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COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

OLD NORSE MYTHOLOGY— COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

Edited by Pernille Hermann,
Stephen A. Mitchell, and Jens Peter Schjødt
with Amber J. Rose

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Old Norse Mythology—Comparative Perspectives

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Óðinn, Charms, and Necromancy

Hávamál 157 in Its Nordic and European Contexts

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Abstract: Óðinn claims in stanza 157 of *Hávamál* that he is able to carve and color runes such that a hanged man will walk and talk with him. In this essay the central image of this the twelfth charm in the *Ljóðatal* section of *Hávamál* is examined in the context of parallels drawn from Iron Age archaeology, Old Norse literature, the wide-spread practice of “Charon’s Obol”, and Christian tradition.

Introduction

To modern sensibilities, few images are more disturbing in Old Norse mythology than the macabre claim made by Óðinn in stanza 157 of *Hávamál*:

Þat kann ec iþ tólpta, ef ec sé á tré uppi
 váfa virgilná:
svá ec ríst oc í rúnom fác,
 at sá gengr gumi
 oc mælir við mic.

I know a twelfth one if I see, up in a tree,
 a dangling corpse in a noose,
I can so carve and colour the runes
 that the man walks
 and talks with me.¹

¹ Note: A version of this essay was originally delivered in Zürich at the October 27–28, 2011 meeting of the Aarhus mythology conference.
Cf. Martin Clarke’s translation (1923: 85):

To what belief system does this grisly presentation of necromancy—if, indeed, that is what it is—refer?² Does this “charm” (*ljóð*) project pure fantasy or might it reflect what was once an actual practice?

The following comments review possible backgrounds of, and influences on, the text’s key claim that Óðinn can make a *virgilmár* speak. They build on the work of many earlier scholars who have considered the issue of the dead and dying in Old Norse mythology, from the pioneering studies by Helge Rosén (1918), Rolf Pipping (1928), H. R. Ellis Davidson (1943), Nora Chadwick (1946), and Folke Ström (1947) to the more recent work of Kirsi Kanerva (2011, 2013), Olof Sundqvist (2009, 2010), John McKinnell (2007) and Vésteinn Ólason (2003).³ Specifically, the essay looks to place Óðinn’s boast in the comparative contexts of native and non-native traditions, exploring on the one hand the Nordic basis for Óðinn’s claim, as well as, on the other hand, the more distant but possibly related European reflexes for the charm, especially those linked to classical traditions of the so-called Ferryman’s Fee (Thompson 1966: P613), and various Christian saint legends. By identifying more precisely the background against which this thirteenth-century text presents the Nordic world’s master of magic making an assertion of this sort, i.e., that he can make a hanged man’s corpse talk and walk through the use of runes, it may be possible to understand what

A twelfth I know: if I see on a tree aloft
a corpse swinging from a halter,
I cut and paint runes
in such wise that the man walks
and talks with me.

English dictionaries (i.e., Cleasby-Vigfusson 1982, Zoega 1975) do indeed gloss *virgill* as “halter” but in contemporary English, this term, when used in isolation (i.e., not in combination with “top” or “neck”), exclusively conveys the sense of a lead, something similar to a bridle, for securing and guiding livestock (at least in the North American dialects I know). By contrast, “noose”, although technically referring narrowly to the knot (cf. its etymology), carries with it in common parlance the sense of a hangman’s knot and of execution, hence, the expression, “to dangle from the end of a noose” or as Larrington has for *váfa virgilmá*, “a dangling corpse in a noose”. In line with this interpretation, Fritzner (1973) offers, “Strikke hvori Person hænges forat skille ham af med Livet”.

² Necromancy (< *necromantia*) properly refers to divination through the use of the dead (cf. Greek *nekros* “corpse” + *manteia* “divination”), practices associated with Óðinn in Nordic sources and with such figures as the witch of Endor (1 Sam. 28) in Judeo-Christian tradition; however, confusion, intentional or accidental, with *nigromantia* “black arts” has led to the term’s more general sense of “sorcery” and “witchcraft”, on which see especially Kieckhefer 1990: 151–75 and Kieckhefer 1997: 4, 19.

