which is disputed. *Hauksbók* has ívídír which occurs also in *Hyrndulljóð* 48 with the meaning 'troll-women or jötunn-women living in the forest' (Sigurður Nórðal 1978:9-10). Another suggested translation is 'immense distances' (LP:325) which, however, does not seem to make very clear sense.

178 On the words mígviðí and mígtuðr, see VI.1.2.

179 In sagas, *völur* are often said to be sitting on a platform when prophesying (Price 2002:162-163), which can also relate to the idea of rising and sinking.
world, of the power of the *völva* who in many ways seems to emulate the *nornir*. In the literature, *nornir* are never consulted for the sake of their knowledge but *völur* are; somehow *völur* are more accessible, possibly because they are conceived of as relatively human where *nornir* are relatively conceptual (see also VI.4.).

Regarding the phrase *skáro á skíði*, that they 'carved on slips of wood', the suggestion that the *nornir* are carving runes has been rejected by both Holtsmark (1951:82) and Sigurður Nordal (1978:40), because *Völfspá* uses the verb *skera*, which is the wrong verb for carving runes. When one is carving runes, the verb employed is usually *rísta*. Holtsmark goes on to suggest that what the *nornir* are doing instead is making marks in a plank of wood in order to tally up years and she refers to several similar traditions that existed in Norway and Denmark, probably from pre-Christian times:

> Hvorom allting er, vi kan på denne måten følge en skikk å avmerke folks alder på telle-stokk ved at det blir skåret et hakk for dem hvert år så lenge de lever, tilbake til middelalderen. Det er ingen grunn til å tro at skikken er innført med kristendommen.
> (Holtsmark 1951:84)

>'However that may be, we can trace back to medieval times a custom of marking off people's age on a counting-stick by cutting a mark for them each year for as long as they live. There is no reason to think that the custom was introduced with Christianity.'
> (My translation)

This could be what is going on in the verse — *nornir* keeping track of time and of how long each person lives which feeds into the interpretation of the *Völfspá-nornir* as representatives of chronology. A problem with Holtsmark's suggestion is that we would probably expect the verb *skora* to be used for counting, not *skera* (Friz III:368). The verbs are obviously related but appear to be used in different

---

180 The *völva* in *Völfspá* seems more mythical than human but the point is that *völur* are more or less willing, some even eager, to share their understanding with people; *nornir* hardly show any such inclinations.
181 I am grateful to Haraldur Berenthósson, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, and Patricia Boulhosa, university of Cambridge, for help with this phrase.
182 This is probably what Raudvere is hinting at when she says that *nornir: omtalas som ristande runor, 'are referred to as carving runes' (2003:63); cf. Sijmons and Gering (1927:26).
183 *Rísta* is the verb consistently used in *Sigrdrífumál* 6, 7, 9, 10 and 11, where the talk is clearly of runes; it is also the one employed in *Skírnismál* 36 and Hávamál 157.
184 I am grateful to Patricia Boulhosa, University of Cambridge, for this observation. Fritzner (III:368) writes: "*skora* 3) Incise on something ... make a line, incision for [some-]one (in a *kefli* [chunk of wood of a size that can be held in the hand; Friz II:270] which later shows how many one has counted)."

88
contexts.\textsuperscript{185} Perhaps it could also refer to marks scratched on the individual lots used for lot-casting, as is described with the use of the verb \textit{skera} in the account of Sigurðr jǫrsalafari in \textit{Morkinskinna}\textsuperscript{186} (1932:377), although \textit{skíði} is an unlikely description of lots; \textit{hlutr} seems more likely.\textsuperscript{187}

The verb \textit{skera} is unusual, albeit not impossible, in a context of runes but that it can be used to carve someone’s image is evident in \textit{Fóstbrædra saga} 23: \textit{á brúðum stólins var skorinn pórr, 'on the back of the chair Pórr was carved'}, and also in \textit{Landnámabók} 330 (284, 245), where Tjórví enn háðsami carved the images of the woman he loved and the man to whom she was married on the handle of his knife: \textit{Eptir bat skar Tjórví pau á knífsskapti sínu} (\textit{Landnámabók Íslands} 1925:134-135).\textsuperscript{188}

Read this way, the phrase perhaps points back to \textit{Völspá} 17 where Askar and Embla are created, seemingly from two tree trunks,\textsuperscript{189} but it might also recall wooden statues found in bogs and the occasional references to carved images of gods.\textsuperscript{190}

Furthermore, the line may recall the phrase \textit{skapa ok skera} (cf. Holtsmark 1951:87) ‘to decide or settle’, attested in \textit{Egils saga} 81: \textit{Nú vil ek, Egill, at þú skapir einn ok skerir um þessi máli} (ÍF 2:286), ‘I shall leave it up to you to rule and judge here, Egill\textsuperscript{191} (CSII:170), and the corresponding nouns \textit{skr}p, ‘fate’ and \textit{skør}, ‘decision’ (Fræ III:417). Suggestions regarding \textit{skáro á skíði} are many and varied; all we can really say is that the \textit{nornir} carve onto wood something pertaining to fate (Gísli Sigurðsson 1998:7).

Jackson (1999:86) suggests that \textit{Völspá} 20 contains “an interlocking list linking device” with the enumeration in line 3 as one of the keys. \textit{Priár} in the introductory part of the stanza is an indication that we should expect three names to be

\textsuperscript{185} This recalls the English ‘score’, another cutting- and counting word (OED IX:239-42). It may be significant that ‘score’ also has the meaning: “to record (debts) by means of notches on a tally; hence to write down as a debt” (OED IX:242), potentially pointing towards the connection between Skuld and ‘debt’. I am grateful to Patricia Boulhosa, university of Cambridge, for this suggestion.

\textsuperscript{186} C.1275.

\textsuperscript{187} Also Dronke (1997:128) and Sigurður Nordal (1978:40) suggest that the drawing of lots is involved. That lot-casting was practised in heathen Scandinavia is evident from \textit{Vita Anskarit}: 18.195, 19.245-250, 27.378-383, 30.409-412 (Rimbert 1986:34, 40, 55, 59).

\textsuperscript{188} I am grateful to Jón Hnefill Adalsteinsson, Háskóli Íslands, for this reference. For a discussion of the episode, see Sayers 1993.

\textsuperscript{189} That humans are created from trees is mentioned only in \textit{Gylfaginning} 9, not in \textit{Völspá}.

\textsuperscript{190} The one-eyed mask in Hegge stave church from c.1200, Valdres in Norway, has been interpreted by some as a representation of Óðinn (Davidson 1969:29). This may be a correct interpretation, but it should be said that Hegge stave church has several such carved masks (Lindholm and Roggenkamp 1969: plates 86-91) and they may not bear any relationship to the heathen gods.

\textsuperscript{191} See also \textit{Hrafnkels saga} Freysgoða 9 (ÍF 11:131).
mentioned but, before the third name, the poet inserts a new key which opens another list of three: 1) þær log logðo, 2) þær lif kuro, 3) [þær] skáro á skíði, alda börnum, erlög seggia. According to this, skáro á skíði would serve not only to alliterate with Skuld but also to show that the stanza does not finish immediately after the list of names. A major problem with this, however, is the orthography in the Konungsbók MS itself because everything indicates that what is usually rendered as stanza 20 actually breaks into two, the last four lines forming a separate stanza, as in Hauksbók. If Jackson (1999:86-87) is correct in saying that the last two lines refer back to the verb skáro then they should be read: ‘they carved on wood for humanity the fate of men.’ However, in the Konungsbók MS there is a clear indication of a break between sentences at this point; there is a full stop after priðio and þær begins with a capital (Konungsbók 2001:2). This contradicts Jackson’s argument because the MS seems to break the stanza into two and one can hardly expect a verb to be carried through into a new stanza. The last four lines (see IV.1.1.) thus appear to constitute a separate entity.

The idea that the nornir ‘lay down laws’ can yield several nuances of meaning. The relationship between ‘law’ and ‘laying down’ is strong (AeW:373; ÁBM:594-595) and the phrase þær log logðo is probably a figura etymologica. The phrase essentially conveys something like a set of ‘natural laws’, or supernatural laws, beyond the grasp of humans and which humans cannot go against. The laws that nornir lay down probably concern those events which frame life itself: birth and death, those special points in the twilight zones of our understanding of life during which nornir typically turn up. The ‘law’ could then be seen as synonymous with the given and unalterable framework of birth and death, forming a basic structure around which life is lived but from which it is never detached.

The lines ‘they chose life for the children of men, the fate of men’ follow immediately after, and it seems reasonable to assume that log and erlög are closely connected here, possibly so that the log laid down by the nornir is the erlög of men. The phrase ‘they chose life’ is frustratingly vague but two things seem clear: 1) it is nornir who choose rather than people themselves, and 2) the choice of words, kiósa lif, ‘to choose life’, could look like a deliberate opposition to the words kiósa val, ‘to

---

192 Rígspula 13 apparently falls into a similar structure (Jackson 1999:76-79).
193 I am grateful to Patricia Boulhosa, University of Cambridge, for this observation which highlights the importance of consulting the MSS themselves, not just previous scholars’ editions of the MSS.
194 Pokorny derives both Old Norse log ‘law’ and Old High German lehter ‘womb, afterbirth’ from the same root: legh- (1959:659).
choose the slain', which is what valkyrjur are said to do.\textsuperscript{195} These two activities — choosing life and choosing death — are of course part of the same thing, but the former is a positive, life-affirming way of expressing it whilst the latter is more negative and gloomy. If it is correct to connect the phrase kiósa líf with kiósa val, then it is of interest that it is the positive one that crops up with nornir. In Völuspá 63, kiósa is used for lot-casting: bá kná Hænir hlautvíð kiósa; it is not impossible that such a connection should also be understood from stanza 20 (Sigurður Nordal 1978:40).

As noted earlier, the version of Völuspá that survives in Hauksbók is slightly different from the one in Konungsþók, not only because editors of Hauksbók normally break the passage into two stanzas: 20 and 21:

\begin{verbatim}
þaðan koma meyiar,  
margs vitandi,  
þríár, ór þeim sal  
er á\textsuperscript{196} polli stendr;  
Urð hétó eina,  
aðra Verandi,  
-skáro á skáði-  
Skuld ína þrúðo.  

þær log logðo,  
þær líf kuro  
alda börnum,  
ørlög at segia.
\end{verbatim}

From there come maidens,  
very knowledgeable,  
three, from that hall  
which stands under the tree;  
one they called Urðr,  
another Verandi,  
-they carved on slips of wood-  
Skuld the third one.

They laid down laws,  
they chose life  
for the children of men,  
fate to speak.

Here, the nornir come out of a hall, sæ, by the tree rather than a lake, sæ (see IV.2.1). A further discrepancy occurs in the last line of stanza 21 which reads ørlög at segia, using the verb segia, 'to speak' rather than ørlög seggia, using the plural genitive form of seggr, 'man'. Thus, Hauksbók introduces an extra verb here, emphasising the role of speech, but according to Jackson (1999:87) the extra verb undermines the structure of the stanza as a whole and can only be a later revision (cf. Sijmons and Gering 1923:26).\textsuperscript{197} It is certainly correct that alda börnum and ørlög seggia fit together as a pair as do þær log logðo and þær líf kuro, and the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{195} Quinn (2006:56) argues that: "Etymologically it may seem that the valkyries' act of choosing the slain ... is the obverse of the norns’ act of choosing life ... yet for the eddic valkyrie the exercise of choice is effectively to deselect the one fated by the norns to be slain."
\item \textsuperscript{196} The preposition á normally means 'on' but it is hard to make sense of it this way. Most editors read it as meaning 'under' in accordance with Konungsþók.
\item \textsuperscript{197} Jackson suggests that the revision is made either because the understanding of oral listing devices was in decline or as a deliberate attempt at 'modernising' the poem for a literate audience (1999:87-88).
\end{itemize}
Konungsbók structure looks much tidier, both grammatically and because it presents two couplets, each giving two variants of the same image: 1) they laid down the laws and they chose life; 2) children of men and fate of men. I agree with Jackson that the verb *at segia* looks superfluous (see also VI.2.3.).

Considering how often *nornir* are elsewhere described in negative terms, associating them with death and doom, the portrayals given in both *Gylfaginning* 15-16 and in *Völuspá* 19-20 are remarkably positive. Here, *nornir* are to a large extent seen as giving and sustaining life rather than taking it away, a side of them not often expressed, or perhaps predominantly expressed in other beings who overlap with *nornir*. It also seems as if the *Völuspá-nornir* are particularly concerned with order, something that will be discussed further below.

IV.2. Dark and Humid Places

The following discussions centre around the well of Urðarbrunnr out of which *nornir* are said to come, according to Snorra-Edda, *Völuspá* and Kormákkr, and around comparisons of the well to places like it which are connected to beings overlapping with *nornir*. In this, both versions of *Völuspá* (Konungsbók and Hauksbók) may be regarded as important and, in fact, as mutually supportive in a number of ways.

IV.2.1. In the Water

The well beneath Yggdrasill, the well of the *nornir* or, according to Snorri, of some *nornir*; is called Urðarbrunnr and is a place of great significance. *Gylfaginning* 15 informs us that:

Priðja rót asksins stendrí á himni, ok undir þeirri rót er brunnr sá er mjók heilagr er heitir Urðar brunnr. Þar eigu guðin dómstað sinn.

(Faulkes 1982:17)

'The third root of the ash extends to heaven, and beneath that root is a well which is very holy, called Weird’s well. There the gods have their court.'

(Faulkes 1987:17)

The relevance of Urðarbrunnr to the gods appears to be echoed in *Hávamál* 111: *Mál er at bylía þular stóli á, Urðar brunni at,* ‘There are words to recite from the wise one’s seat, at the well of Urðr’. Here, too, the place seems to have significance in a legal, or perhaps in a supernatural, quasi-legal sense (see III.1.1.1. and VI.2.3.), as both the meeting place, or even the court, *dómstaðr*, of the gods and the place of origin of *nornir* who hold power over the lives of gods as well as men. The place
occupied by nornir in people's mental space seems to have been rather significant, if intangible, as Lindow points out:

The skald Hallfred Óttarson vandrádaskáld coined the expression "long-maintained fates of the norns" to refer to the paganism he abandoned when he converted to Christianity. (2001:245)

Hallfreð's stanza (discussed above in III.1.1.) is interesting for the central role it allocates to nornir in the heathen belief system but this seems to be matched by the centrality of Yggdrasill, the axis mundi, and of Urðarbrunnr, a legal centre for the gods.198

This well beneath the tree is of interest, partly because it provides a link to disir who seem to be connected to the Uppsala sacrifice and the sacred tree with a well or spring beneath it (cf. Ynglingasaga 29),199 partly because it connects nornir to a whole range of other female supernatural figures.

As mentioned above, the two renditions of Völuspá differ slightly in this particular detail, Konungsbók referring to a lake,200 Hauksbók to a hall, but both mention the well of Urðarbrunnr. Snorri, after mentioning the well, says that a hall stands beneath the tree and that this is the place out of which the nornir come, thus combining the idea of a well with that of a hall.

The well is also mentioned in two pieces of skaldic poetry. Kormákr Ógmundarson says: komsk Urð ór brunni (Faulkes 1998:70),201 'Urð rose from the well', providing an image easily paired off with the one in Völuspá 66: nú mun hon sákvaz, 'now she will sink' and the one in Helreið Brynhildar 14: sokkstu, gygiarkyn, 'now sink, trollwoman';202 but also the one in Völuspá 20: þaðan koma meylar, 'from there come maidens.' Kormákr uses the image of Urð coming from the well as one of several mythological allusions, one at the end of each stanza of the poem,

198 By extension, the centrality of Urðarbrunnr would seem to connect nornir to a central place whereas they appear otherwise to be connected to transition and borderlines. I am grateful to Terry Gunnell, Háskóló Islands, for pointing this out.
199 Adam of Bremen mentions this in Book 4 of his History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen, 26/skolion 138: "Near this temple stands a very large tree with wide-spreading branches, always green winter and summer. What kind it is nobody knows. There is also a spring at which the pagans are accustomed to make their sacrifices, and into it to plunge a live man. And if he is not found, the people's wish will be granted" (1959:207).
200 A lake is, in fact, a rather different body of water from a well. I choose to overlook this detail but am aware that it could turn out to be of some significance.
201 The line is connected to Kormákr's Sigurðardrápa, allegedly c.960 (Skj. BI:69-AI:79) but is found only on Skáldskaparmál 49.
202 In Helreið Brynhildar the gygi seems to be sitting on a burial mound; presumably that is the place which she is commanded to sink into.
seemingly providing images analogous to his descriptions of what goes on in the human realm (Skj BI:69-A:79). Given the connections drawn between nornir and violent death elsewhere in skaldic poetry (see III.1.1.1.), it seems striking that he picks Úrðr for a stanza describing warfare. The fact that all his other references direct themselves towards mythical persons points to an understanding of Úrðr as a person, too, rather than as a purely conceptual version of fate. That she rose from the well could also be taken to mean that the well is primary and she is secondary (Weber 1969:149-154); perhaps the norn has her name from the well rather than the other way round.

In Eilífr Guðrúnarson’s stanza about Christ, apparently c.1000 (Skj BI:144), the well is mentioned again (quoted in III.1.1.2.). This stanza crosses Christian and Norse ideas, leaving the nornir out altogether and instead having Christ sitting at the well of Úrðr (placing the well in Rome, even, an important Christian centre), but the notion of this well as the central place in the world and as a central place of those, or of him, who hold the fate of human beings in their hand, remains the same. The apocryphal Book of James, XI.1, also mentions a well as the place where the Annunciation takes place (James 1945:43), thus connecting Christ to a well (see below).

Úrðarbrunnr appears to be a well beneath a tree to which certain supernatural and predominantly female beings are connected, either in the water or in a hall that is somehow within the water and it is a feature which nornir share with a number of other female supernatural creatures. However, before going into a discussion of these, a point about the well itself needs clarification.

The well is called Úrðarbrunnr but there seems to be reason to consider it the same well as the ones referred to as Mímisbrunnr (Völuspá 28; Gylfaginning 15, 51) and Hvergelmir (Gylfaginning 15, 16, 39, 52; Grímnismál 26).203

Mímisbrunnr is connected to the enigmatic character of Mímir whom Snorri claims in Ynglingasaga 4 to be one of the æsir but who in the þulur seems to be of the jotnar (Faulkes 1998:110). The name has connotations of wisdom and memory – abilities commonly associated with jotnar and also þulur.204 The association of Mímir,
or of Mímir’s head,\textsuperscript{205} with wisdom is evident in \textit{Völsþá} 46 and \textit{Gylfaginning} 51 where it is said that Óðinn consults Míms hófuð, ‘Mímir’s head’, and at the same time Mímir is closely and strongly associated with the well and the tree.\textsuperscript{206} The name Sókkmímir, apparently ‘sunken Mímir’ (sókkr means ‘a state of being sunken’, Fríz III:653), occurs as the name of a jötunn in \textit{Grímnismál} 50 where he is involved in one of Óðinn’s exploits, in \textit{Ynglingatal} 2 where he inhabits a shining hall, and in the pulur as a jötunn, a sword-heiti and a heiti for the heavens (Faulkes 1998:110, 119, 133).

In comparison, the name Hvergelmir seems also to be closely related to the realm of the jötnar; names ending in -elmir are otherwise names of jötunn characters (Simek 1993:167). Hvergelmir is only known from Snorra-Edda where it is a spring in Niflheim (\textit{Gylfaginning} 4) and a spring under Yggdrasill (\textit{Gylfaginning} 15, 39), and from \textit{Grímnismál} 26 where it is the source of all rivers in the world. Centrality is a clear feature of all three wells.

Mímir represents some kind of otherworldly knowledge that is of immense value, certainly to Óðinn, and here he overlaps significantly with the \textit{völva}. Through his close association with the well he comes close to the nornir, except he is male and he is nowhere connected with ideas about fate. The overlaps between Hvergelmir, Mímisbrunnr and Urðarbrunnr seem too many for them to be completely separated out as individual unrelated wells. In all likelihood we have several expressions of the same idea: the otherworldly well of wisdom guarded by beings associated with the underground and with jötnar.

\textit{Völsþá} 33 names Frigg’s dwelling place Fensalir, a name which literally means ‘hall in the fens’ and \textit{Grímnismál} 7, in a parallel image, states that Óðinn and the goddess Sága drink in a place called Sokkvabekkr, which means ‘sunken benches.’ Sága is little known outside of \textit{Grímnismál} 7 and this makes it difficult to understand exactly what she is.\textsuperscript{207} Interestingly, Frigg and Sága both alliterate with the names of their dwelling-places: Frigg in Fensalir and Sága in Sokkvabekkr (Grundy 1996:62)\textsuperscript{208} and they seem closely connected to each other; they both stand in some relationship

\textsuperscript{205} According to \textit{Ynglingasaga} 4, the vanir behead Mímir and Óðinn magically preserves the head which speaks to him.

\textsuperscript{206} Some kennings for the world tree involve names seemingly alluding to Mímir: Hoddmímis holt (\textit{Vafthrúðnismál} 45) and Mimameiðr (\textit{Fjðrsvinnsmál} 20, 24).

\textsuperscript{207} Sága is mentioned in \textit{Helgakviða Hundingsbana} 1:39, apparently as a place-name.

\textsuperscript{208} Several similar alliterations exist in \textit{Grímnismál}: Baldr in Breiðablikk, Njótr in Nóatún, Freyia in Fólkvangr, Heimdallr at Himinbýggi; but there are likewise exceptions: Óðinn in Valhóll and Freyr in Álheimr.
to Óðinn and both relate to ideas about prophecy and fate. The etymological meaning of Sága is probably 'seeress' (AeW:459), recalling Frigg's knowledge of fate in *Lokasenna* 29 (see VI.5.). Furthermore, Þjóðólfr Óláfsson in *Hauðistjórn* 9, supposedly c. 900, preserved in *Skáldskaparmál* 22 (Faulkes 1998:30-33), states that the goddess Íðunn lives in a place called Brunnakr, 'field of wells', a name indicating a watery place like Fensalir and Sokkvabekkr. Íðunn is also a figure in charge of life and death as she holds the apples said to keep the gods young (*Gylfaginning* 26; *Skáldskaparmál* G56). Thus, these three goddesses, like *nornir*, relate to water sources found below ground.

As noted, the two versions of *Vgluspa* refer to, respectively, a lake and a hall as the place of origin of *nornir*, both situated beneath the tree, but we need not see in this any great discrepancy between the two images because Fensalir provides us with a two-in-one solution: there is a hall in the water. The same idea is clearly expressed in the Old English poem *Beowulf*, lines 1492-1517, where Beowulf dives into the water in pursuit of the wounded Grendel and finds a hall deep down. Lines 1492-1496 read as follows:

> After these words the Weather-Geat prince dived into the Mere - he did not care to wait for an answer - and the waves closed over the daring man. It was a day's space almost before he could glimpse ground at the bottom. *(Beowulf 2001:54)*

The description continues in lines 1512-1517:

> Then the man found that he was in some enemy hall where there was no water to weigh upon him and the power of the flood could not pluck him away, sheltered by a roof: a shining light he saw,

(96)
a bright fire shining clearly.
(Beowulf 2001:55)

The Old English poem portrays the woman whom Beowulf encounters down there in the 'enemy hall' in the water, Grendel's mother, as an absolute monster;\(^{209}\) yet, at the same time as being the terrifying enemy of the humans above the surface she is also the mother of a son whose death causes her both anger and grief. "She is not so much a 'bad' mother, uncaring, unfeeling, unnurturing, as too good a one. Vengeful, son-obsessed, her maternity makes her an anti-social being, murderous and monstrous" (Stafford 1997:80). The double-sided nature of the woman inhabiting the underwater hall is evident in Beowulf, even if we are not meant to have any sympathy for her.\(^{210}\)

Frigg, mother of Baldr, carries this double-sidedness, too. It is clear that she holds power over his death because she is the one who knows the secret of how he can be killed (Gylfaginning 49). As his mother, Frigg is the natural protector of Baldr's life but this means that she is simultaneously the one who is able to take his life away (see III.1.4), like Sigurðr jarl's mother Óðna in Orkneyinga saga (see IV.3.). Frigg does not cut a terrifying, gloomy figure in the sources; she is said to know about fate (Lokasenna 29), but is rather a passive character who does not often enforce the powers that she nevertheless has. She is most active in the prose introduction to Grímnismál which portrays her as genuinely powerful and almost a rival to Óðinn.\(^{211}\) She is predominantly the good mother, her nurturing side made clear when she seeks to protect Baldr and later retrieve him from the dead (see VI.5.). There is no doubt that Grendel's mother, too, loves her son, but her behaviour turns her into a grotesque, monstrous mother, the very opposite of the properly behaved Frigg.\(^{212}\) Yet, it is possible to see both these figures as connected to the giving as well as the taking of life – the same features that are so characteristic of nornir and disir.

---

\(^{209}\) Interestingly, Beowulf has both a male and a female inhabitant of the water.

\(^{210}\) In line 1506, Grendel's mother is referred to as brimwyll[r], 'mere-wolf', and it is tempting to compare this to the Norse Fenrisulfr whose name may indicate that he originally lived in the fens. This may relate to the connection between troll-women and wolves (see note 42).

\(^{211}\) The introduction to Grímnismál corresponds closely to the story told by Paulus Diaconus in his History of the Langobards from c.790 (1907:16-17).

\(^{212}\) Stafford (1997:159) discusses Grendel's mother in relation to Wealhtheow who here compares to Frigg: "Beowulf's Lady with the Mead Cup and Grendel's mother delineate the acceptable and unacceptable faces of the queen-in-the-household. As a holder of treasure, a maker of gifts, counselling and speaking, she was the necessary cup-bearing lady. But when engaging in such activity for her own ends, she was monstrous, Grendel's mother fighting the hero alone in her hall beneath the mere."
In relation to these supernatural female beings in the water, Tacitus’ description of the cult of the goddess Nerthus in *Germania* 40 is of some interest:

nec quicquam notabile in singulis, nisi quod in commune Nerthum, id est Terram matrem, colunt eamque intervenire rebus hominum, invehit populis arbitrantur. est in insula Oceani castum nemus, dicatumque in eo vehiculum, veste contectum; attingere uni sacerdoti concessum. is adesse penetrati deam intelligit vectamque bubus feminis multa cum veneratione prosequitur. laeti tunc dies, festa loca, quaecumque adventu hospitioque dignatur. non bella ineunt, non arma sumunt; clausam omne ferrum; pac et quies tunc tantum nota, tunc tantum amata, donec idem sacerdos satiatam conversatione mortalium deam templo reddat. mox vehiculum et vestis et, si credere velis, numen ipsum secreto lacu abluitur. servi ministrant, quos statim idem lacus haurit. arcanus hinc terror sanaque ignorantia, quid sit illud quod tantum perituri vident.

*(Tacitus 1938)*

‘There is nothing noteworthy about these tribes individually, but they share a common worship of Nerthus, or Mother Earth. They believe that she takes part in human affairs, riding in a chariot among her people. On an island of the sea stands an inviolate grove in which, veiled with a cloth, is a chariot that none but the priest may touch. The priest can feel the presence of the goddess in this holy of holies, and attends her with deepest reverence as her chariot is drawn along by cows. Then follow days of rejoicing and merrymaking in every place that she condescends to visit and sojourn in. No one goes to war, no one takes up arms; every iron object is locked away. Then, and then only, are peace and quiet known and welcomed, until the goddess, when she has had enough of the society of men, is restored to her sacred precinct by the priest. After that, the chariot, the vestments, and (believe it if you will) the goddess herself, are cleansed in a secluded lake. This service is performed by slaves who are immediately afterwards drowned in the lake. Thus mystery begets terror and a pious reluctance to ask what that sight can be which is seen only by men doomed to die.’

*(Tacitus 1948:134-135)*

This description comes from a Roman consul who lived around the first century AD and is far removed from the Old Norse world of Scandinavia at the time of c.800-1100 AD.213 A number of features are shared between Nerthus and the female figures described above: she stays on an island, a place surrounded by water, and she brings peace and prosperity but also death.

With regard to the name, Nerthus corresponds linguistically to the name of one of the later Norse gods, Njörðr of the vanir, and the apparent change of gender from the female Nerthus to the male Njörðr has been a point of discussion.214 Much has

213 The Baltic island which it describes is possibly Als or Fyn in present day Denmark (Simek 1993:230).

214 It has been argued that the deity was in fact masculine and that Tacitus made it into a feminine figure because of certain correspondences to the Roman cult of Magna Mater in
been said about the connection between these two names (cf. Simek 1993:230; McKinnell 2005:51; Lindow 2001:237-238, 243; Lehmann 1919:1); what is clear is that they are, indeed, connected but whereas Njørðr is male, Tacitus imagines Nerthus as female, even if the name he gives her is grammatically masculine.\textsuperscript{215} This type of confusion is likely to arise when the writer did not have first-hand knowledge of what he was describing and Tacitus is unlikely to have had that. McKinnell's opinion seems a reasonable one: "It seems more likely that the deity had both a male and female form (cf. Freyr/Freyia ...), and that Tacitus's error was simply to use the name of the male deity for the female one" (McKinnell 2005:52).

It is possible that this notion of a dual deity somehow relates to the story about Grendel and his mother recounted in \textit{Beowulf} where both these characters are known by just one name with only the motherhood of the female to differentiate between them: \textit{Grendel} and \textit{Grendel's mother}. The son's name is used to describe her, too. If there were both a male and a female deity lurking beneath the surface of the water, this might also explain the apparent ease with which both Mímir and Urðr inhabit wells of knowledge, wisdom or fate.\textsuperscript{216}

Further to these considerations of predominantly literary sources, it is relevant to take into account what we know from archaeology. Northern Germany, Denmark and England have provided us with a substantial number of bog finds dating to the early Iron Age, around the first century AD – the well-preserved bodies of people who met their deaths in these places.\textsuperscript{217} Many of them seem to have been ritually killed, probably sacrificed in the bogs to a deity of whom we obviously know little. Apart from the human bodies, wooden carvings presumed to portray gods, both male and female, have also been found (Müller-Wille 2002:146-150; Glob 1969:126-128).

\textsuperscript{215} The name occurs in several variant forms in the MSS: Neithum, Nerthum and Nertum (McKinnell 2005:51).

\textsuperscript{216} The presence of both genders in the pool in \textit{Beowulf} recalls the two words urðr, of which the masculine version means 'death' and the feminine 'fate'; cf line 1260 of \textit{Beowulf} where the pronoun se, 'he' is used to refer to Grendel's mother. I am grateful to Rory McTurk, University of Leeds, for this reference.

IV.2.2. Below the Ground

Apart from the characters inhabiting wells, fens, pools and bogs, a number of other female supernatural characters merit at least a mention in relation to what has so far been said about norðir, though two of them, namely þórgarðr Hólgabrúðr and Hel, remain marginal. Neither character is said to inhabit water but both dwell below the ground and are strongly chthonic figures comparable to, if not identical with, the ancestress figures. Here, we might also recall the Saami akkas who dwell below the floor and are of the dead (Bäckman 1984:35; see III.1.1.1.).

The character of þórgarðr Hólgabrúðr is mentioned in Skáldskaparmál 45 and turns up in a number of sagas under varying names (Hólgabrúðr, Hóðabrúðr, Hóðatróll though always þórgarðr). She appears to be a type of ancestress figure whose cult, relating to wealth in gold and silver and to battle magic, perhaps also fertility, was well known in western Norway and parts of Iceland in the tenth century. Hákon jarl in particular is mentioned in connection with her (McKinnell 2002 and 2005). The relationship between her and her sister Irpa is especially interesting: whereas þórgarðr is referred to as brúðr, ‘bride’, the name Irpa means ‘swarthy’ (AeW:287, 291), potentially indicating a positive and a negative aspect of the same figure: a goddess and her ‘dark sister’. þórgarðr contains aspects of both a benign ancestress (she is never called a goddess) and a troll-hag, and Irpa may represent a hypostasis of her gloomier aspects. þórgarðr is said to inhabit, variously, temples (Njáls saga 88) and a forest clearing (Faereyinga saga 23), but she is also connected to a burial mound (Skáldskaparmál 45), which is how she fits into a discussion of underground characters. Although she is closely connected to death, battle and wealth (typical aspects of vanir), there is little indication that she relates to prophesying or fate and her relationship to norðir looks somewhat marginal.

Hel is an epithet used to describe both the chthonic realm and the guardian of this realm. Gylfaginning 34 describes her thus:

---

218 I have not looked at figures inhabiting the sea but it is possible that the characters of Rán and Ægir may be relevant to the discussion at hand.
219 Njáls saga 88; Faereyinga saga 23; Jómsvíkinga saga 34; Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar 185; Harðar saga 19; Kétís saga haargs 5.
220 For fuller discussions of þórgarðr, see Storm 1885; Steinsland (1991:220-226); McKinnell 2002; McKinnell (2005:81-85).
221 The goddess Hel appears as a protagonist only in Grímnismál 31 and Snorra-Edda; elsewhere Hel is the name of the realm or a personification of death. I am grateful to Chris Abram, University College London, for pointing this out.
Hel kastaði hann [Óðinn] í Niflheim ok gaf henni vald yfir niu heimum ... Hon er blá hafi en hafi með hörundar lit - því er hon auðkend ok heldr gnúpleit ok grimlig.
(Faulkes 1982:26)

‘He [Óðinn] threw her into Niflheim and gave her authority over nine worlds ... She is half black and half flesh-covered – thus she is easily recognizable – and rather downcast and fierce-looking.’
(Faulkes 1987:27)

No references to the goddess Hel are found in early skaldic poetry; Snorri’s description is by far the most detailed one and she appears to be a relatively late poetic personification. What is particularly relevant in the present context is the idea that she rules over nine worlds, is a strongly chthonic figure and that she is clearly a half-and-half figure – half dead and half living. That she is a powerful character who is able to go against the wishes of the gods comes across in the Baldr story according to Gylfaginning 49 where she keeps the dead Baldr within her realm, but in this respect she may also be seen simply as a personified form of death itself; the gods of the Old Norse pantheon are subject to death. She is not portrayed as a figure of knowledge, is not connected to the wells discussed above and may not be an ancient figure. Clearly, Snorri’s rationalisations that evil and unworthy people go to Hel and that her realm is exquisitely undesirable as a place of habitation have been somewhat coloured by Christian influence. Other figures relating to Hel and the underworld are of greater significance at present.

In Baldrs draumar Óðinn travels to the underworld in order to consult a long dead völva about the fate of his son Baldr.222 It seems noteworthy that the völva encountered in this poem is not simply dead and buried in a normal way because she is in the underworld realm of the dead and even there, amongst the dead, she is buried. As such she is doubly dead, or at least buried twice.223 It seems that this völva possesses knowledge about the future that Óðinn himself does not have, and in stanza 4 he employs a magical spell in order to bring her back from her grave and to compel her to speak to him:224

þá reið Óðinn

Then Óðinn rode

222 It is interesting that Óðinn does not consult Frigg at this point, although she is said to know about the future and about fate. When he wants to obtain such kinds of secret knowledge, Óðinn seeks out the völva, even though Ynglingasaga 7 says that Óðinn himself is able to obtain knowledge about fate through practising seiðr.

223 As a dead woman, she may recall the konor dauðar, ‘dead women’ in Atlamál 28 (see III.1.2.).

224 The awakening of a dead woman in order to obtain otherworldly knowledge from her is rather like the opening of both Sigrdrifumál and Völuspá (Helga Kress 1993:74-77).
He proceeds to question the dead woman, not only about the impending death of Baldr but also about events further into the future. She gives him answers, albeit with the greatest of reluctance, and the situation between Öðinn and the völva has the character of a contest of power: she has the knowledge but he has the means to make her impart that knowledge to him, at least for a while. She answers the first three of Öðinn’s questions but finishes each of her stanzas with the phrase: nauðug sagðak, nú mun ek þegja, ‘reluctantly I spoke, now I will be silent.’ In stanza 12 Öðinn puts his fourth question, the meaning of which is characteristically cryptic and difficult to interpret, but somehow this question reveals Öðinn’s identity to the völva (he has hitherto concealed his real identity by using the name Vegtamr) and with this he loses his power over her.

The reluctance of the revived völva to share her knowledge is by no means unique to her but seems to be reflected in the voice of the völva who speaks Völsuspá. In the middle section of the poem she finishes off several stanzas with the phrase: vitoð ét enn, eða hvat?, ‘do you know yet, or what?’ She is not as outspokenly hostile as is the völva from Baldra’s draumar and the situation surrounding her speech also appears to be of a different kind. But in Völsuspá she is closely associated with the jöttnar, a race with which the gods are generally at odds and of which particularly the females can be very hostile (many of Pórr’s adversaries amongst the jöttnar are actually females; Clunies Ross 1994:105; McKinnell 2005:109-125) and, although she appears to speak willingly, we might imagine that she has somehow been compelled or paid to do so.

The very last phrase of the poem: nú mun hon sökkvaz, ‘now she will sink,’ could mean that perhaps she, too, has been made to rise from the dead for the sake

---

225 Most often, Völsuspá is imagined as Öðinn questioning a völva (Steinsland and Meulengracht Sorensen 2001:58; Dronke 1997:52; Hermann Pálsson 1996b:76), but some scholars (Gíslis Sigurðsson 2000-2001; Kure 2006) have argued that the opposite is the case. Although both Gíslis and Kure make valid points regarding stanza 29, there is a clear indication in stanza 1 that the völva is speaking at Öðinn’s request. However, I agree that the exact relationship between the two figures is problematic in the poem.

226 The völva employs both first and third person singular forms in the poem, apparently using both to refer to herself.
of her knowledge and that she is returning to a place below ground or even a source of water at the end of her prophecy. The phrase closely matches the reference to the tree fyr mold nedan, 'below ground', in stanza 2, and the idea that she remembers nine worlds recalls Hel who is said to rule over nine worlds. Much remains unknown to us concerning this völva, her relationship to Óðinn and the spá she makes; her relationship to the well itself may be marginal but her chthonic underground aspect does seem to be quite clear. Also clear is the familiar wrestling over and reluctance to part with otherworldly knowledge.

Lokasenna 29 says about Frigg: ørlög Frigg hygg ek at òll viti, þótt hon síálfí segi; 'Frigg, I think, knows all fate, although she herself does not speak' (see VI.5.), a phrase repeated in stanza 21 where it is attached to Gefjun. It seems, then, that Frigg and Gefjun are also reluctant to speak of the hidden matters of fate. It is clearly knowledge of an otherworldly and therefore dangerous and powerful kind – not easily obtained or parted with, precious as well as deadly.

Of relevance also is the poem Hyndluljóð, found in the late 14th century Flateyjarbók but not in Konungsók. In this, Freyia consults a jötunn-woman or troll-woman in order to obtain knowledge about the ancestry of her lover Öttarr. In stanza 1, Freyia addresses Hyndla thus:

Vaki, mæþ meyia!
vaki, mín vina,
Hyndla systir,
er í helli byr!
 nú er rókkur rókkra:
ríða vit skolom
til Valhallar,
ok til vés heilags.

Wake up, girl of girls!
wake up, my friend
Hyndla sister,
who lives in a cave!
now is the darkest of darkness:
we two shall ride
to Valholl,
and to the sanctuary of the gods.

The poem is interesting for a number of reasons. It involves consulting an otherworldly woman in order to make her part with knowledge of the past, it is reminiscent of a prophecy and, significantly, contains what is known as Völuspá hin skamma, ‘The Shorter Völuspá’ (stanzas 29-44 of Hyndluljóð comprise this), and Freyia and Hyndla have been interpreted as rivals for Öttarr’s favour which makes it possible to see them as counterparts of each other, like Þorgerðr and Irpa (see above) (McKinnell 2002:272-279 and 2005:85-89). It is clear that Hyndla is the one who possesses not only the knowledge (which she willingly communicates to Öttar, although she sneers at Freyia) but also the precious drink, called minnispl, ‘memory-

---

227 For fuller discussions of this poem, see McKinnell 2002 and 2005; Steinsland 1991.
ale', stanza 45, which Hyndla gives to Óttarr at the end.\textsuperscript{228} Hyndla seems closely related to \textit{vglur} and of particular interest is the notion that she guards a chthonic type of knowledge also represented as a drink which is given to the male protagonist of the story.

Of further interest in \textit{Hyndlufljóð} is the description of Heimdallr as the son of nine \textit{jötn}mothers, particularly stanza 38:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Icelandic</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sá var aukinn</td>
<td>He was strengthened</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iarðar megni,</td>
<td>with the power of the earth,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>svalkoldom sæ</td>
<td>with the cold sea,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ok sonardreyra\textsuperscript{229}</td>
<td>and with sacrificial blood</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The stanza is remarkably similar to \textit{Guðrúnarkviða II} 21 lines 5-8:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Icelandic</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ðat var um aukit</td>
<td>it was strengthened</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>urðar magni,</td>
<td>with fateful power,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>svalkoldom sæ</td>
<td>with the cold sea,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ok sonar dreyra</td>
<td>and with sacrificial blood</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In \textit{Guðrúnarkviða}, the phrase describes a drink given to Guðrún to make her forget the past. This has been discussed by, amongst others, Steinsland (1991:282-283) who suggests that the close similarities may stem from ideas about a ritual drink of some sort.\textsuperscript{230} This would allow the two stanzas to be seen simply as variations of the same piece of knowledge instead of one being regarded as a corrupt form of the other. The relationship between \textit{iarðar megni} and \textit{urðar magni} may be more than just accidental linguistic similarity as both could be seen as ways of referring to supernatural forces below the ground (cf. Steinsland 1991:282-283; Reichborn-Kjennerud 1933:61).

The last woman to be included here is not dead but she does have her dwelling below the ground; nor is she living in water, yet she has a strong connection to liquids. \textit{Skáldskaparmál} G57-G58 tells the story of how Óðinn obtained the mead of poetry which the \textit{jötn} Suttungr was keeping deep inside the mountain of Hnitbjörg, with his daughter Gunnløð to guard it. When Suttungr refuses Óðinn's request for a drink of the mead, Óðinn bores a hole through the mountain, changes

\textsuperscript{228} This recalls the drink given to Sigurðr by Sigdrifó in \textit{Sigdrifumál} 5 and by Brynhildr in \textit{Völsungasaga} 21 (Grimstad 2000:148-148).

\textsuperscript{229} A difficult word. Fritzner (III:478) translates it as \textit{Offerbiod}, 'sacrificial blood', supposing \textit{sonargaldadreyri}, 'blood of a sacrificial boar' to be a more original form of it. Why he supposes this is not immediately obvious.

\textsuperscript{230} Further on on drinks, see Enright 1996.
himself into a snake and enters the mountain to get to the precious liquid. The story continues:

Fór Bolverkr [Óðinn] þar til sem Gunnlög var ok lá hja henni þrjár nætr, ok þá lofaði hon honum at drekka af miðinn þrjá drykki. Í inum fyrsta drykk drakk hann allt or Óðreri, en í qørum or Boðn, í inum þríðja or Són, ok hafði hann þá allan mjóðinn.
(Faulkes 1998:4)

'Bolverk [Óðinn] 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.'
(Faulkes 1987:63)

The story is also referred to in Hávamál 104-110 but in a rather different version from Snorri's. Scholarly tradition has often seen the two renditions as different variants of the one story and has therefore often taken Skáldskaparmál as the basis on which to interpret the more fragmentary Hávamál (Meletinski 1973b; Simek 1996:124-125, 208-209; Edwards and Pálsson 1998:29-30). However, Svava Jakobsdóttir has shown that the two versions of the story about Gunnlod should not be regarded as one and the same:

It is clear that the Hávamál stanzas in question must be examined, once and for all, without the help of Snorri Sturluson. It seems to me that they will remain obscure if we turn to Snorri uncritically for explanation and read into the poem on the basis of the younger work. It may well be that many points of Hávamál seem obscure only because attempts are made to force them into fixed conceptions imported from other times and places – or perhaps because of simple misunderstandings.
(Svava Jakobsdóttir 2002:31)

Svava goes on to discuss the Hávamál stanzas independently of Skáldskaparmál, finding that the story they tell bears much closer resemblance to royal consecration ceremonies associated with the hieros gamos, described in Celtic sources as banais righe or feis temrach, than it does to Snorri's account (see 'kingship' in ÓhÓgain 1990:263-265; MacKillop 2004:285-286). Celtic tradition tells of:

a woman (the goddess) who grants the king-figure (or hero) mead and goes to bed with him... The goddess (or her personification) is called 'sovereignty,' and she grants the king authority to reign with a 'sacred marriage.'
(Svava Jakobsdóttir 2002:34)

Svava further points out that whereas Snorri tells the story of a theft, Hávamál places much stronger emphasis on betrayal; Skáldskaparmál has Óðinn use trickery to worm his way into the mountain where he is clearly not supposed to be, whereas in Hávamál he is openly allowed in, apparently even expected and welcomed.
Moreover, Hávamál only introduces the heiti Bglverkr, 'Evil-doer', after the betrayal, whilst Skáldskaparmál uses it throughout the story. The betrayal motif is clear, for example in stanza 105 where Gunnløð is first introduced:

Gunnløð mér um gaf
gullnom stóli á
drykk ins dýra miaðar;
il iðgjóld
lét ek hana eptir hafa
síns ins hellar hugar,
síns ins svára sefa.

Gunnløð gave me
from her golden seat
a drink of the precious mead,
a poor return
I let her have after that
for her sincerity,
for her heavy mind.

The argument made by Svava Jakobsdóttir seems to have considerable validity as she manages to show that the Gunnløð-story told in Hávamál makes good sense in itself, independently of Snorri's version and that it is relevant to the present discussion.

Although the mead, of poetry or of sovereignty, may not be an exact equivalent to Urðarbrunnr, there is a level of correspondence even so. The mead seems to relate especially clearly to Mímisbrunnr with its connotations of wisdom and knowledge and as the object of Óðinn's quest in Völsúspá 46 where Óðinn seeks out Mímisbrunnr to get counsel from Mímir. Thus, Óðinn seeks out three wells with similar intentions: Mímisbrunnr in Völsúspá and Gylfaginning 51, Urðarbrunnr in Hávamál 111 and Gunnløð's mead in Hávamál 104-110. All three sources of liquid are connected to wisdom and to some kind of power, be it through knowledge or sovereignty; they are underground and at least two of them are guarded by strongly chthonic figures, Mímir and the nornir, and two of them by female figures, the nornir and Gunnløð. All of the guardians can be seen to have close affiliations to jötunn.

The story about Gunnløð does not portray a hall in a well in the same way as Fensalir, Sókkvabekkr and Grendel's mother's lair in Beowulf, but it seems to give the reverse image: there is a source of special liquid in the underground dwelling of this supernatural woman; there is a well in the hall. Interestingly, Eyvindr skáldaspillir, in Háleygjatal 2, apparently c.985, alludes to the story using the name Sókkvdalr to refer to Hnitbjörgr, the mountain inside which Gunnløð is found (Skáldskaparmál 2). Hnitbjörgr means 'clashing rocks' (LP:270; Frtz II:28), a name corresponding to the Symplegades,231 the dangerous entrance to the otherworld through which only the hero can enter, but Sókkvdalr translates as 'sunken glen' or 'deep valley' (LP:561), a name strongly recalling Fensalir, Brunakr and especially Sókkvabekkr, all of them

dwellings of goddesses who relate to fate. Interestingly, Óðinn comes to Hnitbjǫrg/Skökkdalr in search of the mead, whilst in Grímnismál 7 he is said to drink with Sága from golden cups in Sókkvabekkr. There is a strong correspondence in the images portrayed by Grímnismál and Hávamál in this respect and it therefore seems relevant to include Gunnlǫð in the discussion of nornir and the other women in the well.

An interesting point about Gunnlǫð is her name, which means 'war-invitation'. In terms of the other supernatural female beings (see III), this name would seem rather close to the valkyrja-type although she is said to be the daughter of a jötunn, a connection not usually made for valkyrjur. McKinnell discusses how the legendary rulers of Haáland in southeast Norway might have regarded Gunnlǫð as their mythical ancestress, claiming descent from her and Óðinn (McKinnell 2005:166-167), and this would seem to make good sense in the light of the sovereignty motif of Hávamál 104-110 – Óðinn receives the mead from Gunnlǫð and this is what grants him the position of ruler (cf. Steinsland 1991). In this respect, Gunnlǫð could come close to the dísir as a sort of ancestress figure whilst also sharing this feature with Skaði, Gefjun and perhaps Þórgerð Hólgabrúó.

Immediately after the story of the mead, Hávamál introduces the well of fate in stanza 111:

\[\text{Mál er at þylia} \\
\text{þular stóli á,} \\
\text{Urðar brunni at;} \\
\text{sá ek ok þagðak,} \\
\text{sá ek ok hugðak,} \\
\text{hlýdda ek á manna mál:} \\
\text{of rúnar heyrða ek daema,} \\
\text{né um ráðom þoγðo,} \\
\text{Háva höllo at,} \\
\text{Háva höllo i,} \\
\text{heyrða ek segia svá:} \]

There are words to be declared from the wise one's seat, at the well of Urð; I saw and I was silent, I saw and I thought I listened to the speech of men of runes I heard talk – nor were they quiet about good counsel at the High One's hall, in the High One's hall, I heard them say thus:

This is followed by the so-called Loddfażnismál-section of the poem.

Stanza 105 shows Gunnlǫð, seated on a golden seat, guarding the mead deep inside a mountain; stanza 111 describes another seat, by Urðarbrunni but also, seemingly, at and in some hall where Óðinn hears 'talk about runes' and 'good counsel'. Perhaps it is not entirely coincidental that the mention of Urðarbrunni follows straight after the Gunnlǫð story; a woman guarding three vats of mead is

---

232 Ynglingasaga 8 and Háleygtatal 3-4 refer to Skaði as an ancestress figure for a Norwegian jarl; Ynglingasaga 5 has Gefjun as the ancestress of the Skjoldungar in Denmark.
described first, then the action shifts to the well of fate, guarded by nornir who may have been conceived of as a group of three. From these places Óðinn obtains very precious things, sovereignty followed by runic knowledge in Hāvamál, poetry in Skáldskaparmál, of which the latter two may be regarded as corresponding to each other as poetry and wisdom were considered very close relatives in the Old Norse mind-set.

Another ‘seat’ perhaps akin to the ones discussed here is mentioned in the strongly Christian poem Sólarijdó 51:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Á norna stóli</th>
<th>On the seat of the nornir</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>satk nú daga,</td>
<td>I sat for nine days,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>þaðan vask á hest hafinn,</td>
<td>whence I was lifted up onto a horse,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gýgjar sólír</td>
<td>the suns of the troll-wives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>skinugrimmliga</td>
<td>were shining grimly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ór skýdrúpnis skýum</td>
<td>out from the clouds in the sky</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Stó:643-AI:635)

There have been different interpretations of this norna stóli, ‘seat of the nornir’, whether it is a deathbed from which the soul of the dead is eventually lifted or an image of Purgatory. It has also been compared to Óðinn’s self-sacrifice on the tree, Hāvamál 138-141 (Fidjestøl 1979:48-49; Njörður P. Njarðvik 1991:80-81). Whether it is one or the other, the varying interpretations seem to agree on the fact that it is an intermediate space and most scholars regard it as a decidedly unpleasant place to be – as it would be to any Christian. The norna stóli reflects the heathen association of nornir with the chthonic realm, and in this Christian poem nornir are probably regarded as wholly negative beings.

IV.3. The Dyngja

Having looked at similarities between the places where nornir and other related female beings are said to come from, the question of why figures representing fate

---

233 This could be another set of reverse images: in the hall in the well three women guard one well; in the well in the hall one woman guards three ‘wells’. This observation, however, might just be coincidental.

234 This is by no means unique to Old Norse society; for a thorough discussion of the idea, see Bloomfield and Dunn (1989:106-119).

235 AM 166 b 8° c.1600-1700, though the poem is allegedly from the 13th century (Njörður P. Njarðvik 1991:7).

236 Price (2002:208) relates it to shamanic ritual and to the seiðjallr described in, for example, Eiriks saga rauða 4 (2002:162-167). This is possible, but Sólarijdó is hardly intended to describe a non-Christian ritual though it might draw on folk traditions.
almost always seem to be feminine will be addressed.\textsuperscript{237} The idea presented below is in some ways speculative but does appear to be strongly relevant to the discussion. I am aware that I am shifting into a somewhat conjectural mode at this point.

To begin with, it can be pointed out that the above-discussed places below the ground and especially in the water seem to be places that carry strong feminine connotations and where masculinity is somehow marginal. They relate to physical places in the human world,\textsuperscript{238} but do they relate directly to the actual lives of human women? And if so - how? I believe they do, but on highly symbolic levels, and my theory about this concerns two specifically feminine spaces encountered in the human world.

The Norwegian skald Þórbjörn hornklofi, in \textit{Haralds saga ins háragnar} 15 (the poem is known as \textit{Haraldskvæði}), supposedly c. 900, says:

\begin{verbatim}
Úti vill jól drekka,
  ef skal einn ráða,
  fylkir enn framlyndi
  ok Freys leið heyja,
  ungr leiddisk eldvelli
  ok inni at sítja,
  varma dyngju
  eða vótu düns fulla.
\end{verbatim}

Outside he will drink Yule,
if he has it his own way,
the foremost prince
and play Freyr’s game;
as a child he detested the fireside
and sitting indoors,
the warm \textit{dyngja}
and mittens filled with down.

The place described in the last two lines, the \textit{dyngja} (plural \textit{dyngjúr}), is, as can be gauged from Þórbjörn’s stanza, regarded as a space not suitable for men, it is a certain building or room where women would do women’s work, particularly textile work (Brednich 1964; Zimmermann 1982:110; Østergård 2004:58-59; see also V.3. and V.3.2.). Jón Hnefill Áðalsteinsson (1997:150) says about this: \textit{Spunakonur í Áslu og á meginlandi Eyrópu mynduðu víða með sér eins konar leyjifélag sem karlmönnum var stranglega bannaður adgangur áð, ‘Female spinners in many parts of Asia and mainland Europe formed among themselves some sort of secret societies from which men were strictly excluded’. This looks akin to what Wolfram (1933) refers to in his descriptions of a ritual surrounding the flax harvest in the border area between Styria and Carinthia in Austria. There, tending the drying flax in a special outbuilding was a job for women only:

\textsuperscript{237} Fate is feminine throughout most European cultures (Grimm I 2004:411-414).

\textsuperscript{238} The watery places recall the archaeological finds of human bodies, male and female, some of which appear to have been sacrificed to deities in bogs (Todd 1992:112-115; Ström 1985:33-38; Glob 1969).
That the women involved in this hot, smoky work would look frightening when they came out of the drying room and might somehow use this to their advantage is a practical detail; what is interesting is the idea that men were forbidden to enter the area at all: *Die eigentlichen Vorrechte der Brecherinnen bestehen darin, daß jedes männliche Wesen, das mit oder ohne Absicht in ihre Nähe gerät, dafür büßen muß,*

'The actual privilege of the woman who does the breaking is that every male being that, with or without intent, comes near her, will have to pay for it' (Wolfram 1933:139).241 The fact that the ritualistic aspects of flax harvesting continued in the area long after flax had lost most of its practical value and meaning to the communities would seem to hint at some very strong symbolic aspects attached to it (Wolfram 1933:137).

In certain ways, the flax drying room is comparable to the Norse *dyngja* which seems to be a manifestation of some specifically female space. It represents a separate area that only women would normally enter or in which it would at least be somehow unmanly to find oneself. It is a workshop space, akin to a smithy,242 and would not be frequented unless for specific reasons or because it is one’s own. All

---

239 Här is an Austrian word for flax, German *Flachs* (Wolfram 1933:138).

240 Translation kindly provided by Peter Graff. Baines (1989:167-181) describes in detail the processes involved in flax husbandry: after harvesting, the flax stalks are placed in wet conditions to make the hard stems mould (retting), then they must be dried and afterwards comes the breaking which extracts the fibres from the stems. The broken flax straw then has to be removed from the fibres (scutching) and finally the fibres are separated from each other (hacking); then they are ready for spinning.

241 Translation kindly provided by Peter Graff.

242 There is a degree of correspondence between the processes of textile work and those of blacksmithing as both are ways of ‘creating something out of nothing’, as Terry Gunnell has phrased it; that is, giving shape to that which has no shape (see also V.3.). Furthermore, the verbs *smiða* and *skapa* are often used with similar semantic content: ‘to create’ (Jón Hnefill Áðalsteinsson 2004:194-197).
the same, it is an everyday room; we are hardly meant to consider the dyngja a ritual space as such.

Figure 4. Drawing of a reconstructed dyngja, based on archaeological finds. The low floor level is clearly visible.

In archaeological excavations of settlements, dyngjur have been shown to be recognisable as rooms containing many textile-related tools and implements, particularly loom weights, which were used to keep the warp taut on an upright loom. This space was often physically separate from other parts of the house. Østergård writes:

From a review of the find-spots of loom weights in excavations from, among other places, the Old Town in Oslo and from Scania, it is evident that they [dyngjur] are often found on the northern side of the room in the dwelling or towards the northeast in pit-houses and it has been possible to see that a door or entrance was placed on the opposite side. The placing of the loom in relation to the door has therefore been interpreted as the result of a wish to receive any light that came in. On the Greenland farms the dyngja was placed in the northern or northeastern part of the farms but may not have had anything to do with light, since no outside doors were found in these rooms. (Østergård 2004:59)

And further, concerning one of the Norse farms in Greenland:

The weaving room at the Farm Beneath the Sand (64V2-III-555) [Western settlement] was sunken, and there was no door out to the open air. The low-lying placing may therefore not be the result of a wish for diagonally falling light. On the other hand, in the weaving room the largest fireplace registered in the farm complex was found, and this may have something to do with the light, since in a large fireplace there is room for a lot of fuel, which besides heat would also provide a good deal of light.

243 Whether the direction north-northeast is of any significance is uncertain.
This latter description conjures up an image not unlike the warm *dynjaf* with the firelight, mentioned by Þorbjörn. One might wonder why people would want to weave inside in dark, half-underground places when there is plenty of light outside, and Østergaard (2004:69) suggests that the looms might have been moved outside in the summer. Yet, archeological scholarship appears not to mention traces of weaving found at outside locations. Loom weights always seem to be found inside the houses rather than outside them and there are good reasons not to move an upright loom outside. One reason is that the Scandinavian summer, apart from being very light, can be very wet, and it would seem undesirable to be weaving in the rain – even if somewhat humid conditions are a help when weaving linen.\(^{244}\) Another reason is that once the loom is set up it would be very cumbersome to take it down again in order to move it and one can hardly imagine attempts at shifting a loom after it has been set up. In Scandinavia, weaving was probably an indoor activity and in shieling cultures, such as most of Norway, Iceland and parts of Sweden, but also in Denmark, it was traditionally a winter activity (Højrup 1978:177). Otherwise, looms would presumably have left traces also at shieling sites, not just farm sites. Spinning, however, is a portable activity and has left archaeological traces at shielings as well as house sites. Spinning was not confined to the *dynjaf*, weaving probably was.

In certain symbolic ways, the *dynjaf* corresponds to Fensalir, to Sókkvabekkr, to the hall in or by Urðarbrunnr, to Sókkadalr – Gunnlög’s dwelling deep inside the mountain and to the hall of Grendel’s mother deep down at the bottom of the pool (see IV.2.1.). This space is charged with some kind of feminine powers, it has to do with creation, with transformation, and one expects to find primarily women inside it.

The word *dynjaf* is itself of some interest here. Dictionary definitions describe it as a space for women: ‘a lady’s bower’ (C/V:111). The *dynjaf* was probably originally a separate building, half underground and with muck spread over the rooftop for warmth: *frauengemach unter der erde*, ‘women’s quarters below ground’ (AeW:90;

\(^{244}\) Zimmermann (1982:116), discussing pit houses as weaving houses, explains how weaving wool is unproblematic but for flax fibres a constantly humid atmosphere is desirable, and that shallow oblong pits thought to increase dampness are often found at sites where looms have stood. This accords well with the idea of half-underground and probably damp *dynjur* heated by fires. Baines (1989:26) also points out that flax fibres need to be wetted in order to be spun; cf. note 121.
It is not the intention here to claim that the *dyngja* was some kind of holy or sacred space but, as a specifically feminine space set aside for feminine types of work, it seems to have the potential for taking on connotations of magic and, moreover, of issues which were outside of the masculine realm. As spinning could at certain times and in special circumstances have some magical significance (see V.8.), so the *dyngja* might likewise at times have obtained similar connotations. Most of the time, spinning is just work needing to be done, the *dyngja* is just the place where it is done and there is nothing strange about that; both of these should probably on the whole be regarded as everyday matters. Yet, we do come across spinning carried out with magical or at least with special and unusual intent (see V.7.); in such special situations it is possible to consider that the space in which this activity is carried out might also gain similar status, even if this is just a temporary status.\(^{245}\) The *dyngja*, then, might be regarded not in itself as a magical space but as a place wherein certain magical or quasi-magical things might take place under certain circumstances; simultaneously, it has a specifically feminine identity.

Connections between the earth and feminine deities are well-known; indeed, Old Norse mythology personifies the earth as female: Jörð, mother of Þórr (cf. ÓhÓgáin 1990:263-265 on ancient Irish kingship). Furthermore:

Belief in the goddess is connected with the earth in the most literal terms. It is not unlikely that the religion of the ancient Scandinavians was associated with hills, or that religious ceremonies derived from belief in the earth and in re-birth took place in specially prepared hills or caves. Innumerable traditions associated with such places survive in the fornaldasögur and in folklore. It is clearly not sensible to lay too much emphasis on these traditions, but there is a weight of evidence to suggest that such ceremonies continued into the saga age. Men entered into foster brotherhood with one another by carving up the earth and going under an arch of raised turf where they drew their own blood and mixed it together with the soil (*Gísla saga* ch. 6 [IF 6:22-23]). This is obviously a re-birth ritual where belief in the earth as mother is implicit in the actual form of the ceremony. When men entered into foster brotherhood, the earth was not merely a symbol of re-birth; it was also the ceremony’s frame, the shrine itself, the actual womb of a mother. (Svava Jakobsdóttir 2002:40)

This would seem to connect to the goddesses below the ground as well as to the *dyngja*, that feminine space half underground. No direct line can be drawn between

---

\(^{245}\) Gunnell, discussing ritual space in pagan Icelandic houses, says: “The idea that these buildings were multifunctional implies that the meaning of their daily space was ‘transformed’ in some way at certain points in time” (2004b:4).
the dyngja and the notion that it was a symbolic womb in Old Norse literature, but
the womb is a protective and confining space – as is the dyngja described by Þorbjørn – and it is also akin to the dyngja as a place where things are generated.
The womb is a wet, dark place on the inside and it is decidedly feminine. One text passage seems quite plausibly interpreted in the light of this idea; the feminine connotations of the dyngja are potentially indirectly referred to in the words of Eðna as she gives the infamous raven banner to her son Sigurðr jarl in Orkneyinga saga ll:246

Ek mynda þisk hafa lengi upp fætt í ulllaupi mínun, ef ek vissa, at þú myndir einart lifa, ok ræðr auðna lifi, en eigi, hvar måðr er kominn; betra er at deyja með sæmð en lifa med skóm.
(IF 34:24-25)

'I would have nurtured you for a long time in my wool basket, if I knew that you would live forever, but it is fate which rules life, and not where a man happens to be; better to die with dignity than to live with shame.'
(My translation)

These somewhat enigmatic words can be understood in the light of the notion proposed here because we can liken the idea of being inside the wool basket to being inside the dyngja and we can do this in two ways: 1) the dyngja is a protective but also confining environment, fit for women and children but not for grown men. Thus, a young boy may spend time with the women in the dyngja but when he grows up this is no longer regarded as proper for him to do. In order to grow up properly he must go into the dangerous world outside. 2) The wool basket contains wool that is as yet untreated, it is a mass of potential but is still without shape or order. In this way it is like the womb where human beings are put together and to remain there would, in fact, mean to remain unborn. What I am arguing is that there is a symbolic connection between textile work on the one hand and giving birth on the other hand (see further below).

In both cases, to remain in the wool basket would be an unnatural thing to do. A man who spends his time in the dyngja cannot be reckoned a proper man and an unborn person cannot be reckoned a person. What Eðna seems to be saying is that for someone to live forever, time has to be suspended at the in-between point when the person is still in the protective sphere of the wool basket, womb or dyngja, yet she also knows that this is impossible because the lives of humans are controlled by

246 Flateyjarbók c.1387-1395 and other MSS.
247 The image of the wool basket corresponds rather well to Þorbjørn’s cosy mittens.
the powers of fate more than by people themselves. Once you have been given the basic equipment for living, you are shoved out of the dyngja, out of the womb.

At the same time as Eòna is saying this to Sigurðr, she is handing him what is effectively his death, the magical raven banner, seemingly emulating the nornir as givers and takers of life. She, his mother, has given him life and now she gives him death (cf. III.2.1.).

The suggested connection between Eòna’s wool basket and the dyngja works on two levels: one is that of human social conventions, the other is a more symbolic interpretation not explicitly present in the text. The first level works in this way: were Sigurðr, literally, to remain in the wool basket, or the dyngja, that physical workshop space that is considered specifically female, he would not be a ‘proper’ man. This reading is quite straightforward. The second level works in this way: it is the fate of whatever is put into the symbolic dyngja, the womb, to come out, transformed from raw and unshaped mass into a human being the same way as untreated wool in the wool basket is transformed into ordered threads which can be made into useful things. The raw mass cannot remain inside once it has gained the form given to it by the ‘supernatural’ powers at work inside the symbolic dyngja; that is the fate of human life: it leads to death and no one can live forever. This could be what Eòna means: that it is not possible to suspend life on the threshold between one state and another. Whether she is actively hurrying her son’s life to an end would appear to hinge on whether we regard her as an evil woman who is using sorcery with malicious intent, or as a human messenger of some higher force who is simply stating the inevitable. It must be kept in mind, however, that this reading works on a highly symbolic level and is an interpretation of the text in Orkneyinga saga 11.

The suggestion of a connection between what goes on in the womb and what goes on in the dyngja finds further support in other European traditions, also Christian ones.248 In the apocryphal Book of James (also known as the Protevangelium) there is a description of the Annunciation which has Mary spinning when the angel comes to speak to her:

But Mary took the scarlet and began to spin it.

Xl. 1 And she took the pitcher and went forth to fill it with water: and lo a voice said: Hail, thou art highly favoured; the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.

And she looked about her upon the right hand and upon the left, to see whence this voice should be: and being filled with trembling she went to her

248 I am grateful to Florentina Badalanova Geller, British Museum, for introducing me to this material.
house and set down the pitcher, and took the purple and sat down upon her seat and drew out the thread.

2 And behold an angel of the Lord stood before here saying: fear not, Mary, for thou hast found grace before the Lord of all things, and thou shalt conceive of his word. And she, when she heard it, questioned in herself, saying: Shall I verily conceive of the living God, and bring forth after the manner of all women? And the angel of the Lord said: Not so, Mary, for a power of the Lord shall overshadow thee: wherefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of the Highest. And thou shalt call his name Jesus: for he shall save his people from their sins. And Mary said: Behold the handmaid of the Lord is before him: be it unto me according to your word.

(Apocryphal New Testament 1945:43)

Two things are of interest here: 1) that Mary is spinning when she conceives, and 2) that she first hears the voice when she goes to fetch water.²⁴⁹

![Figure 5.](image)

This 12th century Spanish icon clearly shows Mary spinning when the angel comes to her.

The idea of the spinning Virgin Mary is strongly supported by Eastern European iconography of the Annunciation. Two such icons are found in St. Sofia cathedral in Kiev, dating from the 11th century, another in St. George’s Cathedral in Novgorod, dating from 1103, and a 12th century fresco fragment from the Church of Sorpe in Spain reveals that the same tradition existed in Western Europe although it was discontinued there in later times. That it was kept up in Eastern Europe is evident

²⁴⁹ In Baltic traditions, Laima, goddess of fate and childbirth, is associated with water as well as textiles (Vaitkevičienė 2002:138-9).
from later icons, such as the 15th century altar gate in the village church in Boboshevo, Bulgaria, the 16th century altar gate at Preobrazhenski Monastery, Bulgaria, and others (Badalanova 2006). All of these icons portray Mary holding a spindle, some of them even show the baby Jesus inside of her just where the thread crosses her abdomen between her hands.250

The connection between spinning and giving birth is also expressed in other forms:

Many Slavonic riddles play with this archetypal metaphor, showing the distaff as an allegorical image of the mother who is spinning the thread of life, while the yarn on the spindle is considered a child growing in her womb: “The mother shrinks, the child grows. What is it?” ... In a number of similar riddles the distaff is also allegorically described as a mother who is spinning her offspring’s life into form out of her own body. (Badalanova 2006:231)251

Inside of the dyngja, on both levels, ‘something’ is made from ‘nothing’, ‘nothing’ is put together, structured and ordered into one coherent ‘something.’ In the actual dyngja, masses of untreated wool and flax are transformed into threads and the threads are ordered and put together in weaving, embroidery and other types of textile work. In this space, human women are at work, ordering and putting together cultural goods in an environment to which men do not normally have, or even want to have, access, although children, boys and girls, are allowed. The powers that women have here are mainly practical but at times they may extend into the realm of magic. The actual dyngja, then, may be seen as a sort of protected area of feminine creativity, giving order and shape to unformed masses of potential.

In the symbolic dyngja, the womb, supernatural powers are at work, those feminine powers represented by nornir that structure and order and lay down the laws for the little human inside its mother. This power is beyond the reach of humans, male or female.

It is of interest here to mention a typological parallel to the theory proposed above, namely that the Tzutujil Maya of Guatemala make particularly close connections between the act of creating textiles and that of giving birth: “the weaving process is thought of as a birthing process” so that: “weavings are not just woven but in fact born” (Prechtel and Carlsen 1988:123). This notion works in terms

---

250 Cf. the Gotland-Swedish expression spinnä pa [spinna pa], ‘spin onto (oneself)’ meaning ‘to become pregnant’ (Säve 1941-45:953). I am grateful to Eldar Heide, Universitetet I Bergen, for this reference.

251 On the connection between ‘text’ and ‘textile’, see V.5.
of a perceived correspondence between a warp and the body, and the stakes placed in the ground in order to facilitate warp-making are referred to as parts of the body: head, heart, foot etc. "Interestingly, there is a belief amongst the Tzutujił that the human body is woven. The common denominator to the belief that weavings are born and humans woven is, of course, the moon – the goddess of both weaving and birthing" (Prechtel and Carlsen 1988:124).

Furthermore, the Dogon people of Mali in West Africa draw an extremely close connection between textile work and human life and death:

Spinning cotton and weaving clothing is exactly the same as a man and a woman entering the house to sleep together and produce children. The weaver, representing a dead man, is also the male who opens and closes the womb of the woman, represented by the heddle. The stretched threads represent the act of procreation. The cotton threads of the weavers and the numerous men in the world are all one. The making of the cloth symbolizes the multiplication of mankind. The craft of weaving in fact... is the tomb of resurrection, the marriage bed and the fruitful womb. (Griaule 1965:73).

This even incorporates the life-giving and death-bringing duality of the women in the well.

The Guatemalan and African evidence is far removed from Old Norse culture but the fact that similar symbol complexes exist in other cultures may be seen to support my argument; that the fate-textile-dynjia complex is not exclusively specific to Old Norse culture would seem to strengthen the reasons for accepting the validity of the metaphor. It also fits with the apparently shared root, legh-, of Old Norse leg, 'law' and Old High German lehter, 'womb, afterbirth' (Pokorny 1959:659).

The force at work in the symbolic dynjia is neither good nor bad and what it brings forth may be good or evil. It may sometimes produce good things and at other times bad things. The power is not in itself inherently positive or negative, it is just an ordering principle that structures and puts together the physical form of human bodies and also the lives they will live, sometimes with beautiful or peaceful, sometimes with violent or disastrous, results. This seems to be very close to the portrayal of nornir in Völuspá 20, since it is an ordering principle which is indifferent or blind to the individual person but concerned with the greater whole; it is neither good nor bad, or – which is the same thing – both benign and evil at the same time. It has, then, the same double-sided nature as do nornir.

252 I am grateful to Laurie Webster, University of Arizona, for introducing me to this material.
This notion of receiving form and shape seems to be carried in the word *skop*, ‘fate’. *Skop* is cognate with the English word ‘shape’ and has a verb-form, *skapa*, ‘to create’, as well as a noun-form, *skop*, ‘fate’ (see VI.1.2.). Both forms of the word can carry a sense of fate, for example the latter half of *Helgakviða Hundingsbana* II 28 reads:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Vantattu vígi,} & \quad \text{You could not stop the fighting,} \\
\text{var þér þat skapat,} & \quad \text{that was dealt to you} \\
\text{at þú at rági} & \quad \text{so that you were the cause of strife} \\
\text{ríkmenni vart} & \quad \text{among powerful men}
\end{align*}
\]

The latter half of *Fáfnismál* 44, on the other hand, reads:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{máat sigrdrífar} & \quad \text{A descendant of heroes} \\
\text{svéfni bregða,} & \quad \text{May not break} \\
\text{skjöldunga níðr,} & \quad \text{Sigdrífa's sleep,} \\
\text{fyr skopom norn.} & \quad \text{that is the decision of the nornir.}
\end{align*}
\]

The sense of *skapa* and *skop* here is that which the *nornir* have shaped, created for or decided on behalf of a person, their fate (see also VI.1.).