³ Scholarship on specific topics is, of course, indicated as appropriate, but with regard to the broader, and vast, scholarship on *Hávamál*, I refer readers to the discussion in Harris 1985, the items listed in Lindow 1983, and the forthcoming volume on *Hávamál* in the series *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda* (von See 1997–). As regards the literature concerned with various aspects of death and the afterlife in the Old Norse context, I refer readers to the discussion and comprehensive bibliography in Nordberg 2004: 313–39.

aspect of pre-Christian Nordic religion and mythology it is that we witness in *Hávamál* 157, how these views relate to pagan and Christian ideology, and just what they can tell us, both about such beliefs and, not least, our medieval religious texts.

Hávamál 157 in Its Nordic Setting

The significance of the dead in Nordic mythological texts has been the focus of substantial debate over the years.⁴ In fact, a number of passages in extant Nordic sources allude to Óðinn interacting with the dead, occasionally in ways nearly as direct as that portrayed in *Hávamál* 157. Notably, on the one hand, there is the matter of postmortem conversations with Mímir,⁵ and, on the other, there are the numerous references to Óðinn and others awakening and speaking with the dead, as presented in such poems as *Völuspá*, *Baldurs draumar*, *Hyndluljóð*, and *Grógaldur*.⁶

Allusions in *Gylfaginning* (ch. 17) and *Völuspá* (st. 28) to the story of Mímir's well, drinking from which Óðinn gains at the cost of an eye, support a general association of Mímir with wisdom and prophetic connections, but it is especially the story laid out in full in *Ynglinga saga* (ch. 4, 7), and referred to, e.g., in *Völuspá* (st. 46) and *Sigrdrífumál* (st. 14), that excites attention in the current context.⁷ According to this tale, Mímir and Hœnir are sent as hostages to the Vanir as part of the exchange that helps end the war between this group of gods and the Æsir. The Vanir, believing that they have been defrauded—as Hœnir, when

⁴ In addition to the works cited in the preceding section, cf. the argument by Andreas Nordberg with regard to the age of the *valhöll* concept and the extensive review of related literature he provides (Nordberg 2004). Of related interest is the “mentalities” perspective Arved Nedkvitne applies to the matter of pre-Christian Nordic views of the dead (2003: 19–47). As I write, publication of Neil Price's *Odin's Whisper: Death and the Vikings* has just been announced.

⁵ On Mímir, see, e.g., the comments and overviews in Sigurður Nordal 1927: 91; de Vries 1956–1957: I: 245–248, II: 82; Halvorsen 1982; Lindow 2001: 230–32; and Simek 1993; on possible Celtic influence at work in the case of Mímir, as regards both his head and his well, and for a survey of the literature on the topic, see Simpson 1963–1964, as well as the recent review in Egeler 2013: 85–88.

⁶ H. R. Ellis Davidson, in a discussion of necromancy, brings these poems together with Saxo's account of Harthgrepa. After describing the necromantic process (e.g., awakening, transmitting of knowledge), she notes: “The wisdom which is imparted is of two kinds. Either it consists of a revelation from the future or the past of what is normally hidden—the doom of the world, the fate of the individual or the line of dead ancestors behind a man of noble rank—or else it consists of spells which give power to the possessor, which can guard him against the baleful magic of others, or give him the power to overcome certain perils in his journeyings” (Davidson 1943: 156).

⁷ The names Mímir and Mímr are both used; however, they occur in complementary distribution: “The form of the name in the formula ‘Mímir's head’ is always Mímr, otherwise the form is Mímir” (Simek 1993: 216).

not benefiting from Mímir's advice, proves to be less outstanding than they had thought—decapitate Mímir and send the head to Óðinn:

Þá tóku þeir Mími ok hálshjoggu ok sendu hofuðit Ásum. Óðinn tók hofuðit ok smurði urtum þeim, er eigi mátti fúna, ok kvað þar yfir galdra ok magnaði svá, at þat mælti við hann ok sagði honum marga leynda hluti. (*Ynglinga saga* ch. 4)