**IV.4. Summary: Fate comes from the Well**

In this chapter, I have tried to find answers to two major questions: 1) what can we make of the idea that there are three *nornir* presented to us in *Völuspá* and *Snorra-Edda*? and 2) why is fate so strongly associated with the feminine? As regards the three names, Óðr, Verandi and Skuld, it was found that the evidence for this constellation is not only relatively late but also confined to only two sources, Snorri probably copying the number three from *Völuspá*. Some evidence for a triple division of *nornir* is supported by *Fáfnismál* 13 which in turn may be related to the *First Merseburg Charm* (see V.6.). The strongest evidence for a triad of *nornir* is the Roman-inspired votive altars depicting three ‘mothers’ but the extent to which those relate to the Old Norse *nornir* cannot be determined exactly.

On the whole, it seems a futile quest to argue for or against any specific number of *nornir*; were there any such ideas in heathen tradition, these are likely to have been subject to change throughout time and space anyway and the question in itself does not really bring us any closer to an understanding of what *nornir* are. Of greater interest are the names given to the three *nornir*. The temporal interpretation of the names as ‘Past’, ‘Present’ and ‘Future’ seems to be evident in, even built into, the idea of there being three, but on the other hand Verandi was found to be a late addition, serving primarily as a grammatical link between the other two. Óðr and
Skuld, however, are certainly old, not as representatives for specific chronological periods but rather for notions of death and fate. Both portray an image of fate, Urðr specifically related to the well, Skuld to battle. Whereas Urðr is closely connected to nornir, Skuld appears to span the grey area dividing nornir from valkyrjur.

It is hard to reach any firm conclusions regarding a group of three nornir, the evidence for it is inconclusive and probably reflects a situation similar to that of the Saami akkas - different regions knew different traditions concerning their enumeration (Kulonen 2005:281).

The arguments presented in this chapter establish a connection between specific supernatural female figures - nornir, völur, Frigg, Sága, Grendel's mother and Gunnlöð - on the grounds that they share in a certain set of features. They are all associated with the underground and many of them with wet or damp places and in the present context this dark abode is aligned with the specific feminine work space of the dyngja. Dyngjur are by no means the only type of half-underground pit houses revealed by archaeology, yet it is not only their physical layout but also their strong feminine connotations which make them relevant to a discussion of ideas about fate in its many female guises. As has been shown, a number of the female figures described in this section find their abode not only below ground but in wetlands and other watery places; while dyngjur are not exactly wet places comparable to fens or bogs they are nonetheless damp places. Also emphasised here is the symbolic value of the type of work which goes on inside the dyngja, namely weaving, combined with the association of textile work with magic, with birth and with women in general.

What I have attempted to do in this chapter is to discover something about the nornir through a close analysis of certain aspects of their place of origin and through seeking out parallel female figures whose places of origin seem strikingly similar. This has directed me towards an attempt at explaining why fate has such strong feminine connotations and the explanation I have found points to the womb as a perceived magical space in which human fate is laid down, the dyngja of the nornir, so to speak, where shape (and skgp) is given to the unshaped and out of which life emerges, created seemingly from nothing.

Little is said about dyngjur in Old Norse literature (see V.3.2.), but little is said about nornir, either, and even less about the practicalities of childbirth. There may be a dearth of hard evidence but this in itself does not invalidate the metaphorical aspects of this explanation. We know that fate is thought of predominantly in terms of feminine beings like nornir, we know that nornir are particularly concerned with
birth and death – with the womb and the tomb. Furthermore, the fate-textile-dyngja complex is significantly supported by evidence from other European traditions and from cultures across the world. It is the very fact that the dyngja also has strong female connotations that makes it such a good analogy for the womb: both are spaces where female creativity is exercised, one on human terms, the other on supernatural terms. The situation would seem to lend itself easily to the blending together of these two levels.
V. Fate and Threads

As noted earlier, it is a common conception that nornir spin and/or weave fate. Numerous artistic representations of nornir centre around this image, which is also widely accepted in academic work, and the focus of this chapter will be on the connections between the concept of fate and various types of textile-related activities, items and phrases. Fate does relate to textile (and I have precisely discussed the dyngja), but not necessarily in the ways commonly imagined.

By 'threads' as used in the chapter heading, I mean not only strings and threads but also spinning and the use of threads in different contexts, such as binding, knotting and tying or as a part of textiles such as embroidery, sewing and weaving. The 'threads' explored in this section thus span the whole complex of making and using threads as well as metaphorical or symbolic references to threads.

V.1. Are the Spinning Nornir just a Yarn?

The idea of the spinning nornir has long been present in scholarship and remains so today; it is, in fact, virtually taken for granted. However, the truth of the matter is that one looks in vain for an absolutely clear and unequivocal representation of spinning or weaving nornir in Old Norse literature. It is not there. This, of course, does not in itself mean that they do not do these things but it does mean that one has to be careful about making statements concerning the idea. The intention in this chapter is not to discard the portrayal of nornir as spinners and weavers but, indeed, to explore it in detail to see what the justification for it might be.

Mentioning nornir who spin and/or weave apparently requires no references to explicit text passages at all. Eiríkr Magnússon (1910a:17) says about Darradarijód: "Of course the weaving of the spear web is a magic function... Thus the Valkyrior here are acting in the capacity of their not very distant relatives, the Norns" – the implication of this statement being that nornir themselves weave in a magical way, but Eiríkr fails to mention where this image may be found. Bauschatz (1982:38) states: "We know that weaving and spinning are among the evolved or related attributes of Urth", but does not reveal how it is that we know this. Larrington (1992:155) says that: "[The name Urðr] is derived from the verb ‘to become’, cognate with Latin vertere – to turn. This suggests spinning, and indeed the idea of

---

253 Examples of this are so many that only a few can be mentioned here: Holtsmark (1939:93); Bauschatz (1982:21); Olafur Briem (1985:209); Larrington (1996:278); Grimstad (2000:183); Winterbourne (2004:92).
an individual's destiny as woven is prevalent in Old Norse." Enright (1996:111) writes: "As far as one can tell, peoples of Germanic culture always associated such looms [warp-weighted looms] with the warp and woof of fate and the women who worked them were often associated with magic." Meulengracht Sørensen and Steinsland (2001:53) describe the nornir according to Völuspá 19-20 saying: I andre kilder fortælles det, at normerne værer eller spinder skæbnen for guder og mennesker, 'In other sources it is said that the nornir weave or spin fate for gods and humans'; and Raudvere (2003:63) says about them: De omtalas som ristande runor eller vävande öden, 'They are spoken of as carving runes or weaving fate.'

None of the statements quoted here actually provide references to passages of Old Norse literature where this image can be found, the 'other sources' mentioned by Meulengracht Sørensen and Steinsland, and by others who have dealt with the issue, have a tendency to remain entirely unspecified, the notion is taken for granted to such an extent that referencing it is apparently thought to be unnecessary. This is curious because, when one goes to the literature in search of spinning and weaving nornir, it turns out that these are by no means common at all. Of all the appearances that nornir and beings related to them make in the Eddas and in skaldic poetry, one poem, Darradarljóð, found in the Íslendingasögur, mentions valkyrjur weaving, one eddic poem, Völundarkviða, portrays women spinning, and one eddic poem, Helgakviða Hundingsbana I, shows nornir working in some way or other with threads. That makes three occurrences of which only two can be said to involve the metaphor for fate (see III.2.2.). Proportionately, text passages involving supernatural textile work are quite rare, it is simply not the most common activity for nornir to be engaged in – even if it was the most common female activity in daily life and even if it has become one of the most commonly conceived images of the nornir.254

While most scholars have made a point of the nornir's involvement in the textile industry, Simek (1993:237) makes the following observation: "the typical motif of the Parcae, namely spinning or weaving fate which is only recorded in Scandinavia for the valkyries (-Darraðarljóð) is missing with regard to the norns." While this is true, the situation regarding the motif of fate-as-textile is a little more nuanced than this.

254 Continental saga material brings in the idea of 'three sisters' who spin, though the word nornir is not actually used: Alexanders saga V:79 (1925:77, 134) AM 519 a 4o c.1280; and Adonias saga 33 (1963:140) AM 593 4o c.1400-1500; but, as Icelandic translations of continental stories, these are rather far removed from Old Norse mythology, in terms of both time and content. The earliest MS of Alexanders saga is from c.1280, whilst Konungsþók is from c.1270; this opens the question of borrowing from Classical tradition.
The textile analogy cannot be rejected altogether but I would like to point out the paradox of combining the well-established image of spinning nornir with the dearth of evidence for such in the actual source material.

Connections between fate, spinning and weaving exist in Old Norse tradition but we ought to be careful about how we refer to this image because, with regard to the nornir, it seems to be one which occurs by implication rather than directly. The evidence that is there is much more subtle than we tend to assume.

In the following, the two passages from Old Norse tradition which turn up when the question of spinning and weaving nornir is raised will be treated. They are: Helgakviða Hundingsbana I and Darðararljóð.

V.2. Helgakviða Hundingsbana I

As mentioned, Old Norse literature presents us with only one very clear instance of nornir working with threads, namely Helgakviða Hundingsbana I 2-4.255

Nótt varð í bæ,  
nornir kvómo  
þær er þöllingi  
aldr um skópo:  
þann báðó fylki  
frægstan verða  
ok buðlanga  
bestan þikkia.

Night fell on the place,  
nornir came,  
those who were to shape  
fate for the prince;  
they said the king  
should be most famous  
and that he’d be thought  
the best of leaders...

Snæro þær af afli  
þröggþátto,  
þá er borgir braut  
í Brálundi; 256  
þær um greiddo  
gullin símo  
ok um mána sal  
miðan festo.

They twisted very strongly  
the strands of fate,  
as the fortifications were broken  
in Brálundr;  
they arranged  
golden threads  
and fastened them in the middle  
of the moon’s hall.

Þær austr ok vestr  
enda fálo:  
þar átti loðungr  
land á milli;  
brá nipt Nera  
á norðvega  
einni festi,  
ey bað hon halda.

East and west  
they put the ends,  
the prince should have  
the land between;  
the kinswoman of Neri  
to the north  
threw across one fastening;  
bade it hold for ever.

255 This section forms the basis of my forthcoming article: “Are the Spinning Nornir just a Yarn?”, in Viking and Medieval Scandinavia vol 3.

256 Brálundr is the name of the place where Helgi is born. That he is born þá er borgir braut has been read so that he is born while there is a battle at Brálundr (for example Jakobsen
Stanza 3 mentions *sörlögþatto*, 'fate-threads', a term clearly conveying the notion of fate as a thread although the word in itself in no way describes the relationship between threads and fate. The *nornir* are said to twist these threads together, fastening them in the sky ('the moon's hall') with three separate strands stretching out from there in compass directions, and it is stated in stanza 4 that Helgi will possess the lands in between. These actions have been vaguely interpreted by some as an act of weaving, for example Larrington who footnotes stanza 2 of the poem thus: "norns, female fate figures who determine the lives of men. They are associated with weaving” (1996:278), and Davidson who finds that the scene: "represents the Norns setting up a huge loom whose threads stretch across the sky” (1998:119). Others have suggested spinning: *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* beschreibt die N[ornen] präzise als Spinnende, *'Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* describes the *nornir* exactly as spinners' (Dillmann 2002:391).

But neither interpretation stands up to close scrutiny if a practical approach to these activities is adopted and attention is also paid to the three crucial verbs: *snúa*, *greiða* and *bregða*. The first verb used is *snúa*, 'twisting', not *spinna*, 'spinning', as one might expect were the intention to portray spinning unequivocally – as happens in *Völundarkviða*. This does not in itself prove that they are not spinning but it does leave open the option that it might be a description of something else. Furthermore, the way in which these threads are used is described in quite a detailed way and in a way that matches neither the process of spinning nor that of weaving on a practical level. Certainly, the fastening of vertical threads may be likened to setting up a warp on a loom and a horizontal thread could then be seen as the weft. But apart from the lack of any words or allusions connected with weaving, the poem refers to only three threads, all of which appear to be running downwards, and that is hardly enough to weave with. For the lack of threads, it seems the weaving interpretation must be discarded. On top of this, the purpose of the threads appears to be revealed

---

1966), but if we read *borg* as a kenning rather than in the literal meaning of 'fortress' it can refer to the womb (cf. *hugborg*, 'fortress of the will, heart or thought' in *Guðrúnarkviða I* 14) and the phrase would simply mean that he is born. I am grateful to Jón Hnefill Ádalsteinsson, Háskóli Islands, for this suggestion.

257 *Snúa*, 'to twist' does not describe the act of weaving on a loom, though it fits with the physical motion of threads in tablet weaving. In modern Icelandic, *snúa* can be used to mean 'translate': *snúa á ensku*, 'translate into English'; I am grateful to Sverrir Tómasson, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, for this observation. This recalls the term *bundið mál*, 'bound language' for poetry and *óbundið mál*, 'unbound language' for prose (see also VI.3. and V.5.).
in the phrase: *par átti loftungur land á milli*, ‘the prince should have all the land between.’

Two things happen here: 1) separate threads are united into one, and 2) threads are used to mark off boundaries in physical space.

Concerning the unification of threads, the image employed in the poem does not describe spinning very well; spinning means drawing out and twisting together strands of wool or flax into a single thread, but in the poem the *nornir* already have three threads. They are not making these from scratch. Rather than spinning, the image seems to portray the process of plying.\(^{258}\) When a thread has been spun, it is often pried, either with one or more other threads or with itself, in order to stabilise it before it is put to practical use; otherwise it is likely constantly to curl back on itself. Single, un-plied threads can, however, be stabilised using steam but the danger of using un-plied yarn is that the finished result may be skewed because the yarn will have a tendency to pull in one direction;\(^{259}\) however, it is not unusual to use un-plied yarn as warp (Baines 1989:60).\(^{260}\) On a spindle, plying can be done by fastening the ends of the threads onto the spindle and, whilst carefully keeping the individual threads separate (which accords well with the verb *greida*, ‘comb, keep separate’ in stanza 3), twisting them together by turning the spindle in the opposite direction from that in which the threads were initially spun. This releases the tension built up in the spun strands, it makes them softer and also strengthens the pried thread by letting the strands twist into one another.

\(^{258}\) ‘Plying’ is the technical term normally used, although ‘twining’ may also be used.

\(^{259}\) Personal communication from Freda Bayne, Holmwood Textiles, Orkney.

\(^{260}\) In turn, this may explain the double meaning of the English word ‘warp;’ the noun refers to the vertical threads on a loom and the verb refers to a degree of bending or distortion, and a warp consisting of unplied yarn is more likely than one of pried yarn to yield a skewed result.
The plying process gives exactly the same visual image as that described in the poem: the three threads are held out each in its own direction, coming together in a meeting point at the top and from here the plied thread stretches down in the middle with the turning spindle at the bottom.261 Already Jacob Grimm seems to have come to the same conclusion with regard to what the norrdir do in these stanzas: "nowhere in Romance or German folk-tales do we meet, as far as I know, with the Norse conception of twining and fastening the cord, or the Greek one of spinning and cutting the thread of life" (Grimm I 2004:413). The somewhat casual manner in which Grimm here distinguishes between spinning and twining appears not to have been understood by all scholars.262

Figure 7.
Spinning with a distaff. The distaff is held under the arm whilst the spindle hangs at the end of the spun thread.

If we shift from the image of plying to that of spinning, there would be only one thread, not three.263 The spinning image is also likely to include not just a spindle but

261 A similarly structured image is described in Plato's Republic 616C, depicting the movement of the celestial bodies using the idea of a spindle as an axis mundi: "and from the extremities they saw extended the spindle of Necessity, by which all the revolving spheres are turned" (Adam 1902:447). The Norse image, however, is unlikely to relate directly to Plato's.
262 Some have understood it; notably Steinsland (2005:329), Hansen (1911:134).
263 I cannot see how one would spin three threads simultaneously on the one spindle.
a distaff, too. The distaff is the tool that holds the unspun material while the spindle is the tool onto which the spun thread is wound. The spinning scene with distaff and spindle seems to accord particularly well with the idea suggested by Hjortsø (1984:95): that the spindle is a human being around whom the thread is wound during the course of their life; when the spindle can hold no more, the thread is cut.

One might also imagine that the scene portrays braiding, as indicated by the verb bregdā, 'to braid or throw across' in stanza 4. This interpretation would change some things because braiding involves continuously moving the loose ends of the threads, letting them trade places as they are laid over one another in succession. The ordering described as greiða is also necessary for braiding, lest the loose ends should tangle up, but it would mean that the motion takes place where the individual strands separate rather than where they come together. In the image of plying, the top ends are fastened in the skies and the strands twist together as the firmament turns around, forcing the strands together in a cord. In the image of braiding, the bottom ends that stretch out are the ones that are in motion, continuously shifting places with one another. Whether the poem depicts one or the other is hard to tell but the contest is clearly between plying and braiding, not spinning and weaving. I believe that plying in some ways is the better image, as it contains the spindle

---

264 It is perfectly possible to spin without a distaff, in which case the unspun wool may be kept in a basket at the spinner's one side while the spindle with the spun thread hangs down on the other side. In Homer, spinning seems to be done sitting down (Odyssey 6:52; 17:97), and Onians (1951:305-306) argues that this is the image behind the phrase 'in the lap of the gods' (Iliad 17:514; Odyssey 1:267) because the actual transformation from unspun wool to spun thread takes place on the knees of the spinner.

265 See also the Slavonic riddles mentioned by Badalanova (2006:231), V.5. below.
hanging down in the middle, possibly symbolising Helgi; braiding shows only the thread itself, running between the skies and the land, but is not attached to Helgi.\footnote{Bregða has many meanings and can also be used to describe an activity being brought to an end, that the appearance or constitution of something is changed, and, interestingly, it can mean to ensure that something which has been decided is not carried out as intended (Frzt 1:181). This last meaning recalls the third seeress in Norna-Gests pátr or the last fairy-godmother in Sleeping Beauty (ATU 410), the one who stops the good prophecies from swinging into action.}

This, then, is what happens in the one clear example of \textit{nornir} working with threads. Rather than spinning or weaving, the activity described in the poem seems to be that of plying: three threads are plied together into one, one end of each thread fastened in the sky – as held by the hand of the person doing the plying – and the other ends, where the individual threads split apart, are fastened in three of the compass directions: east, west and north. The textile analogy in this poem cannot be disputed: the one reference to \textit{nornir} working with threads shows them plying a fate-thread together at the moment of Helgi’s birth and this thread ties together the area which is his ‘lot’ by having its ends anchored in cardinal directions.

The notion of fate as a thread is also conveyed in \textit{Reginsmál} 14 where the smith Reginn says of the young Sigurðr:

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{ll}
Ek mun fæða & I will nurture \\
fólkiðarfan gram; & the battle-brave prince; \\
nú er Yngva konr & now the offspring of Yngvi \\
með oss kominn! & has come to us, \\
siá mun ræsir & he will be a king \\
rikstr und sólo, & the most powerful under the sun, \\
brymr um ãll ðond & his fate-threads \\
ørløgsímo & will remain in all lands.
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

This stanza, however, is no clearer in its association of fate with threads than is \textit{Helgakviða Hundingsbana I}. The meaning of the last two lines depends on interpretation as \textit{þrymja} means either ‘to remain in one place’ (LP:649; Frtz III:1046) or ‘to move rapidly forward, to spread out’ (KLE 5:314; Gisli Sigurðsson 1998:225). Whether these fate-threads are ‘extending’ or ‘remaining’, it seems clear that they are somehow connected to a geographical area. This strongly recalls the plying image and here it should be said that: \textit{HH. I 3 und Rm. 14 bieten zugleich die einzigen expliziten Erwähnungen eines Schicksalsfadens in der anord. Dichtung, ‘At the same time, Helgakviða Hundingsbana I 3 and Reginsmál 14 offer the only explicit references to a fate-thread in Old Norse poetry’} (KLE 4:177). These are the only two references and it is noteworthy that \textit{Reginsmál} makes no direct mention of \textit{nornir}. If we choose to see \textit{nornir} in \textit{Reginsmál} then it is because we know \textit{Helgakviða}
Hundingsbana I beforehand; there is little else to justify connecting nomir to this stanza. It presents the notion of fate in the form of a thread, and whether or not this implies spinning seems to me entirely conjectural, it could just as well refer to some sort of binding.267 Different types of threads, uses of threads and thread production may well serve as poetic variations of the same theme but this does not change the fact that there are no nomir in Reginsmál 14.

The supernatural spinners, so rare in Norse tradition, are, however, common in Classical tradition (see III.3.).268 A 1st century epigram by Martial269 comes especially close to the scene in Helgakvíða Hundingsbana I:

Nascere Dardanio promissum nomen Iulo270 
vera deum suboles; nascere, magne puer, 
cui pater aeternas post saecula tradat habenas, 
quiue regas orbem cum seniore senex. 
ipsa tibi niveo trahet aurea pollice fila
et totam Phrixi271 Iulia nebit ovem.
(Liber VI-III)

'Be born, Dardanian, that has been promised a name by Iulus 
true offspring of the gods; be born, great boy, 
to whom your own father after centuries will hand over the reins 
and who will rule as an old man together with an older one. 
Julia herself will draw with her snowwhite thumb272 the golden threads 
and spin all the wool of Phrixus' sheep.273
(My translation)

267 The term bōnd is not uncommonly used for the Old Norse gods, but never for nomir.
268 Moirai are commonly known as spinners of fate, although in Homer this image is used but 
once and spinning is attributed to the aída, klothos or to the gods; in later sources it is more 
frequently associated with moirai, especially at births (III.3.). Ovid uses it in his description of 
the birth of Meleagros, Metamorphoses 8:451-455, and in Tristia V:13,24, where he says that a 
career 'not so black' was spun for the poet. In Statius' Thebaid (1st century AD) death is 
described in terms of threads breaking or crumbling: I:632, III:642, VIII:10. Numerous other 
examples exist.
269 Marcus Valerius Martialis, Liber VI:III (Oxford 1903). The poem was apparently written on 
the expected birth of an heir to the empire after Domitian. It may refer to an expected child 
of Domitian and Julia, Domitian's niece, with whom he lived after he had repudiated Domitia. 
Possibly, the expectation expressed here was never realised (Stephenson 1929:293).
270 Also known as Ascanius, son of Aeneas. His presence in the epigram apparently 
emphasises the claim of the Roman emperor to be descended from the gods (Grant and 
Hazel 2004:52).
271 Phrixus was the son of king Athamas who, obeying an oracle, had to sacrifice his son, but 
the boy was rescued by a fabulous ram with a fleece of spun gold. Later, Phrixus sacrificed 
the ram; the fleece was eventually acquired by Jason (Grant and Hazel 2004:272-273).
272 The same phrase occurs in Ovid's Metamorphoses 8:450-455. The white colour evidently 
indicates a good fate; black would indicate an evil fate (Grewing 1997:91).
273 I am grateful to Chris Yocom, university of Edinburgh, and to Ture Larsen for help with 
the translation.
There is quite a high degree of correspondence between the image in this Latin epigram and that in our Norse poem: the birth of a great boy, a future ruler and the golden threads. Combining this with the dearth of further references to it in Norse makes me wonder whether we are talking about a medieval borrowing or appropriation, something which other scholars have also mentioned: Die Nomenv Darstellung in HH.1 2-4 zeigt Einflüsse antiker Vorstellungen, 'The representation of nornir in Helgakviða Hundingsbana I 2-4 shows the influence of Classical ideas' (KLE 4:171). Furthermore, Classical sources often portray the fate figures in connection with births whereas this is actually rather rare in Old Norse tradition (KLE 4:173), Helgakviða Hundingsbana I and Norna-Gests þáttir being the only sources which show such scenes, although they are also mentioned in Gylfaginning 15 and possibly Fáfnismál 12. Norse sources portray nornir predominantly in connection with deaths.

Helgakviða Hundingsbana I shows neither spinning nor weaving but it does show nornir involved with textiles and fate at the same time and so it may justify a view of nornir as spinners, even if spinning is not what they actually do here. It is, however, the only evidence and this ought to make us a little suspicious; out of 29 direct mentions of nornir only this one involves textiles of any kind. Snorri does not seem to know the image, neither does Völuspá. It seems a narrow base of evidence on which to build extensive arguments about spinning nornir. If we choose to focus single-mindedly on that one text passage, we will end up overlooking the vast majority of references to nornir and thereby in all likelihood leave ourselves with a skewed perception of how these beings were really conceived of at the time. It cannot be proven that the spinning nornir did not exist but the evidence does not seem to provide the 'wealth of nornir and valkyrjur who weave fate for men' that many scholars believe exists. Given the relatively late date of Helgakviða Hundingsbana I (it may be from the 11th century; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1962:478) and the rather close correspondence to Classical texts, perhaps we are dealing with a borrowing (Weber 1969:124; Holtsmark 1990:85).

V.2.1. Threads and Space

The image in Helgakviða Hundingsbana I may relate to medieval maps of the world, so-called T-O maps that:

surrounded the land by a world ocean, which forms an O, while the Mediterranean and the Red Sea and Tánais rivers divide the land, which

\[274\] I am grateful to George Clark, Queen's University, Canada, for making this connection.
forms a T. This form was a schematic representation of God’s ordering of the world; it was certainly not a cartographic instrument. The T shape reflected the points of the cross, with east, the location of Paradise, on top. Jerusalem is at the center, representing a city that was considered both secular and divine. (McNaughton 2000:258)

The image does not square entirely with that found in the poem because the map points towards north, south and west, the poem towards east, west and north. But whether we draw this parallel to the map or not, Helgi’s fate-threads are seen to cover the whole of the northern half of the world, probably as an intended indication that he is the greatest hero in that part of the world.

Another question is what actually happens with the loose ends of the threads in Helgakviða Hundingsbana I 4. We are told that the nornir enda fælo, that they ‘hid the ends’, apparently in the east and west. In the image of plying, it appears to mean simply that the end of the thread is at the centre of the ball of wound up thread or, with spinning, that the end has not yet been spun and is hidden somewhere in the unspun masses attached to the distaff or kept in the basket. But the verb fela can also mean ‘to give something into someone’s keeping’ or ‘to entrust’, so that enda fælo can mean both that the ends are hidden and also that they have been passed over to someone for safekeeping. The latter suggestion seems to go well with what is said of the ‘kinswoman of Neri’ in Helgakviða Hundingsbana I 4, namely that she would hold the thread forever; it also fits with the meaning of prymr, ‘to remain in one place’.

The textile work is done at the moment of Helgi’s birth; the separate parts which make up a human being are plied together into one balanced, coherent thread. The phrasing is: snæro þær af aflir orlogþátto, þá er borgir braut í Bráundr, ‘they twisted very strongly the strands of fate, as the fortifications were broken in Bráundr.’ That

---

275 A seemingly parallel image of a four-corner structure with a fifth point in the middle connected to birth and to creation in the womb is found in the ragaraga, the seat of the Sílaon na Bolon, the High God of the Toba-Batak people of Sulawesi in Indonesia. This is a square tray of sorts, suspended from the roof of a house with four ropes, on which the people would place sacrifices to the god in certain ritual contexts. The ragaraga seems to be a representation of the world with the four compass points (Tobing 1963:78-82). I stress that this parallel is typological rather than generic. I am grateful to Emily Lyle, University of Edinburgh, for this reference.

276 The poem leaves out the direction of south which Eilífr associates with Urðarbrunnr (see III.1.1.2.). A number of valkyjur and other supernatural women are (pleasantly?) associated with the south; e.g. Völundarkviða 1, Helgakviða Hundingsbana II 45, and Haustling 10.

277 A similar phrase is used in Völuspá 31: Ek sá Baldri, blöðgum tívar, Ödins barni, orlog fógin, ‘I saw for Baldur, the bloody god, Odin’s child, his fate concealed’. Sigurður Nordal (1978:65) interprets ‘fate concealed’ as referring to a fate-thread.
the threads are twisted very strongly or very hard together gives the impression of a hard, solid cord being made; there is nothing loose or flimsy about this thread. Also, it is made of gold, not just any old material; it is clearly a special thread. The hard twisting refers perhaps to Helgi’s heroic and aristocratic personality – that he is hard and unyielding – or perhaps to the course of his life – that it is hard and unbending. In this image, the nornir establish a thread, guideline or some kind of framework which spans the full geographical potential of Helgi’s life, seemingly uniting eastern, western and northern areas of land into one over which Helgi will rule. The creation of boundaries looks very clear – what lies within the threads is Helgi’s realm; the griggtaaettir appear to bind Helgi to a certain area of land, a geographical space.  

Finally, the story of the death of Hildigerus in Gesta Danorum, Book 7 (9,15), provides an image which, although presented in Latin and therefore using the term Parcae, might represent native ideas about binding and loosening (see also V.7.):

\[
\text{Sed quæcunque ligat Parcarum præcius ordo,}
\]
\[
\text{Queçunque arcanum superæ rationis adumbrat}
\]
\[
\text{Seu quæ fatorum serie præuisa tenentur,}
\]
\[
\text{Nulla caducarum rerum conversio tolet.}
\]

(Saxo Grammaticus 2005:488-490)

‘Whatever foreknown links are fastened by the Fates, whatever the mysteries of divine reason sketch out, whatever events are foreseen and held in sequence of destiny, no change in our transitory world will cancel.’

(Saxo Grammaticus 1979:224)

Here, the Latin ligare means ‘to tie up, to bind’, referring to the use of threads or strings (it is related to ‘ligament’), and tenere means ‘to hold, to maintain or to adhere’ (related to ‘tenacity’). The notion conveyed in these lines, then, seems to be that the Parcae bind or string events together in a certain sequence, or they might be plying threads together as the nornir do in Helgakviða Hundingsbana I. One wonders whether the unfolding of events over time might then be likened to the loosening of threads or to unravelling them. With regard to Saxo’s mention of the Parcae, one might well consider the extent to which Classical ideas could have influenced his description (this would not be unusual for a historian during the 12th century renaissance; Friis-Jensen 2000:93-94), but it is noteworthy that the image he presents is probably very like that of the Old Norse orlogþættr – threads which bind people to certain events, courses or places. At any rate, the image presented by

---

278 This recalls Egils saga 56 where vèðond are used to mark off the area of the court (ÍF 2:154); cf. English ‘lot’ for ‘destiny’ or ‘an area of land’.
Saxo seems more reminiscent of the warp on a loom or the binding and loosing of the First Merseburg Charm (see V.6.) than of spinning.

V.3. Darraðarljóð

The only description of Old Norse supernatural weaving comes from the poem Darraðarljóð,\(^{279}\) preserved in Njáls saga.\(^{280}\) Here we encounter a number of valkyrjur (the poem has six, the prose twelve) who are engaged not only in weaving but in preparations for a faraway battle. The poem, which is framed by two prose passages, describes in detail what happens on the loom as well as on the battlefield.\(^{281}\) It is worth quoting in full:

Fóstumorgininn varð sá atburðr á Katanesi, at maðr sá, er Dørruðr hét, gekk út. Hann sá, at menn riðu tölfr saman til dyngju nokkurrað ok hurfu þar allir. Hann gekk til dyngjunnar ok sá inn í glugg einn, er á var, ok sá, at þar várur konur inni ok hófuðu vef upp færðan. Mannahöfuð váru fyrir kljána, en þarmar ór mönnum fyrir viptu ok garr, sverð var fyrir sklæð, en þr fyrir hræl.\(^{282}\) Pær kváðu þu visur nokkurrað\(^{283}\)

‘On the morning of Good Friday, this event occurred at Caithness, that a man called Dørruðr went out. He saw that twelve persons rode together to a dyngja and there all of them disappeared. He went to the dyngja and looked in through a window which was set in it, and saw that women were inside and had set up their weaving. Men’s heads served as loomweights and intestines from men as weft and warp, a sword as the sword-beater and an arrow as the pin-beater. Then they spoke some verses’

1 Vitt er orpit
fyrr valfalli

Far and wide
with the fall of the dead

\(^{279}\) The poem carries this name in scholarship, not in the sources. The kenning vefr darradær, from which the name is constructed, has been the subject of some debate, interpreted variously as ‘web of spears’ or as ‘web of banners’, whilst the medieval compiler of Njáls saga, in giving the man who sees the women the name Dørruðr, understood it as ‘Dørruðr’s web.’ (Dørruðr has in turn been seen as a heiti for Óðinn who is in the habit of seeking knowledge from supernatural women; Dronke 1969:49). ‘Web of banners’ or ‘weaving of banners’ seems the most probable explanation of the name (Holtsmark 1939:85-93).

\(^{280}\) The poem is found, with some variations, in different MSS, the earliest of which is Reykjavík b.1300-1325. I follow the text in IF 12 (Möðruvallabók c.1330-1370) with some changes: In the last two lines of stanzas 9 and 10, IF 12 follows Gráskinna c.1300 (now only in a 17th century transcript).

\(^{281}\) A similar motif occurs in Víga-Glúms saga 21 (IF 9:71-72).

\(^{282}\) The heads at the bottom conjure up an image of reverse body-order (heads are normally at the top); these are, quite literally, hanging by a thread. They recall the Celtic cult of the head (Ross 1967:94-171) and also the Irish gloss mesrad machae, i.e. cendae doine iar na nairlech ‘Macha’s fruit crop, i.e. the heads of men that have been slaughtered’ (Hennessy 180-1872:36; Goedheer 1938:83).

\(^{283}\) The scene is not unlike one described in Íslendinga saga 165 [23; 28] where a man in a dream sees some women inside a house, rowing and singing gory songs; they have valkyrja-names: Gunnr and Góndul (Sturlunga saga I 1988:165).
a warp is set up:

blood rains down.

Now, with the spears,

a grey woven fabric

of warriors is formed,

which women friends

of Randvér’s killer

come complete with a red weft.

The fabric is warped

with men’s intestines

and firmly weighted

with men’s heads;

bloodstained spears serve

as heddle rods,

the shed is ironclad

and pegged with arrows.

With our swords we must strike

this fabric of victory.

Hildr goes to weave

and Hjörprimul,

Sanngríðr, Svipul,

towards:

with unsheathed swords:

the shaft will break,

the shield will shatter,

the sword will

pierce armour.

Let us wind, let us wind

the weaving of the pennant

which the young king

had before:

we must go

and advance into the throng

where our friends

set weapon against weapon.

Let us wind, let us wind

the weaving of the pennant

and follow the prince

afterwards:

there [Guðr] and Gondul.

284 Interestingly, Onians (1951:343-348) discusses the Greek words καίρος, ‘the target which archers aimed at in practice’, apparently an opening or series of openings (Odyssey 19:573-580), and κείμενος, ‘the shed between the warp-threads on a loom’, that is, the triangular opening through which the shuttle passes, carrying the weft threads. The meanings ‘opportunity, critical time’ also relate to these words.

285 Gráskinna has: er söknarðar syngja kunnu, ‘while the slaughter-wardens sing their song’ (CSI III:217), quoted in IF 12; I follow Möðruvallabók.

286 Gráskinna has: geirfjóða hjóða ok gumum segi, ‘the tones of spear-women and tell them to men’ (CSI III:217), quoted in IF 12; I follow Möðruvallabók.
who protected the king
saw men's shields
covered in blood.

Let us wind, let us wind
the weaving of the pennant
there where the standards
of fighting men go forth:
let us not permit
his life to be lost;
the Valkyries have
their choice of the slain.

Those men will
rule the lands
who dwelt until this time
on the outlying headlands:
I say that death is decreed
for the mighty king;
now the earl has sunk down
before the spears.

And the Irish will
undergo grief
which will never fade
in men's memories;
now the fabric is woven
and the field dyed red;
the tidings of men's destruction
will travel throughout the land.

Now it is fearsome
to gaze around
as blood-red clouds
gather in the sky:
the heavens will be stained
with men's blood
when our prophecies
can spread abroad.

We spoke well.
of the young king;
let us sing with good fortune
many songs of victory:
and let him
who listens
learn many a spear-song
and entertain men.

Let us ride out fast
on our bare-backed horses,
away from here
á braut heðan. with brandished swords.

Rifu þær þá ofan vefinn ok í sundr, ok hafði hver þat, er helt á. Gekk hann þá í braut frá glugginum ok heim, en þær stigu á hesta sína, ok riðu sex í suðr, en aðrar sex í norðr.
(ÍF 12:454-459)

'Then they tore the weaving down and ripped it apart, each one retaining the piece which she was holding. Then he left the window and went back home, while they mounted their horses and rode six to the south and the other six to the north.'
(Poole 1991:116-119)

It is not the intention here to discuss all the details of the poem as this would amount to a separate study altogether. Instead, I will focus on a number of aspects which I consider relevant in the present context, the main intention being to look specifically at the weaving motif employed in this text. Darðarljóð is probably the most common point of reference for a connection between textile work and the concept of fate in Old Norse literature and a number of scholars have interpreted the poem along these lines. Holtsmark may serve as a representative for this view:287

Darradarljöð er en visjon, og de som synger den, er en del av visjonene. ... Det er vevende nornir i arbeid, de vever liv og død for mennesker; ... Vevningen er ikke ‘metafor’, den er magi. De vever og synger om det som hender – og det hender.
(1939:93)

'Darradarljöð is a vision and those who sing it are part of the vision. ... These are weaving nornir at work, they weave life and death for people; ... The weaving is no 'metaphor', it is magic. They weave and sing about what happens – and it happens.'
(My translation)

Holtsmark sees in the weaving motif an act of sympathetic magic; the vælkyrjur are not only in the house in Caithness, they are also present on the battlefield near Dublin and their weaving directly influences the fighting. In this metaphor the women are, so to speak, weaving the battle as it is going to progress and the web is symbolic of the fate of the warriors.

However, other scholars are of the opinion that fate has no place at all in this poem.288 Poole, representing this view, writes: "similarities were perceived between weaving and battle in the type of persons who participate, the implements they use, and the appearance of the finished product" (1991:139). He further argues: "that

287 See also Eiríkr Magnússon 1910a and Cook (2001:343).
288 von See 1959; Poole 1991.
'vefr' in Darradarljóð is not a representation of fate but a reflection of the visual appearance of battle” (1991:141). Thus, he sees the weaving motif simply as poetic circumlocution with no magic at all. In his view, the weaving reflects the visual impression of the goings-on of the battlefield, the red and grey colours of blood and weaponry intertwining, and there is neither magic nor fate involved. All of it is merely a poetic description of battle scenes.289

The crux of both interpretations rests in the weaving activity.

Part of the metaphor in Darradarljóð is a correspondence between the activities of human women and those of supernatural women: “Just as weaving was archetypically women’s work ... so the guidance of battles was archetypically the work of supernatural women” (Poole 1991:136). Yet the correspondence, according to Poole, concerns only the visual appearance of these activities (guiding a battle looks like weaving) and does not extend to the deeper meaning of the activities so that the connections between weaving and fate “do not explain Darradarljóð very well” (Poole 1991:140). Poole’s argument seems to be that the poet associates human women’s weaving with supernatural women’s powers over life and death in battle but then disassociates the valkyrjur from those powers or somehow fails to notice that he could be alluding to ideas about female supernatural guardians of life and death. This seems to me a stretch of the imagination and I believe that some idea about fate must have been in the poet’s mind.

Holtsmark (1939) argues for a different view, namely that weaving on a loom does not look anything like a battlefield, therefore something else must have inspired the poet to use this motif. In her mind, the connecting point is the notion of fate and the magical raven banner carried by Sigurðr jarl of Orkney in the Clontarf battle to which the poem is supposedly connected.290

My opinion is that the weaving motif in Darradarljóð deals with notions of ordering. Anyone who has tried their hand at it will know that weaving requires a very high degree of precision and exactitude and this has, I believe, two implications for our reading of the poem: 1) the battle is described in terms of a highly ordered

---

289 Russell Poole has, however, changed his mind since 1991. At the 13th International Saga Conference in Durham 2006 he told me that he now believes Darradarljóð does portray an image of fate.

290 Njáls saga contains an account of the battle of Clontarf and connects the poem to this battle, but some scholars (Genzmer 1956; Goedheer 1938:74-87; Poole 1991:120-125) have pointed out that there are significant discrepancies between what the poem describes and what is known about the battle of Clontarf. It may be that the poem was originally attached to a battle fought almost a hundred years earlier (see V.3.2.).

138
and meticulous activity, and 2) this appears to create a distance between the poet and his subject matter, seemingly implying that the battle is seen from a supernatural rather than a human perspective. If this is the case here, then we seem to have a group of beings able at least to foresee, if not to manipulate, what will happen to the human men fighting the battle.

One might doubt whether being in the midst of a battle would seem like that steady, persistent, even slow and very ordered kind of work which weaving is, and the mathematical precision required for this does not transfer easily to the visual impression of the battlefield, at least not as seen from a human perspective. If this is indeed what the poet is doing then he is not involved in the battle himself; he is most likely watching it from a nearby hilltop from where he can see the battle unfold before him. In other words, he is adopting that higher perspective which allows him to perceive a sort of order on the field of battle. But there is more than order to the image. Although much of Óðræðartjóð can be seen only as description of the kind the poet might produce from his adopted higher perspective, some phrases in the poem convey a different notion. In stanza 6 the valkyjur say: láturn eigi lið hans farask, ‘let us not permit his life to be lost’, which apparently indicates that they have the power to prevent his death. Later, in stanza 10, they say: Vel kváðum vér um konung ungan, ‘we spoke well of the young king’, which suggests that their words have an influence on how the young king fares in the battle.\(^{291}\) The phrase: ok siklingi síðan fylgjum, ‘and later follow the princes’ in stanza 5 seems to be a prediction of something which is going to happen later; the words: nú er fyrir oddum jarlmaðr hninginn, ‘now the earl has fallen before the spears’ in stanza 7 sound as if they are describing something happening in close association with the weaving (cf. Warmin 1997:212). These passages of the poem do not square entirely with Poole’s view of the imagery as simply description without any magic; on the contrary, they reveal that the women do have the power to influence the battle.

The notion of ordering, of putting threads together in a certain, regulated sequence and of tying all the different threads together is that process of creating something out of nothing which takes place in the *dyngja* and which I have associated with *nornir* and fate above (IV.3.). The prose passage introducing the poem also imagines the setting to be that of the *dyngja* but, even without the

\(^{291}\) Eligius (c.588-660 AD) objected to women who sought to exercise supernatural power through their textile work: “No woman should presume to ... call upon Minerva or other ill-starred beings in their weaving or dyeing” (McNamara, Book 2:16). “The power may have been exercised by weaving a curse into a garment to be worn” (Flint 1991:226).
specific mention of this, the image of female weavers would itself be enough to conjure up this exact setting.292

As noted above, this is the only clear-cut description of supernatural weavers in Old Norse literature293 and it refers specifically to valkyrjur, not nornir. Yet, Holtsmark immediately makes the association to nornir when weaving is mentioned; she says about the motif:

De vevende i Darradarijod kaller seg selv valkyrjer, og navnene er valkyrjenavn. Som så ofte er begrepene norn og valkyrja løpet sammen. ... Vevende valkyrjer er ikke et hjemlig motiv; det synes også valkyrjenavnene å vise, ikke ett eneste av alle de 40-50 heiti skjaldene kjente, har noe med vevning å gjøre.
(1939:95)

'The weavers in Darradarijod call themselves valkyrjur, and the names are valkyrja-names. As often happens, the concepts of norn and valkyrja have merged. Weaving valkyrjur is not a familiar motif; the names of valkyrjur also seem to reveal this, not one single example of all the 40-50 heiti the skalds knew for valkyrjur has anything to do with weaving.'
(My translation)

The poem itself does not make any connection to nornir at all and, although valkyrjur and nornir must obviously be considered beings related to each other (see III), there is nothing to suggest that the terms were actually interchangeable with one another. We cannot simply take random mentions of either and claim that they really refer to the other merely because this fits our preconceptions. The scene is very closely linked to the actual events of the battlefield and this is, I believe, the reason why the women are specifically said to be valkyrjur — they are particularly closely associated with active battle. Holtsmark (1939:95) nonetheless points out the lack of connection between valkyrjur and weaving in other Old Norse sources, mentioning that Anglo-Saxon tradition employs the weaving motif more often and, in agreement with Weber (1969:121), explains this as derived from Classical tradition.294 Placing the poem within a mixed Norse and Anglo-Saxon context would

292 The introduction is strikingly reminiscent of the Icelandic folktale about Gilitrutt (ATU 500-501) in which a man overhears a supernatural woman speaking words of a magical character whilst busy at her weaving in a house that is half underground (JónArnason I 1954:172-173[181-2]; Simpson 1972:73-75; cf. Ádalheiður Guðmundsdóttir 2003:451).

293 Gunn (1932:243) mentions that around 1768, when Gray's re-working of Darradarijóð, The Fatal Sisters (Gray 1966:29-31), was published, a version of the poem was still found in the oral tradition of North Ronaldsay, Orkney. It was never written down and is now long since lost.

294 Lonnroth (1970:23) explains Darradarijóð as Classically influenced imagery, more precisely as owing something to the three Parcae in Gautier's Latin poem Alexandreis of which Alexanders saga is an Icelandic translation.
therefore seem reasonable as this would explain the fate-as-weaving metaphor, which is common in Anglo-Saxon but not in Norse tradition. I believe Darraðarljóð does represent an image of fate but I do not think it represents a purely Norse image.

V.3.1. English and Irish Weaving

Looking at the weaving motif as this is employed in sources from the British Isles would help to explain why it seems reasonable to think that the poetic mind behind Darraðarljóð was rooted in Irish and Anglo-Saxon as well as in Norse traditions.

Poole (1991:138-139) suggests a connection between the war-related Darraðarljóð and Riddle 56 of the Exeter Book.295 Riddle 56 reads as follows:

\[\text{Ic wæs þær inne þær ic ane gesæh}\\ \text{winnende with wido bennegean,}\\ \text{holt hwæorfende; heapgollemma fæng,}\\ \text{deopra dolga. Daröpas wæron}\\ \text{weo þære wihte, ðond se wudu searwum}\\ \text{faeste gebunden. Hyre fota wæs}\\ \text{bildfæst ðeber, ðeber bisgo dreag,}\\ \text{leoc on lyfte, hwilum londe neah.}\\ \text{Treow wæs getenge þam þær torhtan stód}\\ \text{leafum bihongen. Ic lafe gesæh}\\ \text{minum hlaforde, þær hæleð druncon,}\\ \text{þara flana geweorc, on flet beran.}\\ \text{(Exeter Book 1936:208)}\]

'I was inside where I saw a piece of wood that was moving to and fro wounding a struggling creature; it received battle-wounds, deep gashes; darts caused it woe, as did the wood skilfully bound fast. One of its feet stood still, the other moved vigorously, sometimes dancing in the air, sometimes near the ground. A tree was close by, clothed with bright leaves. I saw what was left by the spears carried into the hall to my lord, where the men were drinking.'

(Whitman 1982:204)

It is thought that the solution to the riddle is 'weaver's loom' or 'web and loom' (Exeter Book 1936:350) and the notion of weaving as an act of violence involving the use of weapons is what has prompted Poole's comparison.296 I find it particularly interesting that both Darraðarljóð and Riddle 56 combine this creative principle with

\[\text{295 The Exeter Book is probably from the latter half of the 10th century (Exeter Book 1936:xiii).}\\ \text{296 Hyer 2005 discusses a number of textile analogies in the Exeter Book.}\]
a destructive principle in one and the same act: weaving. This accords well with the double nature of the female figures: they are both givers and takers of life.

Further parallels can be drawn from the Old English poem Beowulf which contains references to weaving. Famously the phrase in line 697: *wigspeda gewiofu, 'web of fate'* has been used by scholars to draw on the weaving motif as a portrayal of fate (Enright 1990:66).\(^2\) This translation certainly conveys what is meant by the words. Beowulf also throws up the word *freoduwebbe* (line 1942)\(^2\) which means ‘peace-weaver’ and is used to describe a woman in some mediating role, either marital (creating an alliance between two families) or diplomatic (creating communal bonds within society; Hyer 2005:35-38). The context in which she is mentioned in Beowulf is, however, a grim one. Lines 1931–1943 tell the story of the evil queen Modþryþo whom no one dared look at for fear she would have them tied up and fettered (line 1936-7). The comment on Modþryþo’s behaviour is (line 1940): *Ne biiu swylc cnwelic peaw, 'such is not queenly conduct'* and it is not what one expects from a ‘peace-weaver’ whose role symbolises amicable ties between different groups. Yet she becomes a virtuous queen after her marriage to Offa (lines 1942-1962), revealing a more peaceful side of her personality. Bringing up the word *freoduwebbe* in connection with Modþryþo seems at first ironic but it might in fact hint at a duality similar to that expressed in Riddle 56; her role is to weave people together in a peaceful manner but she is also capable of spreading fear among men, embodying both a creative and a destructive principle.\(^2\)

An interesting point is the double context of Beowulf which is Old English in language but purports to be Scandinavian in content. If the British context is really the home-environment of Darraðarjóð then this would provide almost a mirror image of Beowulf, being Old Norse in language but using imagery that seems more Anglo-Saxon than Scandinavian: war-like weaving. The weaving-fate metaphor also turns up in other Old English texts: in the Rimming Poem, verse 70, this phrase is found: *Me þæet wyrd gewaef, 'Fate wove that for me'* (Muir 1994:266) and also in Guthlac 1351 (52v) [B text]: *wefen wyrdstaðafun, 'woven decrees of fate'* (Muir 1994:158).

---

2\(^2\) A much later parallel can be found in Shakespeare’s Othello, c.1600, which uses the ‘web of fate’ portrayed as Othello’s handkerchief. In Act III, scene 4, Othello says about the handkerchief: “‘Tis true: there’s magic in the web of it. / A sibyl, that had numbered in the world / two hundred compasses, / in her prophetic fury sewed the work.” Throughout the play, this piece of material is very closely linked to Othello’s fate.

2\(^2\) The word occurs also in Widsith line 6 (Muir 1994:241).

2\(^2\) Damico (1984:46-51) discusses Módþryþo with a similar duality in mind.
If the geographical home of the poem is the British Isles where the native tradition, probably in itself inspired by Classical sources (Weber 1969:121), drew parallels between fate and weaving, then it is by no means unnatural to imagine that people in that place at that time would have read fate metaphors into the imagery used, neither is it inconceivable that the poet who composed Darradarljóð was from the British Isles. Were it even the case that the poem was not intended to represent fate, it could still be understood to do so, at least in the eyes of an Anglo-Saxon audience.

With regard to Darradarljóð, Poole (1991) and Holtsmark (1939) both suggest a Celtic origin for the weaving motif and Enright (1990; 1996) generally sees Germanic and Celtic cultures as so closely related that he follows a mention of Darradarljóð with some references to Celtic texts, seemingly as a matter of course (1990:66-67). However, the Celtic traditions are not exactly forthcoming with regard to weaving metaphors either; indeed, the supernatural female textile workers in charge of fate hardly seem to have been known at all in Celtic sources. But a weaving metaphor does exist; I have found it employed in four sources.

The Song of the Sword of Cerbell is a poem addressing the sword of a dead king; the first line of it reads: Mochen, a chlaidib Cherbaill! bát menic i mórenglaim, 'Hail, sword of cerball! Oft hast thou been in the great woof (of war)' (Meyer 1899:9). The same image is repeated in In Cath Catharda 'The Civil War of the Romans: 5438-9: Atconnairc na dairedha dluithi digainni dergruada do slegaibh os a ceannaibh 7 a n-englumma aigh 7 a[n-jinnec[h] ur badha, 'Then he beheld the dense, copious, rud-red forests of long, edged spears above their heads, and at the butts of those spears their woofs of battle and their weft of bane' (Stokes 1909:399). These two references seem to be straightforward battle kenningar.

---

300 The poem is found in the Book of Leinster (47a 50), 11th or 12th century, but the language forms show the poem to be Old Irish, probably 10th century. King Cerball is said to have died in 909 (Meyer 1899:7).
301 Kershaw (1922:117) refers to this but does not discuss it in any detail.
302 An Irish adaptation of Lucan's Pharsalia (the Latin text does not contain this image). The part of the MS quoted here was written in 1616 (Stokes 1909:v), but the language forms show that it was copied from a text written down prior to the spelling reforms of the 13th century. The language borders between Late Middle Irish and Early Modern Irish and is probably from the early 13th century.
303 The 'woof of battle and weft of bane' is somehow connected to the butts of the spears, that is, the lower ends of the spear-shafts, with the spears perhaps seen as shuttles carrying the weft as they fly through the air. The image of spears, incidentally, is preceded by that of banners fluttering in the wind.
extraordinarily similar to Daradařjōd in their imagery: swords and spears being likened to the weft threads in a woven textile.

Three references from the Metrical Dindshenchas support the same kenning, describing warriors as men who weave strife: firstly the phrase: fer find, figed gail, ‘a valiant man who used to wage battle’ (Silab Bladma line 17; Gwynn 1906:54-55); secondly: fer figed feirg, ‘one that knit strife’ (Belach Durgein line 4; Gwynn 1913:84-85); and thirdly: fri ferga fige, ‘[one] good at weaving strife’ (Luimnech line 27; Gwynn 1913:272-273).305 Although Gwynn lets the English translations vary in the verbs used (wage, knit, weave), the Irish text is consistent in using forms of the verb figid, ‘to weave’. It seems, then, that the idea of connecting weaving to warfare was, or at least became, a well-established figure of speech in Irish tradition. There is, however, nothing supernatural about the situations in which the Irish image is used and there are no women of any sort involved; the ‘weavers’ are the men fighting on the battlefield.

Looking at Daradařjōd through this Old English and Irish material, it seems that our poem is truly a hybrid, the weaponry-weaving idea displaying Irish influence with the weaving-fate idea showing Anglo-Saxon influence. Not only is he familiar with these, the poet is also firmly grounded in Norse tradition where the male warrior-as-weaver metaphor may have been just a bit too exotic. This is where the Norse valkyrjur come in.

One last but somewhat problematic reference to warlike weaving in Irish is found in the Táin Bó Cúailnge where the seeress Feidelm makes a prophecy before the battle at the very beginning of the tale. Feidelm arrives, holding in her hand an item referred to as claidib corthaire or claidib findruini. Two versions of this text describe the scene. In the Táin Bó Cúailnge (Recension I) it says:

'Claideb corthaire do findruine inna laim, esnàid óir and

In her hand she carried a weaver's beam of white bronze, with golden inlay' (O’Rahilly 1976:2, 126).

In the Táin Bó Cúailnge (Recension II) Feidelm’s arrival is described as follows:

304 A poetic version of the Dinnshenchas Érenn, 'The Lore of Placenames of Ireland.' It exists in a 12th century MS but is based on earlier prose material.
305 The triple-f alliteration makes the phrase sound formulaic.
306 The oldest surviving MS is Lebor na hUidre, c.1100; other MSS are from the 14th and 16th centuries.
307 From the 12th century Book of Leinster.
Is amlaid boí ind ingen ic figi chorrthairi 7 claideb findruini ina láim deiss cona secht n-aslib do dergóir ina déssaíb.

‘The girl was weaving a fringe, holding a weaver’s beam of white bronze in her right hand with seven strips of red gold on its points (? ’
(O’Rahilly 1967:5, 143).

The translation provided by O’Rahilly 1967:143, 1976:126 and Kinsella 1969:60, a ‘weaver’s beam’, is unquestioningly accepted by Enright (1990:67; cf. Goedheer 1938:81), but it is not incontestable and O’Rahilly’s question mark in brackets at the end of the sentence hints at some uncertainty with regard to its exact meaning. The word claideb in itself means ‘sword’ but in both texts it is clearly an unusual sword. Recension II gives claideb findruini, ‘a sword of white bronze’ (DIL:306-7) and states that Feidelm uses this to figi chorrthairi. O’Rahilly footnotes the phrase ic figi chorrthairi thus: “i.e. weaving threads together in a magical manner, to enable her to prophesy the coming battles” (1967:279), for which Davidson (1998:101; 117) suggests tablet weaving, sjaldvefnadur.

Figure 9.
Weaving tablets made of bone from Norse Greenland. The picture shows them roughly half their actual size.

However, a kind of sword is by no means an obvious choice of reference to a stack of small square weaving tablets with a hole in each corner.

---

308 One immediately thinks of the skeid or vefjarskeid, ‘weaving sword, sword beater’ with which the weft is beaten into place on an upright loom (see also V.4).
309 A cloidem corthaire turns up in the Ancient Laws of Ireland (1865:150-151) amongst tools for spinning and weaving and is apparently a rod used for making fringes. The combination claideb corthaire occurs only here and in The Táin. Garman or claideb garmne are the common phrases for ‘weaver’s beam’ (DIL:356).
But in the light of the *Metrical Dindshenchas*, is it not possible that she is wielding a sword in the manner of a warrior who weaves strife and that this is how the weaving image fits in? The *corrthar*, ‘fringe or border’, often of a garment (DIL:152-153), could be a metaphorical reference to the coming battle based on the image of weaving war rather than weaving textile, perhaps understood as indicating that by weaving the edge of it Feidelm initiates the battle or lays down the basic outline of it. Sayers mentions that: “No other instances of prophesying through the interpretation of intertwined threads are adduced from early Irish literature” (1984:178); he further points out that the item in the text is described with the adjective *findruini*, ‘of white bronze’, a term “far more applicable to a decorative sword than to any piece of weaving equipment, although one must allow for epic exaggeration” (1984:178), and adds that the phrase *secht n-asil dergôr ina déssaib*, ‘seven strips of red gold on its points’ is not seven threads woven together but: “a stock descriptive phrase used of weapons” (Sayers 1984:178). ‘Stock phrase’ seems an exaggeration but the term *aisal* does turn up in connection with weaponry (DIL:31).\(^{310}\) It seems that the contestable weaver’s beam can be neither proven nor disproven. However, this whole discussion recalls so strongly the engraved Greenlandic *skeið* discussed below (see V.4) that, although Feidelm does seem to be carrying an actual sword, the notion of some involvement of weaving cannot be dismissed altogether. Yet if it does refer to weaving, it would seem to be a unique image in Irish tradition.

As the motif of weaving in relation to death, battle and destructive forces is clearly evident in Old English and Irish sources whilst occurring but once in Old Norse sources, it looks increasingly uncertain whether *Darðarljóð* can be taken as representative of native Norse imagery, especially because it has such strong connections to the British Isles.

V.3.2. The Raven Banner

In *Njáls saga*, *Darðarljóð* is linked to the battle of Clontarf which was fought in 1014. However, as several scholars have discussed (Poole 1991:120-125; Goedheer 1938:74-87), the poem does not give the same details with regard to the battle as does the surrounding saga prose. Four problematic details present themselves here: 1) the poem explicitly refers to a glorious victory on the part of the young Norse king and it is difficult to reconcile this with the conduct of Sigtryggr silkiskegg in 1014 —

\(^{310}\) I am grateful to William Sayers, Cornell University, for this reference.
according to Njáls saga he ran away. 2) Although the Irish king, Brian Boru, was killed at Clontarf he also won the battle – the poem has the Irish king lose. 3) Clontarf was not a clear-cut encounter between Norse and Irish the way the poem has it. 4) The information in the poem does not match the account of the battle given in the prose of Njáls saga. All of these things cannot have escaped the attention of the person who put the saga down in writing and included the poem with it.

It is possible that the poem actually describes a different battle altogether, namely one fought almost a hundred years earlier, the battle of Confey in 919 (916 according to Genzmer 1956 and von See 1959), and has been incorrectly attached to the Clontarf encounter (Poole 1991; von See 1959; Genzmer 1956). In 919, Sigtryggr Caech fought a battle near Dublin, killing the Irish king Niall, son of Aed, and won the battle; in 1014, Sigtryggr silkiskegg fought a battle near Dublin, killing the Irish king, Brian Boru, but was defeated in spite of this. The many correspondences between these two battles provide very good reasons why confusion should arise and, in actual fact, some of the details of the poem fit better with 919 (for example the prediction made in stanza 8 that the Norse will rule Ireland from now on), others with 1014 (for example the fall of an earl in stanza 7; we know of no earl falling in 919). It is unlikely that we will ever be able to tell for sure which battle Darradarljóð concerns; in fact, one might imagine a situation wherein the poem was perhaps initially composed after the first battle but was then remembered differently after the second one.311

If it is not the outcome of the battle or even the visual appearance of it (not too different from many other battles one might suspect), then what has inspired the placement of Darradarljóð in its current saga context?

One detail presents a possible answer: Sigurðr jarl’s raven banner and its significance in the battle of Clontarf (Holtsmark 1939). Even if Darradarljóð has been wrongly attached to this battle, the weaving scene certainly recalls the magical banner created by Eðna, Sigurðr’s mother, and it is possible that the raven banner has played a part when it comes to the placement of Darradarljóð in the context of

---

311 The battle of 919 is close enough to the death of Cerball in 909 to suggest that a direct borrowing from Claidib Cherbaill could potentially be at the root of Darradarljóð. This is pure speculation.
the Clontarf battle. The first we hear of the raven banner in *Orkneyinga saga* 11[312] is this:

en Sigurðr gekk til fréttar við móður sína; hon var margkunnig. Jarl sagði henni, at eigi myndi minni löðsmunr en sjau menn um einn. Hon svarar: *Ek mynda þik hafa lengi upp fætt í ulllaupi mínunum, ef ek vissa, at þú myndir einart lífa, ok reðr auðna lífi, en eigi, hvar móðr er kominn; betra er at deyja með sámð en lífa með skómm. Tak þú hér við merki því, er ek hefi gótt þér af allri mínni kunnáttu, ok vænti ek, at sigselt myni verða þeim, er fyrir er borit, en banvænt þeim, er berr.* Merkit var gótt af miklum hannryðum ok ágætligum hagleik; þat var gótt í hrafnis mynd, ok þá er vindr blæss í merkit, þá var sem hrafn beindi fluginn. Sigurðr jarl varð reiðr mjók við orð móður sannar.

(ÍF 34:24-25)

'Sigurðr went to consult his mother, who was skilled in magic. He told her that the odds against him were heavy, at least seven to one. She answered: 'I would have kept you for a long time in my wool basket if I knew that you would live forever, but it is fate which rules, and not where a man is from; better to die with dignity than to live with shame. Now, take this banner that I have made for you with all my skill, and my belief is that it will bring victory to the man it is carried before, but death to the one who carries it.' It was a finely made banner, very cleverly embroidered with the figure of a raven, and when the banner fluttered in the breeze, the raven seemed to be flying ahead. Sigurðr jarl lost his temper at his mother's words.'

(My translation)

This is all we hear of it and of Sigurðr's mother. She seems an enigmatic woman, daughter of an Irish king and described as margkunnig, 'skilled in magic'. Her brief role is a mixed blessing, as is the banner she has made for her son, and to some extent she recalls those double-sided supernatural women discussed above (IV.2.1. and IV.2.2.): she brings victory and death at the same time. Clearly, Sigurðr jarl is not exactly happy with the banner. He first uses it in an Orcadian battle where its magical power is proven (*Orkneyinga saga* 11, ÍF 34:25); afterwards, in the battle of Clontarf, when no one else will carry it for him, he does so himself and is killed. Despite the magical promise of victory, Sigurðr does not win the battle.

The Orcadian raven banner is not unique. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (1953:77) (Laud Chronicle) mentions a banner called 'Raven' captured by the local population from a band of vikings after a battle in Devon in 878. This is described in more detail in the *Annals of St. Neots*, from c.1120-1140 (Dumville and Lapidge 1985:xvi), as well as in *Asser's Life of King Alfred*. The following quotation is from the *Annals of St. Neots*:

---

312 Flateyjarbók c.1387-1395.
In quo etiam acceperunt illud uexillum quod Reafan nominant. Dicunt enim quod tres sorores Hynguari et Hubbe, filie uidelicet Lodebrochi, illud uexillum tex' u'erunt et totum paraurunt illud uno meridiano tempore. Dicunt etiam quod, in omni bello ubi praecederet idem signum, si victoriam adaptrici essent, appareret in medio signi quasi coruus uius uolitans; si uero uincendi in futuro fuissent, penderet directe nichil mouens – et hoc sepe probatum est.
(Dumville and Lapidge 1985:78)

'In that battle they took also the standard which they call The Raven. Now it is told that the three sisters of Ingwar and Hubba, the daughters of Lodbrok, weaved that banner and completed it entirely between dawn and dusk on a single day. Moreover they say that in every battle in which that banner goes before them, the raven in the midst of the design seems to flutter as though it were alive, if they were destined to gain the day; but if they were about to be conquered in the coming fight, it would drop down without moving: and this has often been proved to be true.'
(Asser’s Life of King Alfred 1908:41)

What has relevance here is not any historical accuracy of the events described but rather the existence of the motif of fate-as-textile. There is clearly some magical aspect to this – three sisters who together weave the banner in one day, which sounds like an impossibly short time.313 This type of battle magic does seem rather closely related to the Orcadian banner; but although we are to understand that these three weaving sisters are Danish, which could imply that the tradition involving them is also Danish, the source which tells us this is Anglo-Saxon and written in Latin. This complicates the issue of whether the imagery described was native to Scandinavia.

A similar banner is mentioned in connection with a battle between Canute and Edmund Ironside taking place in Essex in 1016 and described in Encomium Emmae:

Erat namque eis [the Danes] uexillum miri portenti, quod licet credam posse esse incredibile lectori, tamen, quia uerum est, uerae inseram lectioni. Enim uero dum esset simpli[ci]ssimo candidissimoque intextum serico, nulliusque figure in eo insera esset [I]mago, tempore belii semper in eo videbatur coruus ac se intextus, in victoria suorum quasi hians ore excutiensque alas, instabilisque pedibus; et sui deuictis quietissimus totoque corpore demissus.
(Wright 1939:266)

'For the Danes had a banner possessed of a wonderful property, which although I believe it will seem incredible to the reader, nevertheless, because it is true, I will insert it for him for truth’s sake. For although it was woven of a very plain and bright silk and had no figure embroidered on it yet always in time of war a raven seemed as if it were to appear on it, in victory opening its beak and beating its wings, restless on its feet, but very quiet and drooping in its whole body in defeat.’

---

313 In Laxdæla saga 49, Guðrún likewise spins so much in such short time (V.7.).
In this example, the colour magic with the black and white seems to turn up again (see III.2.2.), a black raven appearing on a white cloth as a battle omen. This gives us three versions of the raven banner, all of which have been woven in some special way, one by a mother, one by three sisters, and these banners are closely and magically connected to the outcome of the battles at which they are present.\textsuperscript{314} The banners might provide another way of linking the weaving motif with battle and warfare. The raven banner is central to Holtsmark's interpretation of Darradarljóð and it is by no means impossible that the ominous banner, its terrifying presence at Clontarf as well as the way in which it was created – magic and fate obviously woven or embroidered into it – has recalled what may originally have been a 919 vision of the grisly weavers. The focus on Sigurðr jarl may also provide the Caithness setting of the poem. Warmind (1997:212-213) and Goedheer (1938:80-87) both suggest that the blood and gore in Darradarljóð points towards Irish war-goddesses\textsuperscript{315} whereas the women weaving a banner are Norse, maintaining that the poem is a cross-over point of Norse and Celtic traditions. That the poem should be a Norse/Celtic/Anglo-Saxon hybrid seems to me the most plausible way of explaining the imagery employed in it.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure10.png}
\caption{From the Bayeux tapestry. The banner in the middle shows the image of a bird.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{314} The Bayeux tapestry, at the passage which reads: et venerunt ad prelium contra Haroldum rege, shows a man on a brown horse, holding a pole with a banner depicting a bird (Rud 2000:75).

V.3.3. ‘and ripped it apart’

Darradartjóð is followed by a short prose passage (quoted in V.3.) describing how the departing valkyrjur tear the newly woven web to pieces before riding off. The significance of this action is not explained, but Holtsmark (1939) suggests that this relates to the role of the valkyrjur as ‘body-snatchers’ of the battlefield, each taking her individual share of the dead. The tearing of the web thus symbolises their sharing of the fallen warriors. The scene in Caithness recalls the description in Völsungasaga 31 where Brynhildr, on discovering that she has been deceived and will never marry Sigurðr, tears up the tapestry she has made, depicting his heroic deeds:

\[
\text{she said that her greatest sorrow was not being married to Sigurd. She sat up and went at her weaving so furiously that the tapestry tore apart.}'
\]

(Grimstad 2000:182-183)

Whereas Darradartjóð can be seen as an act of sympathetic magic that happens in direct connection with the event it purports to influence, Brynhildr’s actions are free of such supernatural connotations and appear simply to be guided by strong, human emotions. She is not doing anything magical; yet, shortly after tearing the tapestry she begins to plot the murder of Sigurðr. In this way, destroying the tapestry depicting his heroic deeds may still be regarded as symbolic of the destruction of the man himself. In Völsungasaga, Brynhildr emphasises time and again that she is bound by the oaths and promises she made when she vowed to marry Sigurðr and no one else. When she tears the tapestry, she also goes on to break the oath (but she has no choice because other people have gone behind her back to create the situation she now finds herself in). Once the oath is broken, the tapestry, it seems, no longer has a valid function.

One might add to this that, while the women in Darradartjóð are undoubtedly weaving, their words and speech also affect the battle. In stanza 10 they say: \textit{vel kvaðum vér um konung ungan} – not ‘we wove well’ but ‘we spoke well’ and yet, the difference between these two actions is less than minimal; text and textile appear as

---

316 From archaeology, we know that objects sacrificed to the gods were often broken up (Glob 1969:107, 124), whereas grave goods were deposited intact with the dead. The tearing apart could indicate some sacrificial context or perhaps a way of dedicating the dead to a specific deity, possibly Öðinn or Freyia, both of whom are connected to the war dead (cf. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 2006).
complementary manifestations of the same thing (see V.5.). The weaving and the speaking belong closely together and in a sense what is woven is a physical manifestation of the spoken words. Raudvere says about *Sigdrífumál* that: *Orden följs hela tiden av handling: det som uttrycks verbalt följs av en kroppsrörelse,* 'The words are constantly followed by action: what is expressed verbally is followed by a bodily movement' (2003:112). The tearing of the material in *Darðarljóð* can also mean that it is the process of making it rather than the finished product that is of significance, as is a common feature in magic.\(^{317}\) It probably relates to the notion that items that were sacrificed to the gods were broken to pieces (Ilkjaer 2002) as people who were sacrificed were killed.

**V.4. Weaving Swords and Rolling Heads**

With regard to the combination of weaving and warfare, so unusual in Norse poetic tradition, it is of some interest that a Norse *skeið* or weaving sword found in Greenland has engraved on it pictures of two sword-wielding characters (Roussell 1941:276; Østergård 2004:57).\(^{318}\)

![Figure 11. The *skeið* with the two figures holding swords.](image)

The *skeið* can be dated to the medieval period, probably 1200-1300,\(^{319}\) and carries a worn runic inscription, now illegible, on its handle (Roussell 1941:276).\(^{320}\) The picture

---

\(^{317}\) Focus on process rather than product is clearly evident in Navajo sand paintings: "It was made to the accompaniment of the ceremonial chants and wiped away when the chant ended" (Burland 1965:101). A similar thought lurks behind the construction of sun lodges among the Canadian Cree; these are also taken down after the ceremony has ended (personal communication from Willie Ermine, First Nations University of Canada, 4.9.2004).

\(^{318}\) This was found at a farm far inland (Austmannadal 5, no.53d) in the Norse Western Settlement in Greenland. It is unlikely that the farm belongs to the early period of Norse presence in the area as it is the farm furthest inland and so probably the last to be established there.

\(^{319}\) Personal communication from Guðmundur Ólafsson, Pjöðminnjasafn Íslands, 9.6.2005.