(Then they seized Mímir and beheaded him and sent the head to the Æsir. Óthin took it and embalmed it with herbs so that it would not rot, and spoke charms over it, giving it magic power so that it would answer him and tell him many occult things. (*Ynglinga saga* p. 8))

And a few chapters later, in the enumeration of Óðinn's magical abilities, the same text notes:

Óðinn hafði með sér hofuð Mímis, ok sagði þat honum mǫrg tíðendi or ǫðrum heimum, en stundum vakði hann upp dauða menn or jǫrðu eða settisk undir hanga. Fyrir því var hann kallaðr draugadróttinn eða hangadróttinn. (*Ynglinga saga*, ch. 7)

(Óthin had with him Mímir's head, which told him many tidings from other worlds; and at times he would call to life dead men out of the ground, or he would sit down under men that were hanged. On this account he was called Lord of Ghouls or of the Hanged. (*Ynglinga saga* p. 11))

The story of Óðinn and Mímir's head holds a unique place in the mythology,⁸ insofar as in opposition to other prophetic “talking heads” in Old Norse literature (e.g., *Eyrbyggja saga* ch. 43), it is specifically Óðinn's charm magic that allows or induces Mímir's head to produce its utterances.⁹

⁸ Cp. Davidson who suggests that the story of the *vǫlsi* in *Flateyjarbók* (*Vǫlsa þáttr*) may be the closest direct analogue to Mímir's head in that both call for the preservation of a body part later connected to occult knowledge (Davidson 1943: 157–58).

⁹ In *Eyrbyggja saga*, a certain Freysteinn, crossing a scree called Geirvǫr late one evening, encounters a severed human head, which volunteers a quatrain (*staka*) without any manipulation from Freysteinn:

Roðin es Geirvǫr	Geirvǫr is bloodied
gumna blóði,	by the gore of men,
hon mun hylja	she will hide
hausa manna.	human skulls.
(<i>Eyrbyggja saga</i> ch. 43)	(<i>Eyrbyggja saga</i> p. 116)

Clearly related to the same mythological complex that assumes that the “Lord of Ghouls” could call the dead to life are such scenes as the following in *Baldrs draumar*, where Óðinn speaks *valgaldr* “corpse-magic” (lit., “magic of the fallen or slain”) in order to awaken the *vǫlva* from her postmortem sleep; she, in turn, utters *nás orð* “corpse-words”:

Þá reið Óðinn fyr austan dyrr
 þar er hann vissi vǫlo leiði;
 nam hann vittugri valgaldr qveða,
 unz nauðig reis, nás orð um qvað: (*Baldrs draumar* st. 4)

(Then Othin rode to the eastern door,
 There, he knew well, was the wise-woman’s grave;
 Magic he spoke and mighty charms,
 Till spell-bound she rose, and in death she spoke:
 (Larrington 2014: 235))

References in the medieval mythological texts to the summoned, prophesying dead (Thompson 1966: M301.14) naturally raise the question of whether these scenes might reflect beliefs about the dead in earlier periods. In fact, the possibility of pre-Christian traditions of such practices as ritual hanging and the gibbeting of enemies—or parts of enemies—killed in battle in northern Europe has been long bruited about. The most famous example comes half a dozen years after the battle of the Teutoburg Forest (9 CE), when a Roman army encounters the carnage left from the defeat of three of its legions:

medio campi albertia ossa, ut fugerant, ut restiterant, disiecta vel aggerata. Adiacebant fragmina telorum equorumque artus, simul truncis arborum antefixa ora. Lucis propinquis barbarae arae, apud quas tribunos ac primorum ordinum centuriones mactaverant. (*Annals* 1.61)

(In the plain between were bleaching bones, scattered or in little heaps, as the men had fallen, fleeing or standing fast. Hard by lay splintered spears and limbs of horses, while human skulls were nailed prominently on the tree-trunks. In the neighbouring groves stood the savage altars at which they had slaughtered the tribunes and chief centurions (pp. 348–49))

Freysteinn relates this vision (*fyrirburðr*) to Þorbrandr, to whom the episode portends important events (*þótti honum vera tíðenda-vænligt*).