\(^{320}\) Another weaving sword, probably from the 8\textsuperscript{th} century, was found at Westeremden in Friesland. This also carries a runic inscription that seems to consist of two personal names.
on this weaving tool proves nothing but at the same time it is hard to believe that it is entirely coincidental — of all the things one might engrave on such a tool, why figures wielding swords? Is it possible that this reflects Darraðarljóð or some similar tradition?321

Similarly, it is of some interest that Jómsvíkinga saga 6322 contains a passage wherein the woman Ingibjörg dreams about weaving:

Sva er sagt at hon sof nar bratt er hon kómur j reikjio. þa dreymir hana oc er hon vacnar segir hon palne drómin. þat dreymbi mik segir hon. at ec þottomz her stodd vera á þesom bö sem nú em ec. En ec þottvirmz vppve ægæ vef en þat var lín vefr. han var grár at lit mer þotti kliagr vera vefin oc var ec at oc vafr oc var litip a ofit at þvi er mer þotti oc þa er ec sló vefin þa feill af einn kléin af miþym vefnom á bac oc toc ec vp. En þa sa ec at kliár þeir varo ecki nema manna hóföf ein oc er ec hafþa vpp tekí þeittha hóföpit er af hafþe slítnap. þa hellt ec á oc hvgþa ec at oc kennda ec hófþipit. Nu spyr palnir eptir hvert hóföpit væri. En hon svarar oc qvab vera hófþv haralldz konvngr Gorms sonar.
(Jómsvíkinga saga 1882:41)

'It is said that she sleeps as soon as she goes to bed. She dreams, and when she wakes up she relates the dream to Pálnir: 'I dreamed,' she says, 'that I thought I was staying here on this estate where I am now. And I thought that I had a loom set up for weaving and the cloth was linen. It was grey of colour. I thought that the loom was set up, and I was there and weaving, and there was little woven as it seemed to me. And when I beat the weft, one of the loom weights in the middle fell down behind the loom, and I picked it up. Then I saw that the weights were nothing other than men's heads, and when I had picked up this head which had come off, I looked at it and I thought that I recognized the head.' Now Pálnir asks whose head it was. And she answers and said that it was the head of King Haraldr Gormsson.'
(My translation)

The passage strongly recalls Darraðarljóð, the loom with men's heads for weights and the grey colour. In Jómsvíkinga saga, the dream is taken as an omen of the king's death, reassuring Pálnir that he will kill the king and avenge his brother. Whether Darraðarljóð has borrowed the image from Jómsvíkinga saga or whether it

---

321 This brings to mind the weaving tablet from Lund on which runes are inscribed. It: "bears (if it has been correctly interpreted) the curious inscription 'Sigvor's Ingemar shall have my weeping – aallatti!' This sounds like a curse on the errant Ingemar, who is now with another woman, Sigvor. Ingemar's rejected love took the nearest object to hand, one of her weaving tablets, and inscribed it with a curse, triggered by the final magic word" (Jesch 1991:46). Perhaps the weaving tablet may not have been as arbitrary an object as Jesch suggests because Flint mentions that: "Love charms seem to have called especially often upon magical knots and upon binding-and-loosing spells" (1991:231), which seems to fit well with the interpretation given by Jesch.

322 Various renditions exist; the following is from AM 291 4° c.1275-1300.
is a reflection of a common root-tradition is difficult to say.\textsuperscript{323} The weaving motif apart, both appear as visions or dreams signifying the death of one or several men, but there are significant differences as well. Notably, Íngibjörg’s dream does not involve a supernatural element, there are no enigmatic words spoken and the scene appears quite normal until she stands with the head in her hand; Darradarljóð is supernatural, mysterious and, not least, grisly, right from the very beginning of the poem. Whether direct borrowing is involved or not, the image of deadly weaving seems to have been powerful and striking enough for it to imprint itself on people’s minds and crop up at suitably ominous times.\textsuperscript{324}

V.5. Text and Textile

The relationship between ‘text’ and ‘textile’, mentioned briefly above (V.3.3.), is of specific interest here as it goes far beyond the etymological connection between these two words. There is a whole set of notions surrounding ideas of speaking, reciting and determining which relates to textile work, as Giannakis notes:

“weaving” a plan or a speech and weaving of man’s fate by the [Classical] gods are seen as parallel activities, and in both cases the metaphor is achieved by semantic extension of the basic meaning of words taken from the concrete world of manufacture, the world of weaving or sewing.
(1998:9)

Nagy (1996:59-64) provides a very clear example of exactly this semantic extension in his discussion of the archaic Greek metaphor ‘sewing or weaving songs together’, meaning ‘performing songs’. He focuses on the compound noun *rhapsōidōs* ‘he who sows together [rháptō] the songs [aoide]’, which describes a poet, singer or performer, finding that the speech-as-weaving metaphor is particularly old.\textsuperscript{325}

Both ‘text’ and ‘textile’ derive from the Latin *texere*, ‘to weave’, and it is in some ways rather telling that ‘text’, etymologically speaking, is secondary to ‘textile’. It indicates that both are, or at least can be, forms of narrative. That textile work and in particular weaving is used as a metaphor for composition is amply evident in the ways in which we speak about narratives and story-telling: words can be strung together, an epic might be interlaced with a series of shorter stories, an unfortunate

\textsuperscript{323} MSS of Jómsvikinga saga are older than those of Njáls saga, although this does not in itself determine the age of their contents.

\textsuperscript{324} Speculatively, Orkney may provide the connection between Darradarljóð and Jómsvikinga saga because we know that the early 13th century Jómsvikingadráp was composed by the Orcadian bishop Bjarni Kolbeinsson, only Jómsvikingadráp says nothing of ominous weaving.

\textsuperscript{325} I am grateful to Dorothy Noyes, Ohio State University, for this reference.
poet might lose his thread – in which case he may have to fabricate something; spinning a yarn means to make up an unbelievable story and (just as a word can be spelled) a spell might be woven as well as cast. Textile metaphors seem to be particularly readily available in the context of speech and words. A very clear example of this connection is found among the Dogon people of Mali in West Africa who say the following about one of their mythical spirit ancestors:

As the threads crossed and uncrossed, the two tips of the Spirit's forked tongue pushed the thread of the weft to and fro, and the web took shape from his mouth in the breath of the second revealed Word... The words that the Spirit uttered filled all the interstices of the stuff: they were woven in the threads, and formed part and parcel of the cloth. They were the cloth, and the cloth was the Word. That is why woven material is called soy, which means 'It is the spoken word'.
(Griaule 1965:28)

Old Norse tradition shows similar trends. A passage from Laxdæla saga 35 (cf. notes 85 and 257) contains an interesting phrase:

Síðan lét Kotkell gera seidhjall mikinn; þau færðusk þar á upp òll; þau kváðu þar harðsnúin fræði; þat váru galdrar. Því næst laust á hrið mikilli.
(IF 5:99)

'Then Kotkell had a great seidr-platform made, they all went up onto it, there they spoke hard-twisted knowledge, that was magic. Next a great storm broke lose.'
(CSI V:50)

The phrase is harðsnúin fræði, it literally means 'hard-twisted knowledge', using the verb snúa also encountered in Helgakviða Hundingsbana I (see V.2.). The context in the saga is the magical ritual of seidr which Kotkell performs in order to call down bad weather on his enemy, capsizing a boat. The phrase gives the impression of the special knowledge that Kotkell and his family possess as somehow having the form of threads; moreover, this knowledge is spoken – þau kváðu þar harðsnúin fræði. It is noteworthy that in Helgakviða Hundingsbana I, fate is connected to threads in the word orlogþátto though these would appear to be thought of as actual threads. In Fjólsvinnsmál 47, the phrase Urðar orð, 'words of Urð', appears as a term also describing fate; these two poems present us with differing metaphors for fate, one of them describing fate in terms of threads and the other one in terms of speech. The passage from Laxdæla saga quoted above seems to combine these two images – the

326 The same is evident in Indian tradition (Gonda 1963:114, 157); I am grateful to Noémie Beck, University College Dublin, and Daithi O'Hagain, University College Dublin, for this reference.
magical words are spoken but they are also hard-twisted as though they were threads.\textsuperscript{327}

A different image occurs in \textit{Guðrúnarkviða II} 14-16 where Guðrún weaves the story about Sigurðr:

\begin{verbatim}
  sat ek með þóra
  siau misseri,
  daetr Hákonar,
  i Danmörko.
  Hon mér at gamni
  gullbókaði,
  sali suðræna
  ok svani danska;
  hóðo vit á skriptom
  þat er skatar léko,
  ok á hannyaðom
  hilmis þegna,
  randir rauðar,
  rekka Húna,
  híðrótt, hálmrótt,
  hilmis fylgjo;
  skip Sigmundar
  skriðo frá landi,
  gyltar grimor,
  grafnir stafnar;
  byrðo vit á borða
  þat er þeir börðoz,
  Sigarr ok Siggeir,
  suðr á Fíoni.\textsuperscript{328}
\end{verbatim}

What Guðrún is doing is essentially creating a visual form of poetry (Norrman 2006:133). The description brings to mind ancient textiles such as the Oseberg (Hougen 1940), Överhogdal (Horneij 1991) and Bayeux (Rud 2000) tapestries from, respectively, 9\textsuperscript{th} century Norway, 11\textsuperscript{th} century Sweden and late 11\textsuperscript{th} century France, all of which are clearly telling a story and can therefore be 'read'.\textsuperscript{329} The vocabulary in the poem is interesting because we find bóka used for 'embroider' and skript for 'picture.' In \textit{Guðrúnarkviða II}, the intention with the embroidered skript is exactly to

\textsuperscript{327} The Greek word σείρις, 'siren', a female being luring sailors to their death with her beautiful singing, is derived from σείρια meaning 'cord, plait, rope' (Lampe 1961:1227). This combination of speech, binding and magical allurement recalls the English word 'spellbound'.

\textsuperscript{328} Konungsþok has Fívó (Fife in Scotland); Nks 1824 b 4\textsuperscript{g} has Fíon (Fyn in Denmark).

\textsuperscript{329} They recall the poems \textit{Ragnarsdrápa} and \textit{Húsdrápa} about, respectively, a shield and wall carvings depicting legendary and mythological scenes. The poems, then, are images turned into stories whereas the textiles are stories turned into images. Both poems are reconstructed from verses scattered throughout \textit{Skáldskaparmál} (Faulkes 1998).
relate stories, to depict and describe on the textiles the heroic deeds of men, as one might also do by composing a poem or telling a story about them. Dronke (1969:228) says about the word bækr (plural of bók)\(^{330}\) used in Hamðismál:

> bækr: coverlets embroidered with scenes or patterns (...) The etymology of ‘book’ remains unsolved (...), and it is possible that the two senses ‘book’ and ‘embroidery’ are independent developments of an older radical sense ... The use of bók = ‘embroidery’ may also have been influenced by the fact that an embroidery could be ‘read’, its scenes interpreted, like a book; so the verb lesa [to read] is used occasionally in Norse for ‘embroider’ ([e.g.]... Frostapningslög IX. 9: klaði lesi [embroidered cloth]).

In this way, bók can be understood as something along the lines of ‘that which contains storytelling material’ so that both a book and a tapestry could be referred to as bók, as for example the Bayeux tapestry: a textile which contains text. Also one of the strips (weave Ia) of the Överhogdal tapestry from Härjedalen in Sweden features a short runic passage (Horneij 1991:43-44). These runes are mirrored, indicating that they, as well as the whole tapestry, should be read from right to left and thus clearly incorporating the notion of ‘reading’ a textile as one would read a book.\(^{331}\) The ‘text’ and ‘textile’ intertwine again.

Figure 12. Weave II from the Överhogdal tapestry. The textile depicts an eight-legged horse and possibly also Yggdrasill, the World Tree. The square building-like images with crosses on top may be Christian churches.

Pictorial textile representation is probably a specifically feminine mode of narrative expression, as verbal poetry appears to be a male-dominated form of expression: “The use of the pronouns we (við[vit]) and they (peir) in the poem [Guðrúnarkviða II] indicates the gender division of the labour at hand; we (women) weave and they (men) fight” (Norman 2006:139). Men did not do embroidery as women did not become poets. Yet, female poets, although rare, are not unheard

---

\(^{330}\) The noun bók (f) is used both about ‘book’ and about ‘beech’ and these two words appear to be etymologically very closely related (Green 1998:259-262; AeW:47-48; IeW:597-598, 955; Frtz I:163; ÅBM:69).

\(^{331}\) Runes are normally represented from left to right “but in early times texts could be written from right to left equally well. They could even be boustrophedon, that is, with alternate lines in opposite directions. Even in left-to-right texts an individual letter could be reversed, apparently at whim, and occasionally a letter might be inverted” (Page 1987:9).
of Gudrunarkviða II itself seems to be what Gíslí Sigurðsson refers to as a ‘female-orientated poem’; in it “we meet with detailed descriptions of various kinds of embroidery, different techniques used for weaving and so forth, descriptions which reflect an insider’s knowledge and point to women as the most likely reciters of the poem.” (Gíslí Sigurðsson 1988:253). The gender division appears in effect to be as much a division into the private and public spheres, dominated by, respectively, women and men; and we should not imagine that women did not tell stories or recite poetry just because women’s lives were lived predominantly in the private sphere of the household while men were active in the public sphere (cf. Ney 2004). Furthermore, Old Norse society operated with a rather strict gender division regarding what was male and female work. Meulengracht Sørensen comments: “Society was to a great extent based on an aggressive masculine ethic. So dominant was it, that for women to conform to it could be regarded as a virtue.” (Meulengracht Sørensen 1983:21). It should, however, be understood that the masculine-dominated mode of thought current in early medieval Scandinavia was not as such a suppression of women in a political sense but a suppression of what was regarded as effeminate, or rather, it was a preference for masculine over feminine behaviour.

Figure 13. From the Oseberg tapestry, a textile clearly telling a story which can be ‘read’.

As the skript made by the women in Gudrúnarkviða II is a way of capturing and telling a story, giving it shape using cloth, needle and thread, so the poet who composed the poem itself did the same thing, using speech and words. The poet,

---

332 Straubhaar 2002 and Jesch 1991 discuss Old Norse female poets.
333 It was expected of a man that he act in ways defined as masculine; for a man to act in ways defined as feminine was unacceptable and carried connotations of morally undesirable qualities. Yet, while it was expected of a woman that she act in ways defined as feminine, it was also, at times, acceptable for her to act in ways defined as masculine; in fact, it seems to have been considered a bonus if she were able to do that: “The female role was ignominious only when it was assigned to a man” (Meulengracht Sørensen 1983:24).
stringing words together, conjures up pictures and so the story is told; Guðrún, threading her needle, embroiders pictures in a speechless, wordless type of storytelling. Although we never see nornir engaged in textile manufacture, it is relevant to mention that the suggested etymology of the word norn relates to the Swedish dialect verb norna, 'to communicate in secret' (Ström 1985:202; see VI.4.2.). They may not actually weave but weaving is an obvious metaphor for what they do.

It is also relevant here to return to the Eastern European iconographic tradition of the Virgin Mary who is described as well as depicted as spinning at the Annunciation (see IV.3.). Western European church tradition eventually discontinued the image of the spinning Mary (Badalanova 2006:217) but that it was in use at one time is evident in a 12th century fresco from the church of Sorpe, Spain; a 12th century stone relief from St Anne’s portal of Notre Dame de Paris, France; a 5th century sarcophagus (known as Sepolcro di Braccioforte) from Ravenna, Italy, and in other places (Badalanova 2006). Instead, the Western tradition focused on an image which was considered to be equivalent, namely that Mary was reading when she received the message from the angel. This is worthy of attention: that spinning (‘textile’) and

334 Ovid’s Metamorphoses 6:412-674 tells the story of Philomela who was raped and had her tongue cut out but wove her story in order to exact her revenge. I am grateful to Ágústur Guðmundsdóttir, Stofnun Ærna Magnússonar á Íslandi, for this reference. See also chapter VI.
reading ('text') should be taken as synonyms for one another in the context of (divine) conception, a connection that actually appears to be quite common, certainly in European traditions:

[T]he act of spinning (as an element of the process of making fabrics = texture, i.e. text) appears to be identified with the act of reading (i.e. coming into existence of the text, its verbal manifestation). Hence, it becomes quite obvious why the Virgin Mary conceives her Son the Logos by spinning or reading: in terms of mythopoeic imagery both actions are considered synonymous.

(Badalanova 2006:239)

and further:

It is evident that, according to the traditional vocabulary of Slavia Orthodoxa, the cloth-creating female activities, such as spinning and weaving, knitting and sowing, as well as embroidering – which are often defined by lexemes denoting "writing" and/or "icon-painting" – are considered to be the classical female hypostases of labour, signifying birth/rebirth mysteries. On the other hand, spinning/weaving/producing cloth and reading/writing (i.e. "producing text") seem to go together in a universal system of symbols, standing jointly as synonyms for Divine Incarnation.

(Badalanova 2006:244)

We now understand that 'textile' is not just etymologically related to 'text' but can, indeed, be seen as another kind of 'text' and a specifically feminine one at that. 'Textile', then, should not be seen simply as a piece of cloth but also as an item conveying a meaning: it can record historical events, mythical and legendary tales, it can convey aspects of social status or hierarchy, it can even carry magical purposes.
such as protection, divination or cursing (Normann 2006:125), and such messages can be ‘read’ in the cloth. This, however, is hardly the first association made to textiles in the modern western world:

We rarely think about the work behind the production of textiles. In post-industrial societies, cloth is mostly factory-made, and, therefore, we do not need to think about how long its production takes, let alone how long it took to produce in the ancient world. Weaving was time-consuming and labour intensive. Therefore, cloth was extremely valuable. (Normann 2006:127)

This would have been the case particularly in early medieval Iceland where the natural resources of the land did not make for an economy based on wood or on metal; instead, it became based on homespun cloth: vaðmál (Íslenskur Söguatlas 1989:76).

Perhaps this relationship between ‘text’ and ‘textile’ can help to explain the metaphor of fate-as-textile. Textile work is, in European traditions, a woman’s occupation, but it is also a means of conveying powerful although silent meanings and messages. In this way, textile is not fate, yet it is the equivalent of a specifically feminine voice which does not speak in ordinary words and therefore cannot be heard, but which is nevertheless as effective and significant as the masculine voices of poets and other male figures who speak openly and in actual words. The parallels between the ideas of speaking and of weaving make it easier to understand why fate may be seen as closely related to textile.

V.6. First Merseburg Charm

In this discussion of fate and threads, it is relevant also to mention the First Merseburg Charm. The Merseburg charms, recorded in an Old High German manuscript from the 10th century (Lindquist 1923:1), stem from the German area south of Scandinavia and so do not really belong to the Old Norse sphere; still, they may be considered in some ways to supplement the Norse traditions concerned here. The Second Merseburg Charm is a healing charm and does not touch on the present topic, but the First Merseburg Charm uses a binding image which appears relevant. The charm says:

Eiris sazun idisi, sazun hera duoder.
Suma hapt heptidun, suma heri lezidun,
suma clubodun umbi cuonio uuidi.
Insprinc haptbandun! Inuar uigandun!
(Lindquist 1923:14)
Translations of the Old High German vary somewhat, particularly with regard to the word *idisi*; some scholars suggest a translation of the word, as does Lindquist (1923:15):

'At first there sat noble ladies, then there sat (...)  
Some tied fetters, some hampered the army,  
but some loosened the fetters around bold men.  
Spring out of the fetters! Escape the (...)!'

Others find it preferable to leave the word untranslated, as does Simek (1993:171):

'Once the idisi sat, sat here and there.  
Some bound fetters, some hampered the army,  
some untied fetters:  
Escape from the fetters, flee from the enemies.'

These *idisi* have often been seen in relation to the *dísir* of Old Norse tradition (see III.1.2.) as well as to the Old English word *ides* which is used in *Beowulf*, seemingly just in the meaning of 'woman', as is sometimes the case in Old Norse *kenningar* employing the term *dís* (Simek 1993:61, 171). While there would appear to be a genuine etymological relationship between these separate words: *dísir, ides* and *idisi*, etymology alone is a fragile foundation on which to build interpretations (Weber 1969:11) and sharing a common root is not sufficient evidence that the beings hiding behind these labels are necessarily similar to each other. The *idisi* are also often seen in relation to *valkyrjur*. *Dessa idisi framstå som stridens, slagfältets segergivande och magiskt betvingande makter, som valkyrjor, 'These idisi appear as the victory-bringing and magically controlling powers of battle, of the battlefield, as valkyrjur'* (Ström 1954:71). This correspondence draws on what the *idisi* are said to do in the charm compared with what *valkyrjur* are said to do in Old Norse literature, or rather, what *valkyrjur* should be doing according to their etymological background. As was discussed above (III.1.3.), it is not all *valkyrjur* who choose the slain, although they always seem to relate in some way or other to the battlefield or to the war-dead.

The Old High German *idisi* seem to have the power both to bind and release warriors in a military context335 and there are apparently several of them, divided into three groups, as the charm tells us that some tie fetters whilst others untie fetters and yet others hinder the army. A parallel often drawn is to the *valkyrja*-name

335 Bede refers to something similar in his ecclesiastical history (Book IV:22), where it proves impossible for people to bind Imma as the fetters are loosed everytime they try. They suspect him of having access to loosing spells, but it turns out that the fetters loosen because Imma’s brother is having mass said on his behalf (1969:403-405).
Herfjôtur (Grímnismál 36; bur) meaning 'fetterer of the army', but the parallel in itself does little to enhance our understanding of the charm or of valkyrjur. The name occurs only twice, describes an action which we never seem actually to see, and no other valkyrja-names appear to have similar connotations; it is difficult to argue that the charm recalls valkyrjur in general. Rather than valkyrjur, the name brings to mind Óðinn's abilities described in Hávamál 149:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{þat kan ek it fióða:} & \quad \text{I know a fourth spell:} \\
\text{ef mér fyrðar bera} & \quad \text{if men put} \\
\text{bônd at bøglimom,} & \quad \text{chains upon my arms and legs,} \\
\text{svá ek gel,} & \quad \text{I can chant} \\
\text{at ek ganga má;} & \quad \text{so that I can walk away;} \\
\text{sprettir mér af fótum fióður,} & \quad \text{fetters spring from my feet,} \\
\text{en af höndom hapt.} & \quad \text{and bonds from my hands.}
\end{align*}
\]

This image is really rather similar to that given in the charm. It may be that something like this was at an earlier stage an aspect of valkyrjur that later became attached to Óðinn so that the name Herfjôtur is a relic of some earlier valkyrja function. This seems probable but remains speculative.337

Idisi appear to amalgamate certain aspects of disir and valkyrjur, having the power to assist or to ensnare warriors in battle. The charm shows them as beings to be called upon for help, seemingly to free one or more prisoners (disir were called upon to assist with childbirth; see III.1.2.). It also conveys the feeling of some ritual setting; the phrasing ‘first some sat, then others sat’ or ‘they sat here and there’338 seems to imply some sort of physical action accompanying the words of the charm, and not really the sort of movements that a bound prisoner would be capable of making, so that one imagines the charm being spoken from afar by someone other than the prisoner himself. Indeed, the image may not be that far from the one conjured up in Darraðarljóð, where the weaving can be seen as a binding action affecting the warriors on the distant battlefield (V.3.), although weaving on an upright loom is done standing up, not sitting down, so whatever kind of binding is described in the charm is unlikely to be weaving on a loom.

336 It is only found in the pulur of AM 748 I 4o c.1300-1325 (Edda Snorra Sturlusonar 1852:490).
337 The idea of binding and loosing rather recalls the practice of referring to the gods as bônd (n.pl.). The singular bônd (n.) means ‘band, thread, chain’, but also ‘obligation’ (LP:34; Fritz I:110). Fritzner suggests that this refers to the gods as powers controlling human activity (1:110); de Vries connects it to an Old Indic word for ‘kinship’ (AeW:25).
338 The act of sitting recalls the norma stôli in Sólarljóð 51 (see IV.2.2.); cf. also Price’s discussion of the seïðhjallr and chair-shaped amulets or pendant from archeological finds (2002:162-167) and Kiil’s discussion of seïðhjallr and Óðinn’s seat Hlîóskjalf (1960).
It is appropriate in this context to draw attention also to Tacitus' description of the rituals of the Semnoni in *Germania* 39:

Vetustissimos nobilissimosque Sueborum Semnones memorant; fides antiquitatis religione firmatur. stato tempore in silvam auguris patrum et prisci formidine sacram (eiusdem) nominis eiusdemque sanguinis populi legationibus coeunt caesoque publice homine celebrant barbari ritus horrenda primordia. est et alia luco reverentia : nemo nisi vinculo ligatus ingreditur, ut minor et potestatem numinis prae se feren. si forte prolapsus est, attolli et insugere haud licitum : per humum evolvuntur. eoque omnis superstitionis respect; tamquam inde initia gentis, ibi regnator omnium deus, cetera subiecta atque parentia. (Tacitus 1938)

'At a set time, deputations from all the tribes of the same stock gather in a grove hallowed by the auguries of their ancestors and by immemorial awe. The sacrifice of a human victim in the name of all marks the grisly opening of their savage ritual. Another observance shows their reverence for this grove. No one may enter it unless he is bound with a cord, by which he acknowledges his own inferiority and the power of the deity. Should he chance to fall, he may not raise himself or get up again, but must roll out over the ground. The grove is the centre of their whole religion. It is regarded as the cradle of the race and the dwelling-place of the supreme god to whom all things are subject and obedient.' (Tacitus 1970:134)

Again, this description belongs to a much earlier period and probably bears no direct relationship to the Old Norse material of the late Viking Age; however, it may tell us something about the distribution and persistence of certain ideas. The combination of sacrifice, fetters and a sacred grove has given rise to comparisons between Tacitus’ description and the worship of Óðinn in the Old Norse period, recalling again Óðinn’s paralysing powers.  

Furthermore, it is interesting to note the striking similarity between the charm and the description of norrir in *Fáfnismál* 13 (quoted in IV.1.). The *suma, suma, sumar, sumar* of the charm and the *suma, sumar, sumar, sumar* of the eddic poem must represent some sort of formula, and it is a cause for some wonder to find exactly the same phrase turning up in quite separate sources. Evident in both passages is the division of the same kind of beings into three separate groups; in the charm they are

---

339 It may likewise relate to Óðinn’s self-sacrifice by a spear, hanging on a tree (*Hávamál* 138-140); possibly also to the passage concerning Fjóturlundr (’Fetter-grove’) in *Helgakvíða Hundingsbana* II 30 where Dagr kills Helgi, his sister’s husband, with a spear under circumstances that could be interpreted as sacrificial. Also the mock sacrifice that turns into a real sacrifice of Vikarr in *Gautreks saga* 7 (FSN IV:31), c.1600-1700, springs to mind.

340 As Lindquist notes (1923:17-18), it also turns up in the fragmented eddic poem known as *Brot, stanza 4: Sumir ëlf sviðo, sumir orm sniðo, sumir Gothormi af gera deildo, ‘some roasted wolf, some sliced snake, some gave Gothormr wolf meat’.*
said to do different things, whereas in the poem they are said to be of different origins. Such triple divisions are known from ancient Greece (see III.3.) and from the Germanic votive altars, and are also attached to nornir in both Völuspá and Snorra-Edda, though seemingly not to disir, fylgjur or valkyrjur in Old Norse sources. In this way, it seems the charm is presenting us with a group of beings spanning the grey areas between disir, valkyrjur and nornir; to find an exact parallel to the idisi amongst the Norse counterparts is not easy.

The binding-and-loosing magic of the First Merseburg Charm probably represents a practice that was known throughout pre-Christian Europe and persisted long into the Christian period (Flint 1991:226-231), and there is no particular reason why it should not have been as prevalent in the Scandinavian area as it was elsewhere. However, it does not seem to bring us any closer to an understanding of the nornir as these are presented to us in the source material because, Helgakviða Hundingsbana I apart, ideas about binding-and-loosing magic are not directly attached to nornir in the available sources.

V.7. Katla, Gríma and Guðrún

Although the mythological material does not present much in the way of magical textile work, Norse tradition is not totally devoid of such things and in the discussion of fate and threads a few of the most prominent examples should be considered. Some Íslendingasögur refer on occasion to the magical qualities attributed to spinning. The two clearest examples are found in Eyrbyggja saga 20 where Katla uses spinning-induced magic in order to hide her son from his pursuers, and in Fostbræðra saga 23 where Gríma uses spinning, also with the purpose of hiding a man from his pursuers.

The passage from Fostbræðra saga 23, somewhat abbreviated here, reads as follows:

En Gríma, kona Gamla, átti stól einn mikinn, en á brúðum stólinsins var skorinn Pórr, ok var þat mikít Ilkeski. Gríma mælti um myrgininn: "Nú vil ek skipa til verka í dag. Stól minn mun ek setja á stufugólf mitt; þar vil ek, fornóðr, at þú sítr á, þá er menn koma; vil ek ekki, at þú rísir upp af stólnum, meðan Póðís er á baenum. Nú þó at þér þykki þókkur nylundur í gerask, eða þér sínisk ófríðr at þér borinn, þá rís þú ekki upp af stólínunum, því at ekki mun stoða at hrökka í hyrningar undan, ef þér verðr bana auðít. Gamli skal festa upp ketil ok sjóða sel; þú skalt bera sorp á eldinn ok lát verða mikinn reyk í húsunum. Ek mun sitja í durum ok spinna garn ok

---

341 Móðruvallabók c.1330-1370 and other MSS.
taka við komondum.” Nú er svá górt sem Gríma sagði fyrir. Ok er skip þeira Þorklæs ok Þórdísar sjásk at landi fara, sezk Þormóðr á stólinn. Gamli hafði uppi ketillín ok bar á sorpit á eldinn; varð mjók reykfast í húsunum. Þar fylgði ok myrkr mikit, svá at ekki mátti sjá. Gríma sat á þreskeldi ok spann garn ok kvað nökkut fyrir sér, þat er aðrir sklíðu ekk. ... Nú fara þau Bǫðvarr ok Þórdís á stofuna upp ok taka af skjána; leggr þá út reykinn. Má þá sjá um alla stofuna, geta þá at lita stól Grímu, þar er hann stóð á miðju gölf. Þau sá þór med hamri sínum skorinn á stólsbrúðunum, en þau sá ekki Þormóðr.
(ÍF 6:245-247)

‘Gamli’s wife, Gríma, had a large chair with a figure of Thor carved into the arms – a sizeable effigy – and the following morning, she said, “Now, this is what I want done today. I will place my chair in the main room, and I want you, Thormod, to sit in it when they arrive. On no account must you stand up while Thordis is here. No matter what strange events you think you see, nor whether you think you are being attacked, you must not rise up from this chair. If it is time for you to die, there will be no escape wherever you run. Gamli will set up a pot and boil some seal meat, and he will put [you are to put] sweepings from the floor on the fire so that the house fills with smoke. I shall sit in the doorway and spin yarn, and receive them when they arrive.”
Gríma’s instructions were followed, and when Thorkel and Thordis’ ships were seen putting ashore Thormod went and sat in the chair. Gamli hung up a pot and threw sweepings onto the fire, and the house filled with smoke so dark and dense that it obscured everything. Gríma sat on the threshold, span som yarn and hummed something that the others did not understand. ... So Bodvar and Thordis went up onto the roof and removed the screens, and the smoke poured out. That made everything in the room visible. They saw Gríma’s chair in the middle of the floor with the figure of Thor and his hammer carved into the arms, but they did not see Thormod.’
(CSI II:384-385)

Several things interact here to create the mysterious disappearance of Þormóðr: boiling seal meat, smoke, a chair with a depiction of Þórr and the spinning that Gríma does whilst saying something unintelligible. It is clearly Gríma who is in control, but only to the extent that she says to Þormóðr that, if he is fated to die on this day, all of this will not help him. Initially, the search party is distracted by the smoke but even when they clear the room, they still cannot see Þormóðr.

In Eyrbyggja saga 20,342 the following story is told:

Þar var eigi karla fyrir fleira en Oddr. Katla sat á palli ok spann garn; hon bað Odd síťja hjá sér, - “ok ver hjóð ok kyrr.” Hon bað konur síťja í rúnum sínum, - “ok verið hjóðar,” kvað hon, “en ek mun hafa orð fyrir oss.” ... Þeir sá, at Katla spann garn af roikki. Nú leita þeir um húsin ok fińna eigi Odd ok fóru brett eptir þat. Ok er þeir kómu skammt frá garðinum, nam Arnkell staðar ok mæl: “Hvárt mun Katla eigi hafa heðni veif í hofuð oss? ok hefir þar verit Oddr, sonn hennar, en oss sýndsk rokkriunn.” ... Þeir

342 AM 448 4° c.1686 (copy of the lost Vatnsheyrna).
Arnkel gengu í stofu ok sá hvergi Odd; lá þar rokkr Kötlu í bekknum; þóttusk þeir þá vita, at Oddr myndi eigi þar hafa verit; gengu síðan út ok föru í brott ... En er þeir Arnkel kómu á bæinn, hljópu þeir inn ok til stofu, ok sat Katla á palli ok spann. Hon heilsar þeim ok kvað þá þykkfarit gera; Arnkel kvað þat satt. Forunautar hans töku rokkinn ok hjuggu í sundr. Þá mælti Katla: “Eigi er nú þat heim at segja í kveld, at þér hafið eigi örendi haft hingat í Holt, er þér hjugguð rokkinn.” Síðan gengu þeir Arnkel ok leituðu Odds úti ok inni ok sá ekki kvíð, útan þunglætt einn, er Katla átti, er lá undir haugnum, ok föru brott eptir þat.

(ÍF 4:51-53)

‘There was not a man on the farm except Odd. Katla sat on the cross-bench spinning yarn. She told Odd to sit beside her, “and be quiet and still.” She told the women to stay in their places, “and be quiet. I will speak for us all.” ... They noticed that Katla was spinning yarn on her distaff. They searched the buildings but could not find Odd and after that they left. When they had ridden a little distance from the farm buildings, Arnkel stopped and said: “Is it possible that Katla could have pulled the wool over our eyes? Could that have been her son Odd who appeared to us to be her distaff?” ... Arnkel and his men went into the main room but could not see Odd. Katla’s distaff was lying there on the bench. They were now convinced that Odd had not been there, and so they went out and rode away ... When Arnkel and his men arrived, they ran into the main room where Katla was sitting spinning. She greeted them and said they were becoming regular visitors. Arnkel said that was quite true. His companions took Katla’s distaff and broke it in two. “Tonight at home,” said Katla, “you won’t be able to say you had no purpose here at Holt since you have broken the distaff.” Then Arnkel and his men searched for Odd inside and out but saw no living creature except a domestic boar that Katla owned, which was lying under the rubbish-pile. They went away after that.’

(CSI V:152-153)

Here, Katla also uses spinning in her magic and it is clear that Arnkel and his men find that the distaff is heavily involved with the goings-on at Holt; at first they think Oddr is the distaff, then that he is the goat and the third time that he is the boar. The two situations are rather alike in their use of spinning as a magical activity and in the purpose of the magic, but these are clearly descriptions of illusions, not fate. Equally clearly, nornir are notably absent from both texts.

A third interesting mention of spinning is the scene in Laxdæla saga 49 (ÍF 5:154)³⁴³ where Bolli, on his return from the murder of Kjartan, is met with Guðrún’s cryptic words: Misjonf verða morginverkin; ek hefi spunnit tólfr álina garn, en þú hefir vegit Kjartan, ‘A poor match they make, our morning work – I have spun twelve ells

³⁴³ Móðruvallabók c.1330-1370.
of yarn while you have slain Kjartan’ (CSI V:79). Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson (1997:134-158) discusses this passage extensively, arguing that Guðrún’s spinning is a type of sacrifice relating directly to Kjartan’s death. In this respect, the passage is similar to Volsungasaga 31-32 and Sigurðarkviða in skamma 10-11 where Brynhildr decides that if she cannot have Sigurðr for herself she would rather see him dead; Guðrún apparently makes a similar decision with regard to Kjartan. Her spinning is then a ritual act that somehow symbolises Kjartan's death in a way similar to the relationship between the weaving and the faraway battle in Darráardjóð (Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1997:154-155); while Guðrún sits at home spinning, her husband Bolli, at her instigation, kills the man whom she loves, Kjartan. In her cryptic greeting of Bolli on his return, she herself seems to equate her spinning with the killing; although she states that the two pieces of work are mismjófn, ‘a poor match’, they appear nevertheless to be a match. And if we read the older MSS, both pieces of work are hermdarverk, ‘foul deeds, sabotage’ (ÍEO:322)

344 IF 5:154 takes this phrase from the very late MS ÍB 226 4° c.1680-1700; Módruvallabók and other earlier MSS have mikil verða hermdarverk / hernadarverk / hefndarverk. The phrase has been much discussed (Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1997:134-137; Louis-Jensen 1993; Ólafur Halldórson 1973) with varying results. Louis-Jensen (1993:267) notes that the phrase “has been badly bungled in the manuscript tradition of Laxdæla saga, and critics have disagreed as to how it should be emended” and goes on to suggest that it should read: “Mikil verða hér nú dagsverkin” (1993:270) ‘a great day’s work indeed’ (my translation) (see Jónas Kristjánsson 1984:208-211 for various suggested translations). Certainty is as hard to come by as agreement in this discussion but the authenticity of the phrase in ÍB 226 4° is seriously compromised by the lateness of that MS (Ólafur Halldórson 1973:126). However, scholars do appear to agree on the fact that Guðrún’s statement refers to some kind of symbolic relationship between her spinning and Bolli’s killing of Kjartan.


Figure 16.
Spinning with a distaff.
The distaff holds the prepared but unspun wool; the spun thread is then wound up onto the spindle.
However, these examples of magical spinning in the sagas seem to be quite far removed from the nornir themselves. Concerning the identity of the women in these three sagas, they are all very human, but hints at folktale stereotypes can also be glimpsed: the witch. Katla is a widow living on her own, in charge of herself and she is said to be beautiful but capable of ill deeds; Gríma is an old woman living far from other people with her husband. She is said to be fornfróð, 'knowledgeable about ancient matters' and, although she is portrayed in a more positive way, she shares with Katla a marginal societal position not unlike that of witches in folktales. Guðrún is different from them; a person of high social status, she is central to the saga plot and to society.