This scene, gruesome as the spectacle of human skulls nailed on tree-trunks must have been, lacks some of the eeriness of the scenario of revived dead hinted at in *Hávamál* 157, but it does suggest a frightening range of post-proelium manipulations of the dead in Iron Age northern Europe.¹⁰

And with that fact in mind, it is noteworthy that this twelfth charm, the mortuary charm reference of *Hávamál* 157, is embedded in a martial context: both the verse preceding it and the verse following it are specifically concerned with safety in battle. *Hávamál* 156 claims knowledge of a charm with which a leader could protect his troops such that they go safely to and from battle, and *Hávamál* 158 is concerned with protecting a young thane (*þegn*) in battle. The placement of verse 157 in *Hávamál* thus fits the mold shaped by both the material and textual evidence of Germanic rituals; indeed, classical writers describe with such vehemence the terrible things the northern tribes do with defeated enemies and their corpses that they might be easily dismissed as propagandistic *topoi*.¹¹ Yet in the light of modern archaeological research (e.g., Alken Enge in Jutland), scenes of the sort reported by classical writers about

¹⁰ On the possibly related matter of animal skulls being ritually displayed, see the case of the Viking Age site at Hofstaðir, Iceland (Lucas and McGovern 2007) and the other examples cited there. The comments by Adam of Bremen regarding the pagan sacrifices in Uppsala bear mentioning in this context as well, “Ex omni animante, quod masculinum est, novem capita offeruntur, quorum sanguine deos placari mos est. Corpora autem suspenduntur in lucum, qui proximus est temple” (*Gesta Hammaburgensis* 4.27) (The sacrifice is of this nature: of every living thing that is male, they offer nine heads, with the blood of which it is customary to placate gods of this sort. The bodies they hang in the sacred grove that adjoins the temple (p. 208)).

¹¹ Against Tacitus’ emotional and elegiac tone, one may, as something of a warning against over-reading, contrast the more blood-thirsty descriptions of other writers, as in the inflamed prose of Florus describing the events in the *Teutoburger Wald*:

Nihil illa caede per paludes perque silvas cruentius, nihil insultatione barbarorum intolerabilius, praecipue tamen in caesarum patronos. Alii oculos, aliis manus amputabant, uni os obsutum, recisa prius lingua, quam in manu tenens barbarus “tandem” ait “vipera sibilare desisti”. (*Epitome* p. 340)

(Never was there slaughter more cruel than took place there in the marshes and woods, never were more intolerable insults inflicted by barbarians, especially those directed against the legal pleaders. They put out the eyes of some of them and cut off the hands of others; they sewed up the mouth of one of them after first cutting out his tongue, which one of the barbarians held in his hand, exclaiming, “At last, you viper, you have ceased to hiss”. (pp. 339, 341))

Writing in a similar vein, Jordanes, in his sixth-century *Getica*, maintains that the Goths worshipped “Mars” with terrible rites, including slaying captives as sacrifices:

quem Martem Gothi semper asperrima placevere cultura (nam victimae eius mortes fuere captorum), opinantes bellorum praesulem apte humani sanguinis effusione placandum. (*Getica* 5.41)

(Now Mars has always been worshipped by the Goths with cruel rites, and captives were slain as his victims. They thought that he who is the lord of war needed to be appeased by the shedding of human blood. (p. 64))

the north European Iron Age may not be as farfetched as once thought.¹² On the other hand, although these instances may provide some opportunity for understanding the historico-cultural context of Óðinn's claim, they should be understood as no more than broad, if highly suggestive, typological parallels to the *Hávamál* image.

Yet a remarkable passage from the twelfth- or thirteenth-century Icelandic law code *Grágás* suggests that even in the Middle Ages the corpses of the deceased (or perhaps near-dead) were not merely the discarded husks of extinguished human life but could also be meaningful sites of debate, differentiation, and classification:

*Þeir menn ero en iiii. er nár ero kallaþir þott lifi. Ef maðr er hengðr eða kyrçr eða settr i grof. eþa i scer. eða heptr afialle. eða i fløðar mále. Þar heitir gálg nár. oc graf nár. oc sker nár oc fiall nár. Þa menn alla scal iafnt aprt giallda niðgiolldom sem þeir se vegnir þott þeir lifi. (*Grágás* p. 202)*

(There are another four men who are called corpses even though they are alive. If a man is hanged or throttled or put in a grave or on a skerry or tied up on a mountain or below high-water mark, he is called “gallows-corpse” or “grave-corpse” or “skerry-corpse” or “mountain corpse”. Those men are all to be atoned for by kindred payments as if they had been killed even though they are alive. (*Grágás* p. 182))

Some commentators (e.g., Joonas Ahola) understand this passage in practical terms,¹³ but an earlier observer, Viktor Rydberg, saw the text in a different light, noting that the sense of *nár* as used in this section of *Grágás* is not merely “cadaver” and so on, but rather to those who are still conscious and can, for example, suffer.¹⁴ One certainly senses thematic filiations between this and the previously

¹² Early reports on the project “The army and post-war rituals in the Iron Age—warriors sacrificed in the bog at Alken Enge in Illerup Ådal” suggest that here too there may have been ritual manipulations of the corpses (see, e.g., Lobell 2012). Further research will undoubtedly provide a conclusive answer (cf. Holst, Heinemeier, et al. Forthcoming), but as of the writing of this essay, that some real-world typological parallels existed to the comments made by classical writers may be more likely than once believed. See also “Alken Enge—The mass grave at Lake Mossø” (Museum Skanderborg 2013); “An Entire Army Sacrificed in a Bog” at ScienceNordic.com; and “Barbarisk fund: Vores forfædre bar ligrester på kæppe” (Persson 2014).

¹³ “For acts that were not considered to be killing and therefore did not grant the right to prosecution, such as leaving someone helplessly on a skerry, mountain, cave, or hung (*Grágás*, 265), was likewise to be paid compensation (*wergild*), and the one at fault was responsible for that compensation” (Ahola 2014: 82).

¹⁴ “Här tillämpas ordet nár således på varelses med medvetande och förmåga att lida, men under den förutsättning, att de äro sådana, som hemfallit under straff afsedda att icke upphöra, så länge de äro i stånd att förnimma dem” (Rydberg 1886: I: 324).

cited passages, but whereas *Hávamál* 157 uses *virgilmár* “halter corpse” or “noose corpse” (cf. n. 1 above), *Grágás* here uses the term “gallows corpse” (*galgnár*).¹⁵

Gallows in non-mythological medieval Nordic contexts generally show them being used for execution, as when in *Magnúss saga berfætts*, Egill and Þórir are hanged for raising forces against the king (ch. 6; pp. 216–18). But, of course, once the execution phase of the process was over, hanged corpses, so positioned, transformed into highly effective and tactile warnings for others and could be left gibbeted, hanging—and visible—until they rotted off the rope, thus becoming public spectacles and expressions of authority visible for long distances, which, of course, accounts for the fact that they were often placed on heights (e.g., Galgberget [lit. “Gallows Hill”] in Södermalm, overlooking late medieval Stockholm) and near highly trafficked areas (e.g., crossroads).

Beyond the gallow’s function in daily life as the ultimate legal sanction and as a potent demonstration of centralized power, gallows and the hanged are frequently mentioned in mythological and semi-mythological contexts that suggest that they also provided the means of torture, pain, and, as in the previous case, spectacle, both as an end in itself and as part of Odinic rituals of varying interpretations (e.g., initiation).¹⁶ An example of the first type is found in *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*, when Hjörleifr is hung by his shoelaces between two fires. When he eventually escapes, Hjörleifr in turn hangs his enemy on the same gallows (*gálg*) which had been intended for his death.¹⁷

In other instances, such as *Gautreks saga*, when the mock sacrifice of King Víkarr turns real (ch. 7), the scene strikes most readers as being informed by a series of surviving narratives about those “hanging” between life and death: Óðinn’s self-sacrifice on the World Tree; the comments in Saxo about sacrificial

¹⁵ In addition to the probable synonymy of the two “corpse” terms, I note that even the devices from which they were suspended were likely to be thought of as equivalent: *galgtré* “gallows tree” is a relatively common collocation, used interchangeably with *galg* “gallows” (e.g., *Magnúss saga berfætts* ch. 6). Although *tré* principally indicates arboreal organisms, it can also mean the products of them, such as “beam”—exactly what is needed to construct an H-shaped *galgtré*. On the other hand, Old Swedish and Old Danish sources tend to say that a thief should be hanged on either of the alliterative pair, *galgha æller gren* “gallows or limb”, suggesting perhaps a perceived need for more immediate satisfaction of the death penalty than a constructed gallows would allow. Cf. the term *vargtré* “wolf [i.e., outlaw]-tree” for “gallows” in *Hamðismál* st. 17.