In terms of behaving like nornir, Guðrún appears to come a lot closer than the other two – nornir do not engage in magical illusions but in fate (a distinction also made by Gríma herself; see above), and it looks as if that is exactly what Guðrún does. Yet, it must be said that there is absolutely nothing in the saga texts which alludes in any way to nornir; this link hinges entirely on the idea of nornir as spinners and the single occurrence of nornir working with threads carries quite positive and optimistic connotations rather than the notions of doom and death displayed in Laxdæla saga.

V.8. Gender and Power

In the context of gender-guided modes of expression (V.5.), another text should be included which does not concern textile work but which is nevertheless relevant to much of the material discussed in this chapter. The question of why fate is feminine now raises its head again as this notion seems to be clearly demonstrated also in Grottasǫngr.346

Otherworldly female figures exist in abundance in many European traditions and it is by no means exclusive to nornir that they should be ambiguous and double-sided, and should incorporate benign as well as malignant aspects. In Old Norse tradition, it is often evident that such supernatural females are connected to the jötunn, to the realm of the dead, or in some other way are defined as 'other'. The two women Fenía and Menia in Grottasǫngr belong to this ambivalent class of beings. They are referred to simply as meyjar, 'maidens', but also as með bergrísa (stanza 10) and bergrísa brúður (stanza 24), and in describing their lineage (stanza

346 From Skáldskaparmál 43 which also gives a long prose introduction to the poem (Faulkes 1998:51-52). Further on Grottasǫngr, see Vésteinn Ólason 2005.
9) they themselves mention the names of four jotnar: Hrungrir, Blazi, Íói and Aurnir, making it absolutely clear that they are connected to jotnar. Furthermore, in stanza 11 they say: Vér vetr niú vorum leikur, oftgar alnar fyrir jórð neðan, ‘Nine winters we were playmates, mighty girls, nourished under the earth’, thereby connecting themselves to an underground realm. It is also clear that they are very strong, máttkar meyiar, that they are framvisar, ‘knowledgeable about the future’ (stanza 1), and that only they can turn the grinding stones of the magical mill. This makes it possible to group them with the otherworldly women who live below the ground and/or in water and who possess supernatural knowledge and with it power (IV.2.1.; IV.2.2.).

Fenia and Menia’s ability to grind out good as well as evil things lends them a double-sided nature similar to that of the supernatural women who give as well as take life. At the same time, they seem particularly interested in warfare, complaining in stanza 16 that life at Fróði’s place is dull and recalling in stanzas 13-15 their past as warriors in Sweden, seemingly as a time when they felt in their element (cf. Vésteinn Ólason 2005:124-126). They point out in stanza 14 that: Steyppom stilli, studdom annan, ‘we overthrew one king, we supported another’, which is reminiscent of the role of valkyrfyr, certainly the ones in Darraðarljóð.

Indeed, both poems potentially have a work-song feel to them, portraying women engaged in physical work and speech at the same time, and in both poems, what is said and what is simultaneously done are not separate issues but two sides of the very same action. Yet, in Grottaðongs we see that an interesting shift from benign to malignant expression takes place in the course of the poem. The action remains the same, the turning of the grinding stones does not change, it appears to be Fenía and Menia’s attitude to King Fróði that changes and they express this in their words which turn from blessings to curses. As long as their attitude remains positive (stanzas 5-6) they speak as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fenia’s words</th>
<th>Menia’s words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Æði mglom Fróða, mglom alsælan, molom fioló féar, á féginslóðri! siti hann á auði,</td>
<td>Let us grind wealth for Fróði, let us grind him great happiness, let us grind many possessions on the quern stone of joy! let him sit on his wealth,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


348 The image of the mill recalls Sneebjørn’s stanza about Amlóða kvern, ‘Hamlets mill’ in Skáldsóparmál 25 (Faulkes 1998:38), also referred to by Saxo, Book 3 (6,10) (1979:85).

349 Holtsmark 1956 describes work songs related to weaving, grinding, smithing and rowing.
sofi hann á dúni,  
vaki hann at villa:350  
pá er vel malit!

let him sleep on down,  
let him wake to happiness:  
that is well ground!

Hér skyli engi  
qðrom granda,  
til ððis bua  
né til bana orka,  
né høggvagi  
hvøssø sverði,  
þóat bana bróður  
bundinn finni!

Here no one should bring  
harm to another,  
not plot evil  
nor conspire against someone’s life,  
not strike  
with a sharp sword,  
though he finds his brother’s slayer  
all tied up!

When their attitude changes, they speak quite differently, stanzas 21-22:

Mól mins foður  
maer ramliga,  
þvat hon feigð fira  
fiðlømargra sá:  
stukko stórar  
steðr frá lúðri,  
iðrni varðar –  
møløm enn framarr!

My father’s daughter  
ground fiercely,  
for she saw death approaching  
for many men:  
the great support posts  
snapped away from the mill frame,  
iron clad –  
let us grind even more!

Møløm enn framarr:  
mun Yrso sonr,351  
niðr Hálfdanar,  
hefnæ Fróða;  
sá mun hennar  
heitin verða  
burr ok bróðir;  
vitom báðar þat.

Let us grind even more:  
the son of Yrsa  
and of Hálfdan  
will avenge Fróði;  
he will be known  
as her son  
and her brother;  
we both know that.

It is not that the women stop grinding; what changes things is the words they speak.  
The reason given for this change in attitude is that Fróði will not allow the women to  
rest but makes them work incessantly.  
It is clear that the mill, and with it Fenia and Menia who work the mill, embodies  
the potential for good as well as for evil, and it may be that the build-up of all good  
and peaceful things eventually counteracted by a hoard of evil, warlike things should  
somehow be seen as balancing one another out. More probably, it is a warning  
against greed – Fróði wants more and more gold, perhaps thinking that the upward  
spiral is endless but, by pursuing it overly hard, he stumble over the summit after

350 At villa may be translated either as ‘to happiness’ or ‘at will’. It makes little difference  
here, in either case he wakes to pleasant circumstances (KLE 3:887).
351 The son of Yrsa is the legendary hero Hrófr kraki. Yrsa was deceived into marrying her  
own father Helgi and so her son by Helgi, Hrófr, was also her brother; see Hrófs saga kraka  
(FSN I:19-26).
which the decline is rapid and fierce. As such it is a lesson in the abuse of power. But perhaps there is also a sense that the turnaround is inevitable.

Or perhaps the sense is that the mill simply grinds out whatever fate has already been laid down, so that the mill does not actually change anything. In the same way, grain is ground into flour but the flour is not essentially different, it is simply a different format of the grain. This might also explain why Fenia and Menia are happy to grind out peace and wealth for Fróði although he has enslaved them (KLE 3:884).^352

It is hard to call these women anything other than what they call themselves: 'jptunn maidens'. Their strength is not only supernatural but also physical and it can be harnessed and made to work for the king and, although it is the mill which is magically able to produce whatever one wishes for, Fenia and Menia are the only ones who have the power to make it work and it is apparently their words which control what the mill produces. In this way they are very closely linked to one another, the mill only works in their hands but at the same time they are tied to the mill, seemingly unable to free themselves from the king's command. There appears to be a power game going on: Fróði against Fenia and Menia; who is stronger than who? The human king or the otherworldly women? The division of strength discernible here is an interesting one because, although Fróði is able to harness the physical powers of the two women, he cannot control their speech and through this their power over his fate. His power is physical and human, theirs is conceptual and otherworldly; he uses force, they use words. This might even reveal a more general notion about which types of powers are considered to belong to which gender (cf. Price 2002:390).

V.9. Summary: Tangled Threads

The fate-as-textile metaphor does exist in the Old Norse material but not to an extent where we can allow ourselves to refer to it carelessly, and it remains unproven that its connection to nornir, on the rare occasions where we come across it, is at all native. The unique imagery employed in Darraðarljóð in all likelihood finds

^352 Similarly, the weft on a loom does not create the pattern but merely actualises what is already laid down in the warp; the grinding of the mill does not in itself produce the peace and the war, it only makes apparent the nature of what was put into it. You start out with grain and end up with flour but these are just two different forms of the same substance. In this way, the words that Fenia and Menia speak are, like the words in Darraðarljóð, part of the actualisation process.
its roots in traditions from the British Isles, and the scene from *Heigakviða Hundingsbana I* 2-4 has suspiciously close parallels in Classical tradition; fate-as-textile does not turn up anywhere else in the *Edda*, nor in skaldic poetry; nor does Snorri know it. This leaves us with the allusive name Herfjótur and the binding and loosing of the *First Merseburg Charm* and with these, combined with the evidence from *Laxdæla saga* 49, it cannot be denied altogether that the fate-as-textile metaphor was present in some form or other in native tradition from ancient times. We might say that the fact that this metaphor was apparently so widespread elsewhere in Europe supports the notion that it was probably not entirely unknown in Scandinavia. Yet, it seems that spinning *nornir* are conspicuously absent from our sources, certainly in comparison with how often they figure in scholarship.

What I have tried to do is to show that the sources separate the fate-as-textile metaphor into two layers. The dominant layer, clearly evident in the sources discussed above, connects fate to textile – but does not refer to *nornir* – and the less dominant sub-layer consists of a symbolic correspondence between textile work and the dealings of *nornir*. This division into two layers of the fate-as-textile image does seem to exist in the surviving evidence; whether the evidence is representative of the ancient heathen world view is a different matter.

In descriptions of what *nornir* do, the vocabulary most often points towards decision-making and it seems that the most prominent metaphor employed is fate-as-law (as will be discussed below). An image of law-as-textile works quite well when applied to the act of cloth weaving (tapestry weaving is different; Horneij 1991:26-28) because the warp can symbolise the law whilst the weft is the different ways in which the law can be realised or applied. The pattern of a piece of cloth is laid down in the warp and so it exists, albeit invisibly so, even before weaving actually commences. There are different possibilities for how the weft may interpret the warp, though some are more logical and appropriate than others, but the warp itself cannot be changed once weaving has begun. If a mistake is made in setting up the warp, it will be present throughout the entire piece of cloth, whereas the weft can to a certain extent be unravelled to correct a mistake. In this way, the warp may be likened to the law or to fate and the weft to the chosen ways of realising the basic structure of the whole. If fate is law and law is textile, then *nornir* engage with textile by extension. But whatever way we turn the pieces, they hardly engage with textile directly. It seems to be the text, not the textile, which describes what *nornir* actually do.
Considering the extant descriptions of the Old Norse nornir, it seems that when we so readily accept the notion that they spin and weave, especially when we consider it a dominant feature of theirs, then we are forcing the nornir to comply with our preconceived ideas before we even read the sources. The sources themselves would never give us spinning or weaving as their dominant aspect; rather, it seems we already know that this is what nornir do and so we do not realise how rarely it is clearly stated. Were we to read the texts with an open mind, I doubt that we would identify the textile analogy as dominant. The idea is there, as Helgakviða Hundingsbana I, Regimsmál 14 and Darraðarljóða imply — although these passages do not show it directly, and although they may be borrowings from elsewhere — but are we not blinding ourselves by letting this image dominate our understanding of nornir when the vast majority of their appearances show them to be engaged in very different spheres of life?
VI. Fate, Prophecy and Law

Davidson (1998:120) writes that: "We do not know much about the Norns, since in the literature we have mainly references to their decrees concerning the fates of kingdoms and individuals." This is true, but I suppose we then have to say that these references to decrees are what we know about nornir. When looking at the words often used in situations mentioning nornir (skipta, dóm, kvíð), it would seem evident that there is some sort of perceived link between 'fate' and 'law' – œrlóg and /óg. The aim of this chapter is to explore that link, both in terms of etymology and semantics, and also in terms of any legal or quasi-legal role represented by nornir.

The exploration begins with the words themselves – œrlóg and /óg – leading into a limited discussion of the relationships between issues of law, speech and prophecy; there truly is much to say about this, and the scope of the present study only allows for inclusion of the aspects most central to descriptions of nornir and vglur. Of some importance here is the relationship between orality and literacy and the developments that took place in early medieval Scandinavia, shifting the authority from the law-speaker to the law-book (Gísli Sigurðsson 2004:53-92). What we are left with today are literary sources telling us about the oral tradition that preceded them – often by several centuries – and there are many complex issues concerning the use of such source material. This comprises rather a substantial field of study in itself and it is not the intention to enter that discussion at present;353 so little is said (or rather written) about nornir that we can hardly hope to pick out potential distinctions between ideas about nornir pre-dating the extant sources and those that are described in our sources. Here, the focus will remain on the nornir presented in the sources and what they represent there: skęp and œrlóg.

In the sources that we have, it appears characteristic of the nornir that their presence is felt mentally and emotionally rather than physically. In this respect, they are different from vglur, and an exploration of the relationship between nornir and vglur forms a central part of this chapter. This necessitates a stronger focus on prose texts that do not mention nornir directly but are relevant to an exploration of vglur and of issues closely connected to the quasi-legal metaphor surrounding nornir.

As will become evident, the following discussions of words, speech and prophecy intertwine with the textile analogies and the gender issues discussed in the two previous chapters.

VI.1. Words for Fate

Before discussing those Old Norse words that cover the concept of fate, I want to look at some English words: 'fate' and 'destiny', both of which come from Latin, and the native Old English *wyrd*.

VI.1.1. English Words

The common dictionary definitions make hardly any distinction between 'fate' and 'destiny', at times even defining them in terms of one another. Both are explained as a supernatural power shaping the lives of human beings or as the events and experiences encountered by a person during his or her lifetime; they generally seem to have very similar semantic content (though see Wierzbicka 1992:92-95, 103-106), but they obviously have different roots: 'fate' is derived from the Latin *fatum*, past participle of *fari*, 'to speak, say' and points towards a close semantic connection to speech and words; 'fate' is seen, at least etymologically, as something spoken. 'Destiny' is derived from Latin *dēstinātus*, past participle of the verb *dēstināre*, 'to determine, to make firm', revealing what must have been a close semantic relationship to the notion of something akin to a law governing the course of events or a decision.

There is also 'weird', Old English *wyrd*, 'fate', cognate with Old Norse *urðr* (see IV.1. and below). The relationship between these two words has been debated many times and discussions of the concept of fate in Old Germanic religious beliefs constitute an almost entirely separate branch of scholarship: "One cannot even translate *wyrd* without committing oneself to a certain interpretation" (Liberman 1994:117). Suffice it here to point out that although *wyrd* and *urðr* are etymological cognates and have at times been considered to have exactly the same semantic content, this should perhaps not be assumed to be the case when the Old English term occurs some 200 times or more, the Old Norse term a mere fifteen times or so and the corresponding Old High German *wurt* only once (Weber

---

354 For example *Johnson's English Dictionary*: "Fate; 1. Destiny; an external series of successive causes. 2. Event predetermined. 3. Death; destruction. 4. Cause of death" (1809:308); "Destiny; 1. The power that spins life and determines the fate. 2. Fate; invincible necessity. 3. Doom; condition in future time" (1809:220).

355 Wierzbicka (1992:92-95) discusses the semantic content attached to these two words in recent decades.

This would seem to indicate that the semantic content of the words played a somewhat different role or simply referred in Old Norse to something other than it did in Old English tradition. Weber says this:

'Although 'wyrd' in Old English poetry always occurs with the meaning-content of 'power of fate', 'doom', 'death' and 'decay', in no instance does this allow us to consider this meaning to be a relict of a heathen Germanic belief in an all-powerful conception of fate called 'wyrd'. This role of the concept of 'wyrd' rather stems from the specifically Christian awareness of transitoriness and chimes with the Christian world view, namely that the earthly existence is understood as subject to the rules of change, decay and death.\(^{357}\)

This means that while \textit{wyrd} undoubtedly has a heathen past, its occurrences in Old English literature may reflect a non-heathen understanding of the concept. Green (1998:374-391) discusses it alongside other Old English words pertaining to ethics and fate that took on new, Christian meanings after the conversion. But the word has continued to develop; the modern use of English 'weird' tends to be as an adjective on par with 'strange, peculiar, odd, curious', all of which can be seen to incorporate some of the meaning 'fate' as in something uncanny or perhaps not entirely coincidental.

It is evident that language is not static, meanings of words are not solid and unchanging; they are, in fact, the very opposite. Although a word can remain the same in terms of spelling and pronunciation through an extended period of time, what is meant by that word is not necessarily the same throughout that period. We need words in order to communicate but we also need to keep in mind that words are provisional and revisable.\(^{358}\) Although their semantic content can be traced back to a certain root meaning, this does not guarantee that they continue to convey that same root meaning through long periods of time (Weber 1969:11). The case of 'weird' proves the point; the word obviously had a meaning in pre-Christian England,

\(^{357}\) Translation kindly provided by Marieluise Bek-Pedersen.

\(^{358}\) Richard Holloway at the Edinburgh Book Festival, August 30, 2004.
we just do not know exactly what it was, and the frequent employment of wyrd in Old English literature suggests that it underwent an adaptation process allowing it to continue to be used so extensively in Christian texts. As noted above, in modern English language 'weird' does not refer to a supernatural being, instead it has an almost entirely secular meaning; it has even shifted word class, from noun to adjective. Thus, the root meanings of words, however interesting, can tell us only about the origins of the word, not how far removed from such origins the semantic content of the same word might be at any given time. It can be difficult to find that exact balance between etymological and contemporary meanings in the Old Norse vocabulary, as we cannot be sure that the words encountered in the manuscript sources are used in their original etymological sense; at times we can, in fact, be sure that they are not. Nevertheless, an exploration of the etymologies of the Old Norse words used to describe what is in English called 'fate' or 'destiny' would be useful.

VI.1.2. Old Norse Words

Old Norse has many words that translate into English as 'fate': ǫrlög, skøp, miotvør, forlög and auðna.359 The mere fact that there are so many words seems to suggest two things: firstly, that the concept was well known; secondly, that these words must have had semantic contents somewhat different from one another – why else would there be five separate words with unrelated etymologies? Apart from ǫrlög and forlög they are not particularly closely related etymologically.

The etymological explanations offered for ǫrlög (n. pl.) suggest that it means 'that which was laid down in ancient times' or 'primal law', a sort of 'ur-law' going back to the dawn of time (LP:667; AeW:683; C/V:767), giving an impression of something which constitutes a basic foundation for everything else. It can also mean 'end' (Früt II:911; ÅBM:1228) or refer to a person's 'exploits, experiences in life' (LP:667; C/V:767).

The meaning of forlög (n. pl.) is the life allotted to man by the powers of fate (Früt I:456) and with the etymological meaning 'fore-law' (C/V:164), a law laid down beforehand; its root meaning comes very close to that of ǫrlög.

359 Of necessity, I can only discuss a few examples. These words occur with such frequency in the corpus of Old Norse literature that a complete analysis of their usage would necessitate a shift of focus away from the nornir.
Both these words appear to indicate something akin to a set of given rules, a fundamental structure that cannot be altered; they may refer to a supernatural power or simply to the given conditions, the rules of the game or the power that sets the rules. It seems at times that these two words are used completely interchangeably.\(^{360}\) This makes it interesting that forlog does not occur in connection with nornir, whereas ørlog does, apparently pointing toward some level of semantic distinction between the two words, though both continue to be used in Christian contexts.

The term skop (n. pl.), plural of skap (n.), has several nuances of meaning from the 'state, condition' of something to 'state of mind, temper, mood' (C/V:537; AeW:483); it is further related to the verb skapa, 'to create, organise, put in order' (AeW:483; ÁBM:829). The word is ultimately cognate with English 'shape' and with Danish skæbne, 'fate.' It seems to indicate something done with a purpose and so skop appears to describe a supernatural power not completely random but purposefully giving shape to things and arranging them in some coherent way, although the coherence may not always be detectable from the human perspective. There may even be a hint of some degree of fickleness present through the connection to 'state of mind, mood', as if skop were an unpredictable or moody sort of power – a matter of the mind rather than of the physical dimension.

Skop can also be used to convey that something happens in a 'natural' way, as seems to be the case in Ynglingatal 9: ef Agna her Skjalfar rød at skopum bôttu, 'if Agni’s army has found Skjalf's deed natural' (Ynglingasaga 19, ÍF 26:38; cf. Strömßäck 1970:201-208). Furthermore, it is adapted to describe the rule of the Christian God, for example in Pórarinn stuttfeldr's 12\(^{th}\) century Stuttfeldardrápa 2: við skop goðs, 'by the rule of God' (Magnússona saga 3, ÍF 28:239). This also indicates that skop is not conceived of in an entirely negative way but can refer to events which are simply natural and occur the way they should.\(^{361}\) This aspect of skop may come close to a quasi-legal meaning.

Furthermore, skop is the word most commonly used to describe 'fate' as represented by the nornir. The combination of nornir/norn and skop, or forms of the verb skapa, occur at least five times in eddic and skaldic poetry, whereas the combination of nornir and ørlog occurs only twice, and forlog, miqtuð and avôna do

---

\(^{360}\) For example Vatnsdæla saga 10 (ÍF 8:29-30).

\(^{361}\) This recalls the term dskop in Hávamál 98, meaning 'something that goes against fate, an unnatural thing' (LP:448).
not seem to occur in connection with *nornir* at all (although *Krákumál* 24 employs *forlög* and *skop* apparently synonymously; see III.1.1.1.).

It is generally difficult to discover the exact nuances of semantic content between these three words, *ærlög*, *forlög* and *skop*. Fritzner (I:456; II:911; III:417) hardly distinguishes one from the other, though some of these translation difficulties relate to the limited vocabulary covering the concept in other languages; for example:

*ærlög*: 1) what has been decided from the beginning, *fate*; 2) *fate*, i.e. what has been experienced, exploits' (LP:667)

*forlög*: *fate* (LP:147)

*skop*: 'what has been (pre-) determined, *fate*’ (LP:517)

(My emphases)

The result is a sort of 'funnel-translation' in the sense that the wider spectrum present in the one language is translated into one monochrome meaning in the other language: all words translate into the same word. Any slight difference in meaning between the Old Norse words is lost in the translations due to the scarcity of words covering the concept in English and in modern Scandinavian languages. The fact that Danish uses only one word for fate: *skæbne*, Swedish uses only *öde*, Norwegian has *skjebne* with the more archaic *lagnad* in nynorsk, whilst English uses 'fate’ and 'destiny’, which appear to be rather tangled up in one another, makes it hard to translate and even to discover the nuances of meaning contained in the Old Norse vocabulary. English and the Scandinavian languages simply do not have enough equivalent terms.

For the sake of completeness, the words *miðtúð* and *auðna* will be discussed briefly, although they seem unconnected to the *nornir*. *Miðtúð* (m.) is translated in various different ways: 'what has been measured out, measure (of fate), fate, death’ (LP:410), referring, as it were, to the (passive) product rather than the (active) producer; or: 'leader, ruler who possesses the power, particularly has the power to determine the fate of people’ (Frz II:725-6; cf. ÁBM:628; C/V:433-4; AeW:390). The latter explanation gives the impression of a personified form: *miðtúð* is 'the measurer, the one who rules.' The word can also refer to 'death’ (AeW:390). *Miðtúð* is cognate with Old English *metod* which occurs with some frequency in *Beowulf* where it is understood to refer to God (Green 1998:386-387; C/V:434). It is related to 'metre' and indicates some supernatural power that allots a certain amount – of time, of good, of bad – to humans. Although this comes close to what is sometimes
said about the nornir (for example the Borgund inscription, see IV.1.3.), miþtuðr, as mentioned above, is never used in connection with them.

Finally auðna (f.) ‘fate’, with the additional sense of ‘happiness, fortune, good luck, blessing’ (LP:21; C/V:32; Frtz I:94; AeW:18), is probably related to auðr, ‘wealth, abundance’, which may explain the many positive associations of the noun listed in the dictionaries. However, the use of the related adjective auðinn, ‘fated’, is not always positive and may be used in the context of death or impending trouble or hardship: in Gísla saga 9, Gísli says to Auðr: at mæla verður einhverr skapanna málum, ok þát mun fram koma, sem auðit verðr (ÍF 6:34), ‘Fate must find someone to speak through. Whatever is meant to happen will happen’ (CSI II:10). Arnórjarlaskáld, in Hrynhenda Magnúsdrápa 12, supposedly c.1046, says: auðit vas þá flotnum dauða, ‘the men were destined to die’ (Magnúss saga ins göða 24; ÍF 28:39). Perhaps auðna, like the nornir themselves, has a double-sidedness of something definitely positive and something quite sinister, although no instances of concurrence of nornir and auðna are documented.

The last word to be discussed here is urðr, ‘fate’ (see also IV.1. and VI.1.1.). Some dictionaries give two versions (LP:589; AeW:635-6): a masculine form referring to ‘misfortune, death’, and a feminine form (also C/V:657) which means ‘fate’ or refers to a norm named Urðr. Initially, these two meanings would seem to emphasise that nornir are strongly associated with death and that the fate which nornir normally represent is also closely related to death. The word urðr is therefore often considered to have a strongly negative semantic content but it is probably a misunderstanding to think that it always consisted of entirely gloomy associations, as has been pointed out by Liberman (1994). Urðr has its origins in the verb verða:

The ‘positive’ meaning of verða/weordan, wyrd, etc. also comes to the surface in formations with the prefix ga-/ge-./gi-. ... The noun gewyrd meant ‘condition’ and ‘pleasure.’ ... Relations between Germanic words without a prefix and their counterparts with ga-/ge-./gi- are sometimes hard to define, but this prefix tended to emphasize the perfective force of the derivative, its belonging to the class of collective nouns, etc., rather than to produce entirely new meanings. Since both OHG gierwdan and OE geweordan refer to pleasurable emotions, this reference must be old, at least in West Germanic. In Icelandic, prefixes were lost, and it is not improbable that verða ‘bring good luck’ goes back to a cognate of gwairpam, just as some isolated meanings of verða (lose, forfeit’ and so forth) correspond to those of frawairpan and frawardjan. But fra- was endowed with destructive semantics, and frawairpan would have meant ‘perish,’ regardless of whether wairpan was neutral (‘happen’) or suggestive of success (‘come to a good turn’), while ga- (ge-./gi-) was too weak to cover the distance between ‘happen’ and ‘please, be pleased.’
If Liberman is right, then the notion of fate contained in the word urðr might not have been inherently gloomy, harsh and negative; things did not always turn out to be bad; sometimes they turned out to be good. Similarly, norrísir probably had a benign aspect (good fate), even if they came to be associated predominantly with their corresponding sinister side (evil fate), as seems to have been the case. We hear about grimmar urðr, líótar norrísir, aumlig norm but it is less easy to find instances of positive adjectives describing these beings.

There is little reason to doubt that urðr is etymologically related to the Latin vertere, ‘to turn’ (AeW:636; ABM:1090). The further suggestion that it therefore refers to fate as something wound, twisted or spun (AeW:636) is, however, a parallel which I reserve the right to be wary of assuming quite so readily (cf. ABM:1090). The parallels ‘winding’ and ‘turning’ are well founded but I have found no evidence that vertere, verða or for that matter wyrd were at any time used in the sense of ‘spinning’; this connection appears to be based entirely on etymology hypothetically combined with the idea of the motion of a turning spindle, not on actual linguistic evidence. Old Norse language never makes a direct connection between urðr and ‘spinning.’ Linking ‘turning’ with ‘spinning’ is problematic insofar as the two verbs are by no means interchangeable, either in English or in Old Norse. The etymology of ‘spinning’ is ‘drawing out in order to twist together’, focusing on the creation of a thread, not on the motion of the tool. The meaning of ‘revolving, turning around rapidly’ is a later development which now constitutes the dominant semantic content of ‘spinning’ (OED X:602-603), although the earlier meaning is still retained in certain contexts: something ‘spindly’ is slender and elongated, it is not turning around. The spindle certainly has to turn in order to draw out the thread but that was not the original association of the word; a spider spins by drawing out a thread, not by turning. I fully accept the ‘urðr-turning-creating’ complex (see IV.1.1.) but I remain uncertain about linking urðr directly with spinna. The connection between the two is metaphorical, not etymological.

---

362 A similar sort of relationship exists in English between the neutral verb ‘happen’ and the positive adjective ‘happy’; this may represent a development akin to that of neutral verða into negative urðr.

363 An interesting point is the etymological relationship between ‘spin’ and ‘span’. In English, a ‘span’ means the ‘distance between two objects’, that is, a length of distance in physical space, and Old Norse spann also refers specifically to the distance between the tip of the thumb and the middle finger on the stretched out hand (LP:531; Frtz III:505; ABM:945); it is probably related to a ‘span’ as in ‘a pair of animals driven together where the distance
These lexical considerations show that there are several nuances of meaning incorporated in the Old Norse notion of fate. It is difficult, as mentioned above, to get a clear idea of exactly where lines may be drawn between the separate words and their semantic content, and it is equally hard to see a clear distinction between heathen and Christian ways of thinking with regard to these words (a personified supernatural power of fate seems to have become converted into something like 'the will of God').\footnote{Further on law, see Sandvik and Sigúrðsson 2005; Miller 1990.} It does appear that some words were more acceptable to the church than others, but whether this was because they were considered somehow less heathen, less damaging, whether they were easier to manipulate and adapt, or whether they were simply so deeply ingrained that they were impossible to weed out is hard to tell. As far as nornir are concerned, the nouns skop and ørlog are the dominant ones for describing what they represent, though both words continued to be in use after the end of the heathen period and remain in use even today.

**VI.2. Lög and Ørlog**

The concept of law was very important in Old Norse society,\footnote{Winterbourne 2004 discusses this.} as is amply testified by the multitude of legal issues that occur with some frequency and are described in

\footnote{Winterbourne 2004 discusses this.}
detail in many Íslendingasögur. Also the surviving law codices serve as witnesses to a preoccupation with law in Old Norse tradition and it is clear that the early medieval Scandinavians had a keen interest in the concept of law and hence in the power of binding decisions. Due to this and to the close etymological relationship between log, forlog and orlog, it is relevant to consider what this relationship actually consists of. As mentioned, the following sections draw on much material that does not connect directly to the normir, but which is nonetheless relevant to an understanding of issues relating to speech and legal matters and to an understanding of how normir fit into the overall picture.

A close connection between the spoken word and law is not unexpected in an oral society and in Old Norse society this is clearly exemplified in the idea of the logsgumadhr, the 'law-speaker.' Until around 1100 there was no such thing as a written law or anything written for that matter, information was stored 'orally,' committed to memory and could be produced in spoken form when it was required so that legal assemblies, court cases, judgements and sentences were all conveyed in spoken formats (Foote and Wilson 1980:90-92).

VI.2.1. Secular and Religious Law

In Old Norse culture, law was not just a tool brought into action for defining and processing disputes but was inseparably intertwined with definitions of what constituted human society. In this way, it was more a way of life in the same sense as when we speak of customs, practices and traditions than a separate institution which could be taken up or left behind:

Law was part of life in Iceland and was perceived as such. Vár log ("our law") was our community as opposed to others (...). But log was not just undifferentiated custom either. Law was in a narrower sense the positive law, the formal legal process and the rules applied and enforced in the courts.

(Miller 1990:221)

---

366 One of the best examples is Njáls saga where most of the plot is closely related to complex court cases.

367 The earliest surviving Icelandic laws, Grágás, are found in the MSS Konungsbók and Stæðarhólsbók c.1300; the Norwegian MS of Gulabingslög is from the same period (Norges gamle Love 1:i). In Íslendingabók 10 (IF 1.1:23-24), we hear about laws being written down in 1117 in Iceland but all surviving MSS are of later dates.

368 This connection is clearly spelt out in some early medieval Scandinavian landscape laws, such as the Danish Jydske Lov from 1241, which opens with this line: Maeth logh skal land bygges [modern Danish: Med lov skal land bygges], 'Through law the country will be founded' (Petersen 1929:65); also in Njáls saga 70: med logum skal land vårt byggja, en med öldgum eyða (IF 12:172), 'Through law will our land be founded, but through its lacking destroyed' (my translations).
It seems that people regarded 'law' as the foundation of human society wherein the individual followed and protected the norms dictated by kinship and by the wider culture: "Norms of good kinship provided the basis for imposing legal obligation, which in turn buttressed the norms and so on in continual feedback of mutual influence" (Miller 1990:221). To be 'legal' or 'inside the law', then, was to be part of society, and to be 'outlawed' was to lose all protection from the wider society - almost as if losing one's humanity. Law was not a set of arbitrary rules and: "Saga characters seldom speak about law as law, but they do, in subtle ways, indicate the law's synonymy with legitimacy" (Miller 1990:230), and while there were laws as well as courts and legal experts, there was no separate institution to enforce the law; that responsibility lay with the individual person (see also VI.2.2.). The distinction between laws and norms in early medieval Scandinavia is a very fine one:

In those instances in which the law codified well-established patterns of behavior, adherence to the rule would tell us less about respect for the law than about the law's respect for customary behavior. ... But in those cases where the law tried to alter and restrict established patterns of behavior, and even in those cases where the law was lending its force to well-established behavioral patterns, it would seem that people thought sanction was more likely to induce compliance or prevent deviance than an abstract respect for laws as Law. (Miller 1990:229-230)

In short, law is a kind of shorthand for 'the way things should be' not unlike the term forn síðr, 'ancient ways, customs', which is as close as Old Norse comes to a description of 'religion'. Our modern distinction between secular and religious prescriptions is difficult to perceive in Old Norse because here, both are closely tied to notions of 'customary practice'. This is summed up in the figure of the godi who holds an office consisting of both secular and religious responsibilities, making him a chieftain and priest in one. Also rituals often include both secular and religious aspects. Meulengracht Sorensen points out that:

En mulig forklaring på godens oprindelige værdighed er den funktion som kultleder, som goderne efter al sandsynlighed har haft i det overvægende hedenske samfund før kristendommens indførelse. Det er givet, at selve ordet

369 Hákonar saga goda 14 (ÍF 26:167-168) portrays síðr in a heathen, Vatnsdæla saga 46 (ÍF 8:125) a Christian context. Raudvere explains: Begreppet síðr inkluderade både vad som antogs vara traditionella föreställningar och sättet på vilket saker skulle göras. Denna mängdygighet innebär att ordet användes i vitt skilda sammanhang såväl kognitivt och känslomässigt som juridisk och socialt, 'The concept of síðr included both what were perceived to be traditional notions as well as the way in which things ought to be done. This versatility means that the word could be employed in many different contexts, cognitively and emotionally as well as legally and socially' (2003:89).
godí er afledt af god (hedensk) gud', og i en beretning, der opgives at være et uddrag af den oprindelige Úlfjótslog... hedder det, at der på alteret i hvert hovedhov (hofuðhov) skulle ligge en ring, som goden skulle bære på sin arm på alle de lofting (logbing), som han skulle indlede. Forinden skulle ringen veedes i blodet fra en okse, som var blevet ofret ... Foreningen af religiøs og verdslig ledelse i førkristen tid har sandsynligvis givet goderne en særlig myndighed, men spørgsmålet er omstridt.

(Meulengracht Sørensen 1993:153)

'A possible explanation of the original dignity of the godí is the cult leader function which godar in all probability had in the predominantly heathen society prior to the introduction of Christianity. It is evident that the word godí is derived from god (heathen) god', and in a narrative which is said to be part of the original Úlfjótslog ... it is stated that there should be a ring on the altar of every central hof (hofuðhov) and that the godí should wear this ring on his arm at all the legal assemblies (logbing) which he would open. Prior to this, the ring must be stained with the blood of a sacrificed ox ... The coming together of religious and secular leadership in pre-Christian times probably gave the godí a special authority, but the question is disputed.'

(My translation)

Úlfjótslog tells us this:

"Pat var upphaf hinna heiðnu laga, at menn skyldu eigi hafa hofuðskip í haf, en ef þeir hefði, þá skylði þeir af taka hofuð, áðr þeir kæmi í landsýn, ok sigla eigi at landi með gapandi hofuðum eða ginandi trjónum, svát at landvættir fælsl við.

Baugr tvleyringr eða meiri skylði liggja í hverju hofuðhofi á stalla; þann baug skylði hvern godí hafa á hendi sér til logbinga allra, þeira er hann skylði sjálfr heymja, ok þjóða hann þar áðr í roðru naautskloðs þess, er hann blótaði þar sjálfr. Hvern sá maðr, er þar þurfði logskil af hendi at leyta at dómi, skylði áðr eða vinna at þeim baugi ok nefna sér vatta tvá eða fleiri.

(ÍF 1:313-315)

'It was fundamental to heathen law that men should not sail a ship with carved heads, and if they did then they should take the head down when they came in sight of land and not sail to land with gaping heads or threatening snouts, so that the landspirits were frightened.

A ring worth two aurar or more should be found at every central hof on the platform; this ring should be carried by every godí to all legal assemblies of which he was in charge, and beforehand he should redden it with the blood of a head of cattle when he sacrificed there himself. Every man who had legal matters to resolve at the court should first take the oath on that ring and name two witnesses or more.'

(My translation)

370 Quoted here from Landnámarbók 268 in Hauksbók. Regarding the authenticity of this law, see Jón Hnèfill Aðalsteinsson (1999:34-37).
I quote both parts of it here because, together, they demonstrate the inseparability of religion from everyday life, the latter part in particular the blending of religion with law.

With these ideas about law in mind, it becomes significant that the gods are said to hold their court in the place that, simultaneously, the nomir are said to originate from in Gylfaginning 15:

Priðja rót asksins stendr á himni, ok undir þeiri rót er brunnr sá er mjók er heilagr er heitir Urðar brunnr. Þar eigu guðin dómstað sinn.

(Faulkes 1982:17)

'The third root of the ash extends to heaven, and beneath that root is a well which is very holy, called Weird’s well. There the gods have their court.'

(Faulkes 1987:17)

The idea of merging the well of the nomir with a divine court seems to be echoed in Hávamál 111 (quoted in IV.2.2.). One gets the impression that the divine world is not only conceived of as something higher than the human world but is also very like it – as human society has central places which represent the higher powers of the gods and the law simultaneously, so the gods have an assembly place that is connected to the well of fate, a place that seems to be otherworldly even in the otherworld.

In human society, a pingstaðr or ‘court place’ was an area marked off as special371 and law involved gods and humans alike:

The divine powers were also involved with the conduct of the public assemblies for discussion, legislation and justice. An assembly was hallowed in some way at the outset, presumably by sacrifice and invocation, and its sanctity prevailed over the defined area within which it took place and for the length of time it lasted.372

(Foote and Wilson 1980:402)

Thus, temporal and divine law are close to being one and the same thing. In our sources, the very highest of powers is represented by something greater than the

---

371 A pingstaðr is described in Eglis saga 56: En þar er dómfrinn var settir, var vóllir skéttir ok settar níðr heslistengr í vóllinn í hring, en fógr um útan snæri umhverfis; væru þat kóluð vёðbund; en fyrir innan í hringnum sátu dómendr, tölf ór Firdafylik ok tölf ór Sygnafylik, tölf ór Hǫrdafylik; þær þrennar túlfir manna skyldu þar dæma um mál manna (IF 2:154), ‘The court was held on a flat plain, marked out by hazel poles with a rope around them. This was known as staking out a sanctuary. Inside the circle sat the court, twelve men from the Fjordane province, twelve from Sognefjord province and twelve from Hordaland province. These three dozen men were to rule on all the cases’ (CSI I:105)

372 This recalls the practice of swearing on the Bible in connection even with modern day court cases.
gods – law (lög) and fate (örlög); the gods are subject to the rulings of fate as humans are subject to the rulings of the gods.

VI.2.2. Law and the Female

An interesting aspect of this situation is that örlög is represented by feminine beings – nornir – while in human society, women did not interact directly with lög (see III.1.1.1.).

They had legal rights but no legal power; a woman always needed a man who could speak for her if she became involved in any legal affairs. Yet it seems that the definitely feminine nornir represent a notion of a given (super)-natural law.

One important difference between the semantically overlapping lög and örlög seems to be that the human lög can be violated and disregarded, whereas it is utterly impossible to go against the supernaturally given örlög. Fate rears its legal head in phrases such as kvíðr norna (Hamðismál 30), norna dóm (Fáfnismál 11) and also skop norna (Hallfreðr) (see III.1.1.1. and III.1.1.2.). There is a similar sense in Helgakviða Hundingsbana II 26:

Erat þér at ðilò, Things are not, strange creature, 
avlitr, geft as you would have them 
- þó kveð ek nokkvi - though I say the nornir 
nornir valda -: decided some of it -:
fello í morgon they fell this morning 
at Frekasteinn at Frekasteinn 
Bragi ok Hōgni Bragi and Hōgni 
- varð ek bani þeira. - I was their slayer.

Here, Helgi says to Sigrún that he has killed Bragi and Hōgni, her brother and father, but he also says that the nornir decided his actions, as though it were not in his power to do otherwise. The conflict is deeply emotional on the part of both Sigrún and Helgi; the complex divided loyalties to their kin and to their love for each other bring them into a situation where all potential ways out will bring them tragedy of

373 Certainly not during the Old Norse period (c.800-1100), but from earlier periods both Strabo (c.64 BC-23 AD) in Geography 7:II:3 and Tacitus (c.56-117 AD) in Histories 4:61 and 4:65 mention Germanic women who hold very powerful positions in society.

374 The disir, apart from their affinities with violent death, seem to be connected to human legal affairs through the disaping which we hear of in the early 14th century Swedish Upplandslagen, and the combination of battle with law further seems applicable to nornir. Some scholars have suggested that warfare had legal connections of sorts, indicated by the attachment of the god Tyr to both battle and the ping (de Vries 1957:18-25; Dumézil 1988:126-127). Cf. also the concept of holmgagullög, 'combat law' described in Egils saga 64 (ÍF 2:205) and in Kormáks saga 10 (ÍF 8:236-239). See further Bø 1969.
one sort or another.\footnote{375} This is what Helgi feels that the \emph{nornir} carry responsibility for. The phrase looks similar to the one in \textit{Hamðismál} 28 where Hamðir regrets killing Erpr, saying: \textit{hvøttumk at diðir, 'the diðir made me do it.'} In both situations, feminine supernatural beings are lurking behind some of the most dreadful aspects of human interaction, situations in which men feel that they are not acting according to their own humanity but nonetheless feel that they must do what they do – as though they were obeying a law.

One gets the impression that whereas this world is ruled by the male, the otherworld turns everything on its head so that it is ruled by the female.\footnote{376}

\textbf{VI.2.3. Laying down the Law}

The last four lines of \textit{Völuspá} 20 (see IV.1.1.) say this about \emph{nornir}:

\begin{quote}
\begin{tabular}{ll}
\textit{þær lög lögðo,} & They laid down laws, \\
\textit{þær lif kuro} & they chose life \\
alda börnum, & for the children of men, \\
\textit{öröl seggia.} & the fate of men.
\end{tabular}
\end{quote}

Only the first two lines use any verbs: \emph{légia} and \emph{kiòsa}, attached to, respectively, the nouns \emph{lög} and \emph{liif}. We might therefore read the last two lines either: \textit{þær lögðo öröl seggia, 'they laid down the fate of men'} or: \textit{þær kuro öröl seggia, 'they chose the fate of men.'}\footnote{377} ‘To choose the fate of men’ seems to indicate that a range of hypothetical choices are available, rather like the notion of an unshaped mass of potential; before a beginning is made there is an endless number of things that it might turn into. But a choice has to be made – which one will it be? This seems the more logical option as reference back to the immediately preceding verb is more likely than anything else.

‘To lay down the fate of men’ has an almost physical feel to it, perhaps recalling \emph{skop} (see VI.1.2.); there it is, being shaped and laid down in front of you like an outline emerging as you go along and you have no way of diverging from it. The notion of something receiving shape and becoming usable is present in both readings, both carry the gloss of decision-making and creation, albeit in slightly different ways.

\footnem{375} This is typical saga material: conflict arises due to opposing loyalties on the part of an individual; \textit{Islendingasögur} often focus exactly on how the individual reacts in such situations. The reason for a conflict frequently fades into the background and a person is measured according to how they behave when put on the spot (see Meulengracht Sørensen 1993).

\footnem{376} I owe this observation to Terry Gunnell; see also Quinn 2006.

\footnem{377} For the variant wording \textit{öröl at segia}, see IV.1.4.
The etymology of the noun *Igg* suggests 'layers' and 'laying down'; the *Igg* is essentially 'that which has been laid down, decided, determined,' like a set of rules that one cannot break away from. *Leggia* is used in many different contexts, some of which are relevant here. In the last lines of *Skírnismál* 13, *Skírnir* says:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>eino dægri</th>
<th>on one day</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mér var aldr um skapaðr</td>
<td>all my life was shaped</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ok allt lif um lagit</td>
<td>and my whole life laid down</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The same phrase turns up in *Lokasenna* 48:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>þegi þú, Heimdallr</th>
<th>Be quiet, Heimdallr,</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>þær var í árdaga</td>
<td>for you at the dawn of time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>it lióta lif um lagit</td>
<td>a detestable life was laid down</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here, whole lives are laid down and fixed, seemingly at one specific time, most likely the time of a person's birth. This gives the impression that a person's fate has been settled even before they properly begin living their lives, and it makes clear that fate is really a supratemporal concept (see note 137). A whole life has been laid down, and time is only the force that actualises the events that take place during that life. The phrase would appear to be formulaic.

Also the choice of words in stanza 4 of *Sigvatr Póðarson's* *drápa* about King Óláfr, in *Ólafs saga Helga* 58, supposedly c.1025, is interesting:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Loptbyggvir, mátt leggia</th>
<th>You, sea-king [Óláfr],</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>landsrétt, þanns skal standask,</td>
<td>can lay down the law of the land,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unnar, allra manna,</td>
<td>one that shall stand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eykja, liós í miðli.</td>
<td>amongst all people.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(IF 27:73-4)

In these stanzas, lives and laws are laid down and the expressions recall the *Iggsgumadhr* who speaks the law, thereby actualising it or even laying it down. This seems to emphasise the shaping powers of words; once they have been spoken they are a reality and cannot be changed. However we envisage the making of fate, whether it be laid down, allotted or pronounced, or a combination of all of these, once it is done there is no going back. The same goes for legal speeches as described in the sagas, they must be word perfect (at least in theory, although in practice one could get away with some mistakes), because once something has been

---

378 It is interesting to consider the phrase 'fate unfolds' in relation to the notion of 'law' as consisting of layers.
said one cannot stop to do a 'take 2' if a mistake has been made. What is said is what stands, even if one intended to say something else.379

In terms of human society, nornir are not connected to the ping,380 their law is laid down elsewhere, perhaps only in some conceptual sphere; the connection between log and orlog is not direct. But on the divine level, nornir are lurking about in the well under the tree beneath which the gods have their assembly. While the gods, presumably, talk and discuss matters, as is done at the ping, underneath their feet the nornir provide the 'ur-law', the warp, the basis for it all. Whilst gods (and humans) concern themselves with log, nornir concern themselves with the deeper levels, with orlog, establishing the very foundation for human life. As log forms the basis of organised human society, so orlog forms the basis of human life in the first place, recalling Völsespá 17 where the first humans, Askr and Embla, are orloglausas 'without orlog' and therefore, it seems, not quite proper humans yet.

It is important to note that there does not seem to be any direct linkage between nornir and the law as this operated in human society. Apart from the (probably unacceptable) peculiarity of having feminine figures representing the law in the male-dominated Old Norse society, it appears that the 'law' which the nornir deal with is simply of such a nature that it does not belong in the context of the ping at all. It is an otherworldly law; like the 'laws' of nature and of time it cannot be disputed, there is nothing to argue or negotiate about, no sides to take or minds to make up – it operates on the basic level of life and death, issues that are not up for discussion. The 'law' or, rather, quasi-law of the nornir is on the one hand very personal and concerns the individual on a deep and close level, whilst on the other hand it is beyond reach and completely unfathomable.

The key to the legal metaphor characterizing nornir may be the same as was found to be the case for the fate-as-textile metaphor, namely that 'law' (court cases and legal disputes) is not what nornir actually do, but what they do is similar to laying down 'laws'; choice and decision are core concepts. This might be the reason why the metaphor is so common: the decisions of the nornir have the same sort of effect on human lives as does the law, only on a much more profound and

379 Bandamanna saga 5-6 (IF 7:316-325); Víga-Glúms saga 9 (IF 9:33-34), both in Möðruvallabók c.1330-1370; cf. Miller (1990:250-256).
380 However, disir are connected to the ping in East Norse tradition; the 14th century Swedish Upplandslagen refers to disæbínx fríbaer, 'truce of the disaping' and disæbínx dagh, 'day of the disaping' which seems to have fallen some time in the early spring and was connected to a market (Upplandslagen 1916:169). This disaping appears to have been a legal meeting; exactly why it was dedicated to the disir is not clear (cf. Ynglingasaga 29, IF 26:57-58).
indisputable level. That is the 'or' in the ørlög - the layers of which this 'ur-law' consists are found on deeper levels and the correspondence is metaphorical rather than actual.

VI.3. Law-speaking and Málrúnar

Íslendingasögur provide numerous examples of fighting and violence, not only leading up to but also resulting from legal court cases; sometimes people attempt to end a feud via settlement in court, but often attempted settlements result in new feuds. When people in the sagas prepare for court cases, the outcome often appears to depend on which side has the more, or the more powerful, supporters rather than on any objective notion of impartial justice. The impression of many court cases described in Íslendingasögur is more of a kind of choreographed battle than of 'the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth'. Muffled by the gríðr 'peacefulness, sacredness' (Frtz I:642-644) of the þing, such a court case is fought with words rather than with weapons, although the dividing line between words and weapons is blurred at times, as both can be used with similar intent: to cause injury. A passage from the Vígsþöd section (ch.114) of the early Icelandic law collection Grágás states that:

Þau eru orð þrjú, ef svo mjög versna málsendar manna, er skóggang varða öll, ef maður kallar mann ragan eða stroðinn eða sorðinn, og skal svo sækja sem önnur fullréttsorð, enda á maður vígt í gegn þeim orðum þrimur. (Grágás 1992:273)

'There are three expressions, if words between men ever get so bad, for which the penalty is full outlawry: if a man calls another man womanish or says that he has been buggered or fucked. And they are to be prosecuted like other words requiring full personal compensation, and in retaliation for those three words a man also has the right to kill.' (Grágás II 2000:354)

Meulengracht Sørensen further points out that: "The most serious verbal offences are thus equated with killing, rape and adultery, and are regarded as more flagrant

---

381 For example Íslendinga saga 235 [85, 90] (Sturlunga saga I:338) where Sturla openly declares: þess mun eg njóta nú að eg hefi vald meira en þér, 'I will make full use of the fact that I have greater forces than you' (Miller 1990:196); Vatnsdæla saga 35 (RF 8:94) where a fight is averted when Finnbogi realizes the size of Þorsteinn's force.

382 Vígsþöd is the only section of Grágás known with certainty to have been written down at Breiðabólstaðr during the winter 1117-1118 when Icelandic laws were first taken down in writing, indicating a high age on the part of this law.
than, for instance, bodily injury” (1983:17). These seem to be cases of very strong powers attached to spoken words. Taylor, in his discussion of the use of language in *Njáls saga*, also states that: “Edge of sword and sharp words together are remedies of slander. Poetic redress is the discourse of heroes” (1986:293), as is amply evident in the Norse flyting tradition. The idea that certain words are of a violent and injuring disposition and that speaking them corresponds to using weapons clearly reveals the powers of certain forms of speech. Speaking certain words can be equated with weapon fighting; the use of words as well as weapons can have legal consequences, at times far-reaching ones.

Something like this is seen in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgöða* 10 where a legal case is presented against Hrafnkell, but because he cannot get within hearing distance of what is being said at the ping he is unable to mount a defence for himself. The importance of the words spoken at that time and in that place is not to be underestimated; if he does not contest the case, he loses it (Wax 1969:109), and how can he contest it if he does not know what was said?

In *Hamðismál* 30 and in *Fjölsvinnsmál* 47 we hear of words spoken by normir: kveld lifir maðr ekki eptir kvíð norma, ‘no man lives out the evening after the normir give their verdict’ and: *Úrðar orð* viðr engi maðr, ‘the words of Úrðr no man can overcome’, respectively. In both cases the words have gone unheard by those whom they concerned but they cannot be circumvented nor invalidated and their influence is sorely felt through what they have effected.

These stories, *Hrafnkels saga*, *Hamðismál* and *Fjölsvinnsmái*, are rather different in type and it is not the historical reality of the events which is relevant here, but the conceptual parallels that can be drawn between the situations: that speaking out loud makes a thought or an intention definite, turning it into unchangeable reality, and also that one can only act on words which one actually hears. Normally, one is perfectly able to hear what is being said at the ping and when this is not possible for Hrafnkell, it is because other people are deliberately keeping him away. Concerning the supernatural orlog, however, the norm is that human ears do not hear what is said. People only discover the effects of the *úrðar orð* in due course. It may be that legal speech constitutes a special register not unlike a spá, a prophecy, making apparent the otherwise hidden truth in concrete words. The spá thereby determines

---

383 One might expect such injurious words to have counterparts in healing ones (as curses have counterparts in blessings), but the law, like the normir, is negatively slanted in specifying negative words only, not positive ones.

384 See Harris 1979; Bax and Padmos 1983; Meulengracht Sørensen (1983:38).
the future or part of the future of the person for whom it is spoken, just like a judgment does when it has been passed and a sentence when it has been pronounced. One might say that there is a conceptual correspondence between spá and log, but the two nevertheless remain separate concepts, at least on the human level.

The idea of legal speech as a special register seems evident in Sigrdríðumál 12:

| Malrunar skaltu kunna, | Speech-runes you must know, |
| ef þú vilt, at manngi þér | if you want no one to repay |
| heiptom gialdi harm. | your sorrow with enmity. |
| þær um vindr, | Wind them about, |
| þær um vefr, | twist them about, |
| þær um setr allar saman, | put them all together |
| á því þingi, | at that assembly |
| er þlöðir skolo | where people must go |
| í fulla dóma fara. | to fully constituted courts. |

In this stanza, the malrunar mentioned could be understood as 'speech-runes' or 'court-runes', as mal may refer to either speech or a court of law and, whatever way we read it, the stanza involves both speech and courts anyway. What is made clear is the importance of the spoken word in a legal context and the importance of paying close attention to exactly what one is saying. It is also understood that there may, in fact, be magic involved in the form of runes. The word mal indicates ability to speak, eloquence, proper use of language as well as language as such (Frzt II:621-626), although it does not appear to cover the prophetic nature of a spá. But it carries connotations of proper use of the law and can refer to a legal case or agreement, for example in the word pingmál, referring to a case treated at the ping (Frzt III:1022). In this way, the malrunar may have several layers of meaning to them, it may even be intentional that the word, if not the whole stanza, should be read on more than one level.

The way in which Sigrdrífa describes the use of these malrunar is noteworthy: þær um vindr, þær um vefr, þær um setr allar saman, 'wind them around, twist them around, set them all together'. This is interesting advice on how to use words or how to put a court case together, which in Old Norse society would have had to result in an oral presentation of that case so that speech is involved regardless of whether we read mal as 'speech' or 'court.'

---

385 This description of malrunar even recalls the hardsnúin fræði of magical connotations encountered in Laxdæla saga 35 (see note 85) – if one imagines putting words together using verbs such as vindr and vefr, then it would no longer be a surprise that the result might be referred to as hardsnúin fræði or perhaps, conjecturally, as snúin fræði. The English
That Sigurdrumál 12 refers to eloquence and the use of (potentially legal) speech seems clear enough; what is less evident is whether the advice given is simply that one should put a case together in a verbally skilful and convincing manner or whether it is actually an invitation to conceal the truth in circumlocution. Whichever it is, both versions serve to emphasise the powers of the spoken word and the sagas and, not least, skaldic poetry provide instances of both.

Furthermore, it is interesting that Sigurðr, the male hero of the poem, receives this advice from a female character, Sigurdrífa, because in the ordinary human world women did not participate in legal matters or public speaking at the assemblies, except by proxy (see VI.2.2.) – even at the divine assemblies of the gods, goddesses do not seem to have their own voice. Although Sigurdrífa’s situation is similar (she speaks only to Sigurðr, not to a public gathering) it is still an odd situation, but it may simply indicate that she belongs to the otherworld or is at least more than human. Shifting the focus from her role as a woman to her role as an otherworldly woman effects drastic changes with regard to what she should or should not do and Sigurðr’s encounter with her clearly constitutes some awakening of supernatural powers. These powers here take the form of speech and they are set in some sort of legal context.

VI.4. Völur and Nornir

The correspondences between völur and nornir have been briefly mentioned in chapters III and IV. The question of who is who amongst völur and nornir deserves some attention and it is the aim of the following two sections to explore this relationship in some detail. The fact that völur occur in prose sources with much higher frequency than nornir do makes it necessary to involve saga material on a greater scale than has hitherto been the case. Even so, a clear-cut division between these two groups of beings is not easy to make but one important distinction

phrase ‘spinning a yarn’ and German er spinnt, ‘he talks nonsense’ also come to mind, as does the Danish noun opspind, which has equivalents in the other Scandinavian languages, referring to stories that are ‘made up’ or ‘fabricated’ – textile analogies seemingly abundantly at hand. Also the word ‘imply’ is interesting because it uses the notion of plying threads, but in a linguistic sense: That one can ply different meanings into one’s words and sentences, which brings us back to the relationship between text and textile, speech and fabric, the notion of stringing words together (see V.5.).

386 For example Gísla saga 18 (IF 6:58-59), where Gísl speaks a verse which, when correctly interpreted, reveals that he killed Þorgrimr.
appears to be that vglur are somehow or other communicative and accessible whereas nornir are neither.

VI.4.1. The Mysterious Staff-Carriers

The word vglva supposedly relates closely to the noun vglr (m.), 'staff', and means a 'female staff-carrier' (AeW:674 and 673; Price 2002:112; Hermann Pálsson 1996:15), hinting at some ritual item that such a woman carries with her.387 Staffs are often symbols indicating high status in society (Steinsland 1991:163-168), and some very wealthy female graves containing staffs have been found; it is thought by some that these women may have been vglur.388 Nornir do not seem to be connected to staffs in any of our sources nor, indeed, to be involved in rituals, and this looks like a significant difference between them and vglur. The staff has been likened to spindles and distaffs where people have seen a connection between fate and textile (Heide 2006:250-253).389 However, the term vglva may also bear some relation to the Indo-European root uel- which has eight different meanings (Pokorny 1959:1140), amongst them 'seeing' (Old Irish fili, 'poet, seer') and 'tearing, wounding, bleeding' (Old Norse valr, 'the slain', Old Irish fuil, 'blood'). The name of the Germanic prophetess Veleda in Tacitus' Histories 4,61; 4,65 and 5,22 (1997:213-214, 216 and 246) supposedly links back to uel- 'seeing'.

The word nornir turns up primarily in battle poetry, heroic legends and mythological settings, whereas the word vglur occurs predominantly in fornaldarsögur, Íslendingasögur and mythological poems and it seems that vglur are mainly conceived of as human women carrying out certain rituals; nornir are never human (this only occurs in relatively late sources such as fornaldarsögur). Nornir

387 From this, Pokorny (1959:1140) derives the name Walburg, a Germanic seeress of the Semnoni mentioned in a 2nd century Classical source (Simek 1993:370-371). The name of another seeress, Ganna (Simek 1993:99), is usually interpreted as connected to Old Norse gandr, 'magical staff', as is Gambara mentioned in History of the Langobards I:VIII. Gambara is supposed to be *gand-bera, 'staff-bearer' (Simek 1993:98-99); cf. note 93.

388 Cf. Price 2002. There are varying interpretations of such graves; Price regards Birka no.660, dated to c.900, as the grave of a vglva (Andrén and Carelli 2006:118-119), whereas Staecker favours an interpretation emphasising a cross also found in the grave, taking the woman to be Christian, the staff a status symbol and the grave a traditional heathen burial (Andrén and Carelli 2006:204-205 [319]).

389 Enright 1990 sees the staff as a weaver's beam, arguing primarily from the Irish Táin Bó Cuailnge and from bracteates depicting staff-carrying figures; his arguments, however, seem highly selective. I agree that the textile metaphor carries some weight, but the bracteates appear rather contestable evidence for this.
rarely appear in person\textsuperscript{390} but it is not unusual for \textit{vglur} to do so, and it seems fair to say that \textit{nornir} are generally conceived of as distant, intangible beings who go about their tasks somewhere beyond human reach whilst \textit{vglur}, where these are described as physically present in human society, represent a more comprehensible version of similar otherworldly knowledge. \textit{Vglur} nevertheless always retain a sense of something otherworldly about them. In this way, \textit{vglur} and \textit{nornir} might actually represent rather similar notions, perhaps the very same notion, only in different formats or on different levels. Particularly in rather late sources, such as \textit{Norna-Gests pattr}, the words tend to be used with apparently interchangeable meanings but, although this makes it less than easy to draw any exact dividing line between the two groups of beings, they should probably be regarded as similar rather than identical.

\textit{Vglur} fulfil similar roles on the divine and human levels of perception (Steinsland 2005:258); they are consulted by humans in the sagas and they are also consulted by the gods – or at least by Ūōinn – in some mythological poems, notably \textit{Baldrs draumar} and \textit{Vgluspá}. In Islendingasögur they are typically portrayed as human women with special abilities so that they do not constitute a wholly supernatural entity; the \textit{völva}, however, is always described as an outsider of some kind, not one of the group of people for whom she prophesies, which lends her strong connotations of otherness (cf. McKinnell 2005:95-100).\textsuperscript{391} It is of interest that \textit{vglur} do not turn up in contemporary sagas at all, as though they have no place in a Christian society. McKinnell says: “In Icelandic prose texts, \textit{vglur} seem to be a feature of the legendary or mythic past, not a social phenomenon in the present” (McKinnell 2005:99), and further: “This impression of lack of familiarity is reinforced by several fornaldarsögur which begin stories about \textit{vglur} by explaining what a \textit{völva} was” (McKinnell 2005:98). Moreover, there is a high degree of agreement between different accounts of prophesying \textit{vglur}, perhaps indicating that there was some sort of a standard proto-story of ‘the prophesying \textit{völva}’, and it seems reasonable to assume that \textit{vglur} were not as frequent in reality as the accounts would have us believe.

\textsuperscript{390} They do in Helgakviða Hundingsbana I, \textit{Vgluspá} and Gyfaginning.

\textsuperscript{391} She can be called a Finn or Saami woman, for example Vatnsdæla saga 10 (cf. Laxdæla saga 35 where it is specified that Kotkell and his family are not local but incomers from the Hebrides). The Norse \textit{seidr}-rituals carried out by \textit{vglur} seem to correspond closely to magical rituals among the Saami (Strömbäck 1935:121-124; Heide 2006; Price 2002:233-278; DuBois 1999:121-138).
Probably the best-known description of a *vǫlva* is found in *Eiriks saga rauða* 4:392

Sú kona var þar í byggð; er Porbjǫrg hét; hon var spákona ok var kölluð lítill-völva. Hon hafði átt sér niður systr, ok váru allar spákonur, en hon ein var þá á lífi. Pat var háttir Porbjargar um vetrum, at hon för at velslum, ok buðu þeir menn henni mest heim, er forvitrni var á at vita forlog sin eða árferð ... En er hon kom inn, þóttillum mönnum skylt at velja henni saemiligr kveðjur. Hon tók því sem henni váru menn geðjaðir til. Tók Pórkell bónið í hond henni ok leiddi hana til þess sætis, sem henni var búit. Pórkell bað hana þá renna þar augum yfir hjú ok hjörð, ok svá hyðyli. Hon var fámalug um allt. ... Slíðan gengu menn at vísendakonunni, ok frétti þá hvern þess, er mest forvitrni var á at víta. Hon var ok góð af frásögnum; gekk þat ok lítt í tauma, er hon sagði.

(IF 4:206-209)

'In the district there lived a woman named Thorbjorg, a seeress who was called the 'Little Prophetess'. She was one of ten sisters, all of whom had the gift of prophecy, and was the only one of them still alive. It was Thorbjorg's custom to spend the winter visiting, one after another, farms to which she had been invited, mostly by people curious to learn of their own future or what was in store for the coming year. ... When she entered, everyone was supposed to offer her respectful greetings, and she responded according to how the person appealed to her. Farmer Thorkell took the wise woman by the hand and led her to the seat which had been prepared for her. He then asked her to survey his flocks, servants and buildings. She had little to say about all of it. ... After that people approached the wise woman to learn what each of them was curious to know. She made them good answer, and little that she predicted did not occur.'

(CSI 1:5-7)

In this account, which, it must be kept in mind, is quite late, the *völva* is clearly not one of the community but a visitor.393 The fact that she is both a stranger and someone to whom the community turns in order to know more about themselves highlights that we are dealing with a figure who is both very powerful and important but at the same time extremely dangerous. What she represents is an otherworldly kind of knowledge that must be treated with respect and, as a consequence, so must she.

There are clear overlaps between the figures of *völur* and *nornir*. Both are associated with special knowledge concerning the past as well as the future, and both seem to possess the ability not only to look into the future but apparently also to determine its course. One significant difference seems to be that whereas *völur* are mostly invited, asked or in some other way made to give their predictions, *nornir*...

---

392 AM 557 4º c.1420-1450.
393 The distance between her and the community might even be further enhanced by setting the scene in faraway Greenland, which must have been an unfamiliar place to most people, not unlike Lappland.
are not consulted but make their pronouncements uninvited.\textsuperscript{394} In Håvamál 111, Óðinn comes to Urðarbrunnr but he states clearly that he remained silent and the scene does not take the question-and-answer format that is common with prophesying völur. The stanza just says that he listened to what was said. Völur appear at times very reluctant to speak about the events which they are able to see, although this description does not hold for all situations; the scene in Vatnsdæla saga 10 shows us not a reluctant speaker, the völva, but a reluctant listener, Ingimundr (see VI.5.2.). There is little that indicates reluctance to make pronouncements on the part of nornir, but they do seem also to make these on another level or at least without people hearing them. Furthermore, it is typical of nornir (and dísir) to act in groups, as collective wholes (though singular ones are not unheard of: Reginsmál 2; Kveldúlf; Kormákr), whereas völur almost always turn up in the singular form. There is usually only one völva at work at any given time, although she needs helpers to perform her rituals (de Vries 1956:330).

\textbf{VI.4.2. Völuspá and Urðar orð}

Völur are closely connected to prophecy in Old Norse literature and de Vries has suggested that, when making a prophecy, putting it into words and speaking it out loud was of great significance:

\begin{quote}
Die spá gab also nicht nur an, wie sich die Zukunft voraussichtlich gestalten würde, sondern sie bestimmte auch, wie sie werden sollte. Damit war also die spá gleichsam ein Zauber, der zur Durchführung gelangen mußte.
\end{quote}

(de Vries 1956:323)

\begin{quote}
‘The spá then, did not just give an impression of how the future might turn out, but it determined how it would be. In this way the spá was also a kind of magic which must lead to its own completion.’
\end{quote}

(My translation)

The notion expressed here is that as a prophecy is spoken, the future of which it tells becomes unavoidable while the words are being said, similar to what was noted above. As though the words describing it do not point towards a mere optional future but in fact bind it to that one specific future path which they describe. Several scholars have noted this, amongst them Lassen:

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[394] In Saxo’s account of Fridleuus (Gesta Danorum Book 6; see IV.1.3.), it remains unclear whether the ‘Parcae’ should be regarded as völur, nornir, dísir or some amalgamated version; of significance is the temple and the fact that Fridleuus gives something in return for the prophecy made to his son.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}

199
Man møder flere steder i den norrøne litteratur en tro på, at en udsagt spådom er uafvendelig. Selve udtalen af spådommen synes at have en besværgende karakter: Man tror tilsyneladende, at man ved at forhindre vælven i at udtale sig om ens skæbne kan undslippe den. På den måde befinder vælven sig i en position, hvor tilhørerne tror, at hendes ord besværer fremtiden. Hun råder med andre ord over deres skæbne. Således møder man flere steder unge mænd, der på det kraftigste forsøger at forhindre en vælve i at spå, selvom deres anstrengelser viser sig at være forgæves. (Lassen 2003:29)

‘At several points in Old Norse literature we encounter a belief in the inevitability of a spoken prophecy. Speaking the prophecy out loud seems to have had a spell-casting quality: people seem to believe that by preventing the $v\rl/a$ from speaking they can avoid their fate. In this way the $v\rl/a$ is in a position where the listeners believe that her words determine the future. In other words she commands their destiny. Thus we encounter several young men who try very hard to prevent a $v\rl/a$ from prophesying, although their attempts are in vain.’

(My translation)

Vésteinn Ólason, too, mentions this:

it is as if men fear that dreams will come true through the very act of voicing an interpretation of them,395 or that spoken prophecy can help to bring about the event prophesied. (Vésteinn Ólason 1998:120)

Vatnsdæla saga 10396 provides one such example. Here, an invited $v\rl/a$ is prophesying for all who approach her, but Ingimundr does not ask her about his own future:

Finnan var sett hátt ok búit um hana vegliga; þangat gengu menn til fréttta, hverr or sinu rúmi, ok spóruð or ðrolgum sinum. Hon spáði hverjum eptí því sem gekk, en þat var nökktur m visceral, hværi hverjum líkái. Þeir fóstbraeðr sáttu í rúmum sinum ok gengu eigi til fréttta; þeir logðu ok engan hug á spár hennar. Þelvan meilti: “Hví spýrja þeir inir ungu menn eigi at forlögum sínum, því at mér þykkr þeir merkiligastir menn af þeim, sem hér eru saman komnir?” Ingimundr svarar: “Mér er eigi annara at vita mín forlög fyrð en fram koma, ok ætla ek mitt ráð eigi komit undir þínun tunguróttum.” Hon svarar: “Ek mun þó segja þér ófregit.”397

(IF 8:29)

‘The Lapp woman, splendidly attired, sat on a high seat. Men left their benches and went forward to ask about their destinies. For each of them she predicted that which eventually came to pass, but each of them took the news in different ways. The foster-brothers sat in their places and did not go up to enquire about the future; they placed no trust in her predictions. The

395 Cf. Guðrún’s interpretation of Atli’s dreams in Guðrúnarkviða II 38-43 (see III.1.1.2.).
396 AM 559 4° c.1686 (copy of the lost Vatnhyrma).
397 In this text, forlög and forlög appear to be entirely synonymous with one another.
seeress said, "Why do those young men not ask about their futures, because they seem to me to be the most outstanding of the men assembled here?" Ingimund answered, "It is not important to me to know my future life before it happens, and I do not think that my future lies at the root of your tongue." She answered, "I will nevertheless tell you without being asked."

(CSI IV:14)

What the woman then says turns out also to be what actually happens to Ingimundr. Almost as if, by saying it out loud, she has made it impossible for anything else to happen to him. The idea of such binding powers of spoken prophecies gives the *völva* not only power over but possibly also responsibility for the predictions she makes; one could certainly imagine that if people held such beliefs about her pronouncements, she might want to choose her words carefully. If people thought that their own lives were at stake and dependent on what the *völva* said, the situation could become difficult to handle, especially if what she had to say was not entirely positive.\(^\text{398}\) "When *völur* are consulted in mythological and legendary sources, it is assumed that they are truthfully predicting an inevitable future" (McKinnell 2005:98). There is an example of this in the legendary *Hrólf's saga kraka* 3 from late medieval times\(^\text{399}\) when Fróði invites the *völva* Heiðr to perform *seiðr* because he wants to discover where the sons of Hálfdan are hiding so that he can kill them. The *völva* begins to reveal what she is seeing and where the boys are. Then Signý, the sister of the two boys, throws a gold ring to the *völva* as a bribe to make her keep quiet about where the boys are hiding; the *völva* now wants to stop the *spá* but the king forces her to continue. The passage reads as follows:

Fróði konungr herðir nú at seiðkonu fast ok biðr hana segja it sanna, ef hún skull ekki pínd verða. Hún gapír þá mjök, ok verðr erfíðr seiðrinn, ok nú kvað hún visu: "Sé ek, hvar sitja synir Hálfdanar, Hróarr ok Helgi, heilir báðir; þeir munu Fróða fjörví raena, - nema þeim sé fíjótt fyrirfarit, en þat mun eigi verða," sagði hún. Ok eftir þetta stíklar hún ofan af seiðhjallinum ok kvað: "Ótul eru augu Hams ok Hrana, eru öþlingir undra djafir."

(FSN 1:9)

King Fróði now presses the sorceress hard and commands her to speak the truth if she is not to be tortured. She opens her mouth wide, and the ritual becomes difficult, and now she spoke a verse: "I see where Hálfdan's sons sit, Hróarr and Helgi, both healthy; they will steal Fróði's life, — unless they

---

\(^{398}\) Tacitus' descriptions of Veleda in *Histories* 4:65 states that there was a mediator between her and the people for whom she prophesied: "They were not, however, allowed to approach and speak to Veleda or even to see her, but were kept at a distance to inspire in them the greater awe. She herself lived at the top of a high tower, and one of her relatives was appointed to carry the questions and answers like a mediator between God and man" (1997:216).

\(^{399}\) AM 285 4° c.1600-1700.
are quickly destroyed, but that won't happen”, she said. And after this she jumps down from the selðr platform and said: “Fierce are the eyes of Hamr and Hrani, they are princes wonderfully courageous.” (My translation)

What happens here is that the völva herself for a moment casts doubt on her own prediction – such and such will happen ‘unless they are quickly destroyed’ – only to deny it again immediately – ‘but that won't happen.’ Her problem is that Fróði has threatened her to make her tell only the truth, but the truth which she sees is that the boys will kill Fróði and it will obviously not please him to hear this; the völva cannot both tell the truth and please him and she appears to be looking for a way out of this tricky situation.400

Whether or not these different accounts describe any kind of social reality – and, given the late dates of most of them, one may rightly doubt so – there are interesting things to say about them, particularly the two ways in which one can approach a völva. One can, as Fróði does, threaten her in order to make her comply with one's own wishes (cf. Óðinn and the völva in Baldrs draumar), or one can, as Signý does, give her gifts in the hope of gaining her friendship.

That predictions made by a völva can be influenced is also hinted at elsewhere. In Viga-Glúms saga 12 the woman Saldís is dissatisfied with the predictions made for her two sons by the völva Oddbjorg, and Saldís says: Annars þættumk ek makligri fyrir góðan beina, ok muntu vera rekin í brott, ef þú ferr með ilispár (ÍF 9:41), ‘I should have thought good hospitality deserved something better, and you’ll be driven away if you go round predicting evil’ (CSI II:286), indicating that it may be possible to influence a prophecy through the way in which the völva is treated. Saldís clearly feels cheated, thinking she gave the völva gifts worthy of a spa better than the one she got. Apart from hinting at this possible route of influence, the scene also reveals that there is no certain way of actually obtaining a favourable spa – the völva is not swayed by Saldís’ gifts, perhaps because she is ill-disposed towards Saldís or her sons or perhaps simply because gifts do not affect the future which she sees, as is the case in Hrólfss saga kraka where it seems as if all the völva is able to do for Signý

400 Price (2002:115-116) interprets the scene differently, seeing the völva as thoroughly selfish, amoral and only concerned with her own welfare.
and her two brothers is to keep quiet; she cannot actually change the future events she sees.\footnote{The fact that Hávamál 87 regards volo viðmæli, ‘a volva who says what you would like to hear’ as highly suspicious apparently confirms that volur are surrounded by an ominous air of fear mixed with expectation.}

The notion of responsibility for making a prediction also recalls the reluctance to speak that is sometimes displayed by volur, for example in Baldurs draumar where Óðinn forces the dead volva to speak, yet she consistently closes all her answers with the phrase: Nauðug sagðak, nú mun ek þegi, ‘reluctantly I spoke, now I will be silent.’ It highlights the importance of the spoken word and poses the question of whether the person making the prediction can be said to be responsible for the effects it has. Some evidence points in this direction. Laxdæla saga 39 provides an example of what looks like an attempt to avoid such responsibility when Óláfr pái is talking about Guðrún Ösvifsdóttir and says to his son Kjartan that he thinks she is a fine woman and a suitable match for Kjartan, but then adds: Nú er þat hugbóð mitt, 

\textit{enn eigi vil ek þess spá}, at vér frændr ok Laugarmenn berim eigi allsendis gæfu til um vár skipti (ÍF 5:112), ‘I have a feeling, although I won’t make it a prediction, that our dealings with the Laugar family will not turn out well’ (CSI V:57; my emphases). What Óláfr is doing is, apparently, trying both to have his cake and eat it; he says that he is worried about how the relationship between Kjartan’s family and Guðrún’s will fare in the long run, but he also says that he will not voice those worries. In fact, he almost says that he will not say what he has just said, only the way in which he phrases the thought makes a very clear distinction to the effect that his use of the word spá, ‘predict’ is something other and more than segia, ‘say’.\footnote{Óláfr seems to make a distinction between a statement, which describes an action, and a performative utterance, which is the action that the words verbalise, in a way similar to what Austin does: “the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action, which again would not normally be described as saying something” (Austin 1962:5).} There is little sense that the following events actually stem from Óláfr’s words, and the scene seems properly understood as a narrative device for heightening the tension in the plot. Nevertheless, the notion that speaking about something can or even will influence that thing is lurking behind Óláfr’s words. There is a good example of this power of speech directly influencing events in Fóstbræðra saga 7:

\begin{quote}
Þorgeirr mælti: “Hvat ætlar þú, hvárr okkarr myndi af gørum bera, ef vit reyndim með okkr?”
Þormóðr svarar: “Pat veit ek eigi, en hitt veit ek, at sjá spurning þín mun skilja okkra samvistu ok þruneyti, svá at vit munum eigi lóngum ásamth vera.”
\end{quote}
Thorgeir said, "Which of us do you think would win if we confronted each other?"
Thormod answered, "I don't know, but I do know that this question of yours will divide us and end our companionship. We cannot stay together."
Thorgeir said, "I wasn't really speaking my mind - saying that I wanted us to fight each other."
Thormod said, "It came into your mind as you spoke it and we shall go our separate ways."

What happens is that Thorgeir expresses a thought which he says is entirely hypothetical: 'What do you think would happen if', but Thormod answers that because Thorgeir has put the thought into words and spoken it out loud it is no longer a hypothesis but a fact. The thought has left its ethereal guise of being a mere possibility and has become solid and concrete in the words; its expression in speech has given it the quality of a spá, and now Thorgeir and Thormod cannot escape it. It seems that fate is something which can be spoken into being.

An example of another kind comes from Njáls saga 38:

Bergþóra said to Njáll as soon as she saw the money, "You think you have kept your promise now, but mine has yet to be kept." "There's no need for you to keep it," said Njáll. "But you've guessed that I will," she said, "and so it shall be."

Here, Bergþóra refuses to let Njáll forget what he himself said earlier on, namely that he would get a freeman's compensation for the killing of Atli, who is only a slave, and that Bergþóra should have Atli's death avenged. After Atli has been killed, Njáll receives the money and Bergþóra now wants the revenge:

Bergþóra is here taking great advantage of Njáll's having made a prediction. Because he has prophesied she purports to be bound to fulfil his prediction as well as her own promise. That is, she (...) wittily denies her free will and with it her accountability for the action she is about to take. She is shifting the responsibility to Njáll.

403 Also Cook (2001:66) translates with 'guess' but the verb geta has many meanings, including 'attain, bring about, say' (Fržt I:590-591).
Again, the spoken word is a binding factor. It binds people to what they say and it binds events to the ways in which they have been verbally expressed and described. This relates closely to the connections between text and textile, between words and their concrete manifestations. The notion of the binding power of the spoken word appears to be very strong, as also Vésteinn Ólason has pointed out:

Again and again we see that words once spoken cannot be retracted. This is, of course, particularly the case with poetry. It is not just that poetry can live longer than both poets and poetic subjects, but also that words used in poetry are invested with a special resonance and force.

(Vésteinn Ólason 1998:124)

This recalls the strong association of poetry with knowledge and the inaccessible otherworldly knowledge which the women in the well possess (see IV.2.2.; Bloomfield and Dunn 1989:106-119). Although many of the sources that describe vglur are relatively late, we can see that some features that are also attached to normir remain current: they are always female, they are otherworldly or at least strangers, and their decisions, the words they speak, are regarded as having a tremendous impact on the lives of the people for whom the words are spoken and the decisions made.

A point of discussion is whether such incidences in Íslendingasögur should be taken as realistic in a literal sense – that people actually did such things, that they spoke and thought in this way – or whether the notion is being used as a literary motif or a narrative technique with the aim of creating atmosphere and building up tension in the story. To this one might reply that attributing significantly deterministic powers to the spoken word is by no means unique to Old Norse tradition but is in fact common in many traditional societies, particularly non-literate ones. Raudvere writes:


(Raudvere 2003:42)

'Great influence over the various affairs of life was attributed to the spoken word. The effect of a spoken sentence could not be questioned and could never be taken back – almost as if it took on physical form, it was there as something absolute. It could only be counteracted through equally strong
words. Strong and powerful words appear throughout the saga literature. Words created reality – not just the other way round.'

(My translation)

Speech, then, is seen as a creative act as much as, or even more than, an act of manifestation of what is already there. Speech is not just a way of describing the world but is also a way of creating it. This even recalls the Gospel according to John 1:1: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God", as well as the reference to Christ as the 'word made flesh' in John 1:14. Also Genesis 1:3: "God said: 'Let there be light', and there was light." The idea here is that things are spoken into being, the power of speech is a creative one and this view is common in traditional societies. This means that language can also work in the opposite way:

'Ett starkt exempel på en form för ett medvetet bruk av det talade ordet i destruktivt syfte är nîð, ett begrepp som syftar både på den verbala genren och på en bestämd rituell praktik.

(Raudvere 2003:55)

'A strong example of a type of conscious use of the spoken word with destructive intent is nîð, a concept which operates both as a verbal genre and as a certain ritual practice.'

(My translation)

And further:

Av de språkliga konstruktionerna yrkja nîð och kveda nîð förstår man att nîð var en utpräglat verbal akt. Det var det talade ordet som gav kränkningen en viss riktning.

(Raudvere 2003:55)

'From the linguistic constructions yrkja nîð [compose, recite nîð; Frtz III:1000] and kveda nîð [say, recite nîð; Frtz II:364-365] it is understood that nîð was a spoken act. It was the spoken word that gave a certain direction to the insult.'

(My translation)

Nîð, then, comes close to a curse, serving as a reminder that speech can be destructive as well as creative. The spoken word is of enormous importance. Like the wool in the wool basket, the unshaped mass of potential, we might consider a person's thoughts or ideas a mass of potential, but as yet unspoken, words. This

404 Speaking or singing things into being occurs many times in Kalevala, for example in Lemminkäinen's journey to Pohjola 139-40 where Lemminkäinen says: "I'll create, by songs of magic, both a man and horse of alder"; and in Marjatta 483-86 where Väinämöinen: "began his songs of magic, for the last time sang them loudly, sang himself a boat of copper, with a copper deck provided" (Kirby and Branch 1985:351 and 645).
shaping power of speech could explain why some \textit{völur} seem reluctant to speak at all: once spoken, there is no way of taking words back, and the \textit{spá} not spoken is not dangerous because it is not a \textit{spá} at all.

The reason why all of this is relevant to the discussion of \textit{nornir} is that they seem to be closely associated with certain forms of speech. In a non-literate society where law, as mentioned, was a spoken matter, phrases like \textit{kviðr norna} and \textit{dómr norna} would appear to indicate verbal actions, whereas \textit{skop norna} may convey more of an impression of a physical act. Furthermore, there seems to be some sort of semantic relationship between 'weird' and 'word', between \textit{urðr} and \textit{ord}, even if they are etymologically removed from one another. The word is that magical command which brings things into being, weird is that power which decides what will be; it is easy to relate these two notions closely to one another.\footnote{I am grateful to Terry Gunnell, Háskóli Íslands, for this suggestion. Also the noun-form and verb-form of the English word 'spell' is interesting in this context.}

This focus on words and a connection between fate and speech comes across in \textit{Fjölsvinnsmál} 47:

\begin{quote}
Svipdagr ek heiti, 
Sólbiatr hét minn faðir, 
þaðan rákmk vindkalda vego; 
Urðr orði 
við engi maðr, 
bótt þat sé við løst lagit.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
Svipdagr I am called, 
Sólbiatr my father was called, 
I came hence on wind-cold roads, 
the words of Urðr 
no man can hinder, 
though it was flawed in its creation.
\end{quote}

In this instance, fate is clearly something spoken: ‘words of Urðr’ or ‘words of fate’, that thing spoken by \textit{nornir} which no one can escape. It recalls two passages from \textit{Ynglingatal}, namely stanza 1 from \textit{Ynglingasaga} 11:

\begin{quote}
Varð frængengt, 
þars Fróði bjó, 
feigðarorð, 
es at Fjölni kom, 
ok sikling 
svigðís geíra\footnote{Svigðir is a \textit{kenning} for an ox; \textit{svigðís geír}, 'ox-spear' is a horn, also used for drinking.} 
vágr vindauss\footnote{Vágr vindauss, 'calm sea'; a \textit{kenning} for the beer-vat in which Fjölnir drowned.} 
of viða skyldi. 
(ÍF 26:26)
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
Where Fróði lived 
it happened, 
the words of death 
which came to Fjölnir; 
it was decided 
that the drink from the horn 
would cut down 
the prince.
\end{quote}

and stanza 8 from \textit{Ynglingasaga} 18:

\begin{quote}
Frákar at Dagr 
daðararði, 
fræggar fuss, 
I have heard that Dagr, 
hungry for fame, 
travelled according
\end{quote}
The idea of death as something spoken seems quite clearly represented in the phrases *feigðar ord* and *daudaord* and these, again, recall *kvíðr norma* (Hamðismál 30) and *norma dóm* (Fáfnismál 11), especially if one considers also the different meanings of the word 'sentence': it can refer to a series of words forming a grammatically coherent whole but it can also mean an authoritative decision pronounced by a tribunal. This latter kind of 'sentence' can, indeed, have severe or even fatal consequences for a person's life – but is it a sentence until it is pronounced? How else do the words in Ynglingatal operate? Similarly one might question the validity of the 'verdict of the normir', or any verdict for that matter, were it to remain silent; indeed the etymological meaning of 'verdict' is 'to speak truthfully' (OED XII:123). Speaking is a way of activating or making real the semantic content of words, it is a determining action, potentially creative – potentially destructive.

It is possible that ideas about speech are relevant with regard to the etymology of the word *norm* for which very few suggestions have been made. The two most common ones are:

Den ursprungliga betydelsen av ordet norma är omstridd. Anknytande till normornas spädomsfunktion har man sammanställt det med det svenska dialektordet norma (nyrna), ett verb som betyder 'hemligt meddela'. En annan etymologi förknippar ordet med en indoeuropeisk rot *ner* med betydelsen 'vrida', 'sno'. Bakom denna innebörd skulle ligga föreställningen om ödestråden, som normorna snor och sammantvinnar.411

(Ström 1985:202)

'The original meaning of the word *norm* is disputed. In connection with the prophesying function of the *normir* it has been seen in relation to the Swedish dialect word *norma* (nyrna), a verb which means 'secretly communicate'. Another etymology connects the word to an Indo-European root *ner*, meaning ‘twist’, ‘wind’. This should stem from the notion of a fate-thread, which the norns twist and twine.'

(My translation).

---

408 Vörv is a placename.
409 Dagr understood the language of birds; he had a sparrow that told him many things but it was killed by a farmer in Vörv.
410 The *nás orð, 'corpse words' in Baldurs draumar* also spring to mind.
411 See also AeW:412; de Vries 1956:273.
As evidence for spinning nornir tends to be somewhat more etymological than factual, the suggested link to spinning should probably be taken with a pinch of salt. The possible connection between norn and ‘whispering, carrying messages in secret’ is more interesting, especially considering the power of the spoken word discussed above.\textsuperscript{412} The Indo-European root (s)ner- has two meanings: ‘murmuring, rumbling’ and ‘turning, winding, drawing together’ (Pokorny 1959:975; AeW:412) and a link between them is by no means impossible (cf. mælrúnar discussed in VI.3.). Of these two options, ‘murmuring’ seems to fit better with the nornir because they speak, making decrees and pronouncing verdicts. ‘Turning, drawing together’ equally fit into the greater picture, only not directly in relation to the nornir. However, producing any definitive proof for an etymology of the word norn remains beyond our reach.

The binding power of a spá is evident in the situations involving völur discussed above; a spá can contain very strong elements of fate and the völva who gives a prophecy can be seen almost to create futures for people with her words. The Urðar orð mentioned in Fjölsvinnsmál strongly recall the same idea, only this time the words appear to be placed in the mouth of (one of) the nornir. Thus, the terms Völuspá and Urðar orð come very close to describing what is really the same one thing: both represent very powerful, deterministic forms of speech and the terms völva and norn almost amalgamate in these expressions.

VI.5. Baldr’s Fate

Of interest to the present discussion are also two passages from Lokasenna. In stanza 29 it is said that: ørlog Frigg hygg ek at ól viti, þótt hon sjalfgi segi, ‘Frigg, I believe, knows all fate, though she herself does not speak.’ Frigg, although she has the knowledge, does not put the ørlog into words. Taking this one step further, it could even mean that, by not giving it shape in the form of words, she is trying to prevent something from happening, rather like Ingimundr who thinks he can avoid his fate if only the völva keeps silent (see VI.4.2.). That this stanza might be taken as a reference to the death of Baldr, Frigg’s son, becomes clear if stanzas 27, 28 and 29 are considered together:

\begin{verbatim}
[Frigg]
Veitstu, ef ek inni ættak
Ægis hollom í
Baldri líkan bur:
[Frigg]
You know that if I had in here
in Ægir’s hall
a boy like my son Baldr,
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{412} Might this etymology recall the verb þylja, ‘to recite’ but also ‘to mumble’ (Frtz III:1064) as employed in Hávamál 111 (see IV.2.2.2.)?

209
út þú ne kvæmir
frá ása sonom,
ok væri þá at þér reiðum vegit.

you, furious, would not get away
from the sons of the Æsir;
there'd be fighting against you.

[Loki]
Enn vill þú, Frigg,
at ek fleiri telia
mina meinstafí:
ek því réð,
er þú ríða sérat
síðan Baldr at söllum.

[Loki]
Do you want me, Frigg,
to say still more
about my wicked deeds,
I (will) bring it about
that you will not again see
Baldr riding to the halls.

[Freyia]
Ærr ertu, Loki,
er þú yðra telr
lióta leiðstafí:
ørlög Frigg
hygg ek at ðili viti,
þótt hon síafogi segi.

[Freyia]
Mad are you, Loki,
when you talk of
your evil deeds,
Frigg, I believe,
knows all fate,
though she herself does not speak.

The point crucial for connecting stanzas 28 and 29 in a way so that they show a coherent picture of spoken words determining future events rests on the word ræð. There are discrepancies with regard to this word in the different manuscripts: Konungsbók has the form réð (réð or réþ), whereas AM 748 I 4° has the form quoted here: ræð. One of the problems with this word is that e in Konungsbók is used to denote both æ and é (KLE 2:443) so that it is rather up to the reader to decide how it should be read. Both are forms of the verb ráða which has numerous shades of meaning: ‘to interpret, understand, advice, consider, plan’ (Frtz III:9-17), but which in this particular instance means something like ‘to cause, to bring about’.

The difference lies in the tense; réð is the past form whereas ræð is the present tense that can also be used to denote future, and this matters for how the stanza is read. Loki is either saying that he brought about Baldr’s death (réð), that he is currently in the process of bringing it about or that he will bring it about (raed; the last two are both rendered possible by AM 748 I 4°). If we read the form raed, then it becomes possible to interpret the stanzas as saying that Loki speaks these words because he wants to bring about Baldr’s death, whereas Frigg attempts to prevent the same event and that this is exactly the reason why she does not speak about the ðlegg.

If we accept this then Lokasenna might contain not simply a reference to the story of Baldr but perhaps even a variant description of how Frigg tries in vain to
keep Baldr from coming to harm. Frigg’s words in stanza 27 are somewhat ambiguous. If her words are to be perceived in any way as a threat to Loki, then it must be because Baldr is alive and just not present. It is not much of a threat to remind Loki that he himself has ensured that Baldr cannot threaten him; that would seem like encouragement rather than a threat. This speaks in favour of the interpretation suggested above. Yet, working against this idea is the subjunctive wording ‘if I had’ which could well be taken to indicate that Baldr is dead rather than that he is simply not present, in which case réð should be the past tense of ráða. But it seems that a case could be made for both these readings – that Baldr is alive at the time of Lokasenna or that he is dead.

In Lokasenna 21 Óðinn says that Gefjun, too, knows about fate:

Ærr etru nû, Loki
ok ørviti,
er þú fær þér Gefjon at gremi;
þvíð aldar orlog
hygg ek at hon öll um viti
iafŋgoria sem ek.

Mad are you, Loki,
and out of your wits,
making Gefjun angry with you;
I believe she knows
all about men’s fates
as well as I know this myself.

All we hear about Gefjun is that she knows, it is not said whether she puts her knowledge into words or not, except that she does not seem to do that here. The context appears to constitute some kind of threat to Loki although it remains unclear exactly what orlog specifically refers to. In Lokasenna, it seems that Frigg and Gefjun either replace the nornir or perhaps join their ranks as beings who preside over fate; as mentioned above, nornir as such never seem to occur in the mythological poems and the exact relationship between them and the gods proper is somewhat unclear.

VI.6. Summary: A Law of the Spoken Word

This discussion of issues surrounding fate and nornir in relation to ideas about speech, prophecy and matters of law has thrown up a number of interesting insights. The etymological closeness between the Old Norse words orlog, forlog and log combined with the apparent involvement of nornir (and seemingly disir, see notes 374 and 380) in certain quasi-legal aspects of human life suggests that fate, as

413 The story of Baldr is told in Gylfaginning 49 and Gesta Danorum Book 3; it is furthermore alluded to in Völuspá and Baldr’s dráumar.
414 Jón Hnefill Ádalsteinsson (1999:51) says: “The old Nordic concept of fate... resembled a blind law, superior to god and man, that could at any time impose on their lives. The main difference in the position of gods and men seems to have been that it was clearer to the gods than to men what fate bore in its lap.” Cf. Clunies Ross 1994:246.
represented by nornir, was imagined as operating in a way similar to how law operated, namely as spoken words. Being a primarily oral culture, Old Norse tradition knew law only in a spoken format, evident in the role of the loðsögumaðr, the law-speaker, until he was replaced by written laws in Christian times, and it may be very telling that the etymological root of the word norn possibly has to do with verbal communication.

This connection between fate, law and speech may also help to explain why nornir are so often seen in a negative light, as might be implied by the case of the fullréttisorð described in Vígsþöd (VI.3.). This law specifies only negative words, not positive ones, yet this does not mean that the law as such was regarded as a negative tool; the very opposite seems, in fact, to have been the case: the law secured the very foundations of human society. It is not unlikely that the nornir were pictured in a similar way. Although we often encounter them in negatively or tragically slanted situations (as the law is brought into play when there is trouble) it could well be a mistake to underestimate their role as providers of balance and stability, so clearly portrayed in Völuspá 19. But whereas lög made sense and was intelligible to everyone, the much more profound orlög was hidden, inaccessible and incomprehensible, except to those who possessed abilities beyond the ordinary human perceptions, such as völur.

Further to this, the idea that speech is a way not just of describing things but of actually bringing them into being has found support in several Old Norse texts. This has some influence on how we understand prophecies of various kinds, accidental ones (for example Fóstbræðra saga 7) as well as deliberate ones (for example Eiríks saga rauda 4), because it touches on the semantic (though seemingly not etymological) association between orð and urðr ‘word’ and ‘weird’ and the notion that fate is something spoken. This metaphor of fate-as-speech is present in the sources in much clearer ways than is the case with fate-as-textile and it is at several times connected directly to nornir. Forms of speech are furthermore strongly implied in phrases such as kvíðr norna (Hamðismál 30) and dómr norna (Fafnsmál 11, Ynglingatal 24). However, it is also found that there are strong semantic links between speech and textile as textile metaphors are frequently used to describe acts of speaking, not only in Old Norse but in many different cultures. It may ultimately be impossible to separate speech and fabric completely from one another as the text and the textile continue to tangle up with each other, but it does seem that if we are to judge by the evidence presented to us by our sources, fate-as-speech is a much
more dominant way of describing that which *nornir* represent than is fate-as-textile. To some extent, however, they probably feed off each other.

The seeming anomaly of having female figures so closely related to aspects of law seems best explained in terms of some kind of gender reversal involving the types of power that are dominant in the human world and in the otherworld. The deep relationship between *lög* and *örlög* appears to indicate that fate was a fundamental aspect of the Old Norse world view and that *nornir*, invisible, impersonal and intangible though they may have been, were conceived of as beings central to the order of the world.
VII. Conclusions

Many conclusions can be drawn from this thesis and, as will be evident, not all of them necessarily align in any neat or coherent way. While this may cause some confusion, it probably reflects the fact that we are not dealing with a completely stable or homogeneous tradition. In all likelihood, the different conclusions reached during the course of this thesis simply reflect the situation surrounding nornir, and so many other Old Norse mythological beings: there is no one answer. If all references are taken into account, the answer either becomes muddled or splits into multiple answers, and in all likelihood this has always been so. Snorri seems to have encountered the same problem when compiling Snorra-Edda. Old Norse beliefs did not constitute one, single, coherent standard version and neither do the sources that survive for us to study; accepting this situation is really all we can do, we can hardly expect logically coherent answers to come from this body of gloriously inconsistent material (cf. McKinnell 1994; DuBois 1999).

Nonetheless, the answers that I have reached show that there are things to be found beyond the stereotypical three nornir who spin and who represent past, present and future. Close analyses of the sources have shown that, indeed, these three 'facts' about nornir – that there are three, that they spin, that they represent time – have turned out to be at best an early medieval conception of these beings rather than an ancient one. There is so much more to say about them than this superficial image reveals.

Although we must constantly remind ourselves that the relatively narrow base of evidence touching on nornir lends itself more to conjecture than conclusion, it is evident that it is possible to obtain some general answers to the questions which initially gave rise to the research presented in this thesis:

1 – Why is fate so strongly feminine?
2 – What evidence is there for fate-as-textile in Old Norse tradition?
3 –What do nornir actually do?

It has been shown that it is possible to make distinctions between nornir and closely related beings such as völur, disir, fylgjur and valkyrjur and that it is important to do so, even if we cannot obtain anything near absolute clarity. Overlaps remain and the similarities between the separate categories are in many ways obvious; it is the differences that are interesting. Two things in particular set the nornir apart from the rest: 1) early evidence of any cult is absent, we only have very late sources for this, and 2) they are rarely represented in person as physically
present, people do not see or encounter nornir. This tells us something about the people for whom these beings were a reality, as does the fact that many of the supposedly earliest references to them (Hamðismál, Atlakviða, Ynglingatal 24, Torf-Einarr, Kveldúlf) make a strong connection between nornir and battle or violent death. When connected to harsh times and tragic events, this form of inevitability lends nornir a particularly stern face.

The fact that nornir, and the majority of beings that they compare to, are conceived of as feminine has been explored. The answer to the question why this should be is complex but ultimately seems to be rooted in the biological fact that it is the female who gives birth to new life. This relates nornir strongly to mother-figures and ancestress figures, indicating that some form of benign power was part of their nature, although these aspects are rather in the background in Old Norse tradition where nornir seem most often to be connected to negative power, even in the earliest sources. Their female nature is probably also what lies behind the notion of fate manifesting itself through specifically female tasks, although such tasks are rarely connected directly to the nornir themselves but rather to more concrete beings, often human women. Their intangible nature may be what often prevents these direct links from being made explicit, but it does not prevent their influence on, or even control over, events from being felt in very tangible ways.

As regards the equation of fate with time and nornir as representatives of past, present and future, it has been shown that although such a conception appears to be present in the names Urðr, Verðandi and Skuld in Vǫluspá it is specifically related to these three names and is probably exclusive to Vǫluspá and Snorra-Edda. It is certainly of some concern that no other texts connect nornir to time and it seems unlikely that this connection is much older than Vǫluspá.

Textile work, such as spinning and weaving, fits into the category of specifically female tasks and there are two important points that have been raised regarding this: 1) the fate-as-textile metaphor appears to be valid in Old Norse tradition, and 2) there is only one example of nornir actually engaging with this metaphor. This has implications for the widespread stereotype of nornir as spinners or weavers of fate and it has been shown that the dominance of this image in scholarship is not supported by the source material. The argument put forward here is that nornir and the fate-as-textile metaphor connect to each other predominantly in the following two ways: 1) through the feminine nature of both nornir and textile work, and 2) through the powers of speech combined with the obvious relationship between text
and textile. Thus, *nornir* and textile work appear in Old Norse tradition as separate manifestations of the same thing, namely *skop*, *строй*, fate, but they rarely combine with one another directly. Therefore it seems unjustified to speak of *nornir* as spinners or weavers of fate, at least not without quite specific referencing; the sources do not give this portrayal as the dominant one but in fact employ rather different ideas in the vast majority of the references made to *nornir*.

The dominant method of portraying the way in which *nornir* were thought to exercise their powers is expressed through legal metaphors, often relating closely to speech. It has been shown that there is a close relationship between the concepts of *lóg* and *строй* and that not only *nornir* but apparently also *disir* are somehow engaged in otherworldly issues of law; it seems that they represent something akin to laws of nature against which human struggle is always in vain. This, however, is not a wholly negative image. The equation of law with society (*vár lóg = our community*, see VI.2.1.) and Hallfreðr's equation of *skop nora* with Scandinavian non-Christian tradition indicate that the framework provided by law and, by extension of this, by the *nornir*, was considered necessary for, or even as being beneficial to, human society in general. Law is not in itself a negative concept, but it does tend to be brought into action particularly when something goes wrong; the notion that people can choose to disregard the law at will but cannot ultimately escape the consequences that such choices will have for their lives appears to be a valid image of the Old Norse understanding of *lóg* and *строй*.

The semantic link between *ord* and *urðr ‘word’ and ‘weird’, the utterance and the shaping power attributed to it, fits well with the suggested, though unproven, etymology of the word *norn*, namely that it refers to murmuring or secret communications. A particularly interesting aspect of this is the relationship between text and textile as it is evident that the metaphor speech-as-textile must have been known. This seems to give us a complex of three intertwining metaphors: fate-as-speech; speech-as-textile; fate-as-textile. The effect is that even if *nornir* were primarily or originally associated with fate-as-speech, it was easy to take this one step further to reach fate-as-textile.

Clarity is hard to come by with regard to these creatures. In any one given situation we can make relatively clear observations as to what *nornir* represent in that specific context, but to add all these individual answers up to one all-embracing answer is asking more than is possible with this type of material. Instead of one certain answer we get several related ones – it is not in the nature of mythology to

216
be single-minded but, rather, to be flexible. Given the fact that the sources concerning nornir range from Iron Age Germany to medieval Iceland and Norway, including everything in between, both timewise and geographically, everything that comes down to us about them has already passed through numerous filters before we put it through our own. There is no such thing as unprocessed myth.

The question of fate in the Old Norse conceptual world can be turned in many directions but it cannot be discarded; a concept roughly translatable into the English word ‘fate’ did exist in most, if not all, areas of Old Norse culture.

Den betydelse ödet spelar får inte förstås som att vi kan tillskriva nordborna en fatalistisk livssyn. Snarare uttrycker föreställningarna om det utrönta ödet en reflektion över den värld inom vilken människan kan agera.
(Raudvere 2003:58)

‘The role that fate plays should not be understood in such a way that we come to regard the ancient Scandinavians as fatalists. Rather, the ideas about fate express a considered view of the world in which humans are able to act.’
(My translation)

Nornir played a role within that view. As an intangible group of supernatural beings, their doings provide some sort of structure or skeleton to human life, mostly, it would seem, the individual life. In certain ways, that which nornir represent in Old Norse mythology is not entirely unlike our modern perception of DNA in its mode of operation – an impersonal, blind, structuring principle that guides certain aspects of our lives without us even noticing it. For better or for worse, neither nornir nor DNA can be influenced nor changed, they can only be accepted in the format in which they are given to the individual.

Yet, fate as we encounter it in Old Norse literature is not something in the face of which people admit defeat or to which they meekly submit. Neither do people believe that they possess the power to escape their fate or overcome it. Rather, it seems that when they encounter what they regard as fate, they see it as a challenge to be confronted, as though the very response to that challenge constitutes its meaning. Thus, belief in fate was not an easy way out; it did not invite resignation – indeed, the heroes of Old Norse poems and sagas seem to conceive of fate as an invitation to action, a potential to live up to, even a chance to show what one is truly made of. That the judgement of the nornir will inevitably be realised does not in itself take away the meaning of a person’s life – in the sagas it most often seems to have quite the opposite effect.
Bibliography

Icelandic authors are listed under first names (eg. Æðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir) and alphabetical order follows the tradition in the relevant language (eg. Icelandic á follows a; Danish æ, ø and å follow z).

Aasen, Ivar, Norsk Ordbog med dansk Forklaring, Kristiania: Cammermeyers Forlag, 1918.


Alexanders saga, tr. Brandr Jónsson [Biskop til Hólar 1263-64], Udgiven af Kommissionen for det Arnamagnæanske Legat, København: Gyldendalske Boghandel / Nordisk Forlag, 1925.

Almqvist, Bo, ‘Gaelic/Norse Folklore Contacts. Some reflections on their scope and character’, Ireland and Europe in the early Middle Ages, eds. Próinséas Í Chatháin and Michael Richter, [n.pl.]: Klett-Cotta, 1996, 139-172.


Bax, Marcel and Tineke Padmos, ‘Two Types of Duelling in Old Icelandic: The interactional structure of the senna and the mannjafnadr in Hárbarðsljóð,


Bek-Pedersen, Karen (forthcoming), 'Are the Spinning Nornir just a Yarn?', Viking and Medieval Scandinavia.


Bosworth, Joseph, Anglo-Saxon Dictionary, Based on the manuscript collections of the late Joseph Bosworth, edited and enlarged by T. Northcote Toller, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1898.


*Codex Regius of the Elder Edda*, MS No. 2365 4º in the Royal collection in the Royal Library of Copenhagen, Copenhagen: Levin & Munksgaard, 1937.


Edda Snorra Sturlusonar II, Hafniae: Sumptibus legati Arnamagnæani, 1852.


--- ed., Darraðaljóð, Published for the Viking Club, Coventry: Curtis & Beamish, 1910a.

--- ed., Gróttasongr, Published for the Viking Club, Coventry: Curtis & Beamish, 1910b.


--- Lady with a Mead Cup - Ritual, Prophecy and Lordship in the European Warband from La Tène to the Viking Age, Dublin and Portland: Four Courts Press, 1996.


--- Godafræði Norðmanna og Íslendinga eftir heimildum, Reykjavík: Hinu Íslenska Bókmentafjelagi, 1913.


Friis, J.A., Lappisk Mythologi, Eventyr og Folkesagn, Christiania: Cammermeyer, 1871.


Hansen, Olaf tr., Den Ældre Edda, København: V. Pios Boghandel, 1911.


--- Gand, Seid og Åndevind, Dr. art.-avhandling, Bergen: Universitetet i Bergen, 2006.


Hertz, Wilhelm, Der Werwolf. Beitrag zur Sagensgeschichte, Stuttgart: Verlag von A.
Kroner, 1862. Reprinted 1973 by Dr. Martin Sändig oHG. Walluf bei Wiesbaden.


--- 'Arbeidssanger', Kulturhistorisk Leksikon for nordisk middelalder, Reykjavík: Bókaverzlun Ísafoldar, 1956, vol 1, 201-203.


Jarlmanns saga ok Hermanns, ed. Agnete Loth, Late Medieval Icelandic Romances III, Copenhagen: [n.pub.], 1963.


Jómsvíkinga saga efter arnamagnæanske Håndskriften No. 291. 4to, ed. Carl Petersen, København: [n.pub.], 1882.


Krákumál, ed. Finnur Jónsson, Oversigt over det kongelige danske Videnskabernes Selskabs forhandlinger, No.2, København, 1905.


Lund, Troels, Dagligt Liv i Norden i det sekstende Aarhundrede VIII, København and ristiania: Gyldendalske Boghandel / Nordisk Forlag, 1908.


Martialis, Marcus Valerius – Epigrammata, ed. W.M. Lindsay, Recognovit brevique adnotatione critica instruxit. Scriptorum classicorum bibliotheca Oxoniensis, Oxonii e typographeo Clarendoniano, 1903.


Petersen, Carl S and Vilhelm Andersen, Illustreret Dansk Litteraturhistorie, København: Gyldendal, 1929.


Price, Neil S., The Viking Way. Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia,


Rudebeck, Elisabeth, 'Vägen som Rituell Arena', Plats och Praxis, studier av nordisk


--- Edda, Saga, Skaldendichtung, Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1981.


Sundqvist, Olof, Freyr's Offspring. Rulers and Religion in Ancient Svea Society, Dissertation for the Degree of Doctor of Theology at Uppsala University, Distributed by the Department of Theology, Uppsala University, 2000.


Tobing, Ph. O. L., The Structure of the Toba-Batak Belief in the High God, South and South-East Celebes Institute for Culture, Amsterdam: Jacob van Campen, 1963 (1953).


Torfi H. Tulinius, 'Sagas of Icelandic Prehistory (fornaldarsögur)', A Companion to


Valtýr Guðmundsson, Privatboligen på Island i Sagatiden samt deivís i det øvrige Norden, København: Høst & Sön, 1889.


http://skaldic.arts.usyd.edu.au/db.php