¹⁶ Cf. Jens Peter Schjødt, who argues for the social reality of such a practice as a *rite de passage* within pre-Christian cultic practices (Schjødt 2008: 173–206; see also Sundqvist 2009, 2010). As Sundqvist notes, citing Bugge 1881–1889: 291–93, the picture is far from clear, as the medieval Latin *pendente in patibulo* “hanging in the gallows” was a common expression for the Crucifixion.

¹⁷ “Hjörleifr konúgr var uppfestr í konúngs höll með skóþvengjum sínum sjálfs, millum elda tveggja,” and “en Reiðar konúgr lét hann hengja dauðan á gálga þann, er hann hafði honum ætlat” (*Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka* ch. 8). I read these two locations as being the same, although I recognize that the wording does not absolutely demand it. Cf. the “hanging” in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* (ch. 5).



Figure 1. Detail from Lärbro Stora Hammars I. Photo by the author.

practices at Uppsala; the thanatological ritual in which Óðinn spouts numinous knowledge between the fires in *Grímnismál* (albeit a non-hanging image).¹⁸ It is, of course, scenes of these types that many believe we see on one of the panels of the Lärbro Stora Hammars I stone on Gotland (Figure 1).¹⁹ Whatever else the picture stone is meant to depict, it clearly means to show a warrior figure hanging from a tree in the context of a ritual.

Also significant in *Hávamál* 157 is the gallows-corpse (*virgilnár*) which Óðinn claims to be able to control: such a person might be a criminal or a sacrificial victim (perhaps even both). In fact, we meet not-quite-actually-dead cadavers in a variety of forms in the Old Norse world.²⁰ One type of undead dead populating Old Norse literature is the *haugbúi*, the mound-dweller, essentially always male, who seems to live in an almost humanlike way, occasionally in the company of

¹⁸ As Hans-Joachim Klare suggests, the dead could know things even an otherwise all-knowing god would be eager to discover: “Die Toten wissen alles, was geschieht, sie sehen in die Zukunft, drum haben sie ein Wissen, das den nach Allwissen dürstenden Gott immer aufs neue reizt, sie zu befragen” (Klare 1933–1934: 16) (The dead know everything that happens, they see into the future, and thus they possess knowledge that excites that god thirsting for omniscience to question them). The literature in this area is vast: Ström 1947; Kragerud 1981; and Davidson 1988 remain useful portals into it; important recent studies include Schjødt 2008: 173–224; Patton 2009: 213–36; and Sundqvist 2009 and 2010.

¹⁹ See, e.g., the discussion in McKinnell 2007.

²⁰ This topic has attracted much attention over the years; see Klare 1933–1934; Ohlmarks 1936; Davidson 1943; and Chadwick 1946.

others, within his mound. Among mound-dwellers, there seem to be a variety of types: at one extreme, there are the malicious, terrifying ones like the *haugbúi* Kárr inn gamli in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* (ch. 18; pp. 56–59) who frightens all the farmers off the island until Grettir dispatches him (Vésteinn Ólason has called this type “the ungrateful dead”). At the other extreme are the benevolent undead like the mound-dweller Brynjarr in *Þorsteins þáttur uxafóts*, who significantly helps Þorsteinn. In between lie morally neutral types like the mound-dweller in *Kumlbúa þáttur*.²¹

Apparently a different category comprises the awakened dead female seeress or *vǫlva*, perhaps the best-known type to modern audiences (in, e.g., *Grógaldur*, *Vǫluspá*, *Baldrs draumar*). The division of these two types, the male *haugbúi* and the well-informed female *vǫlva*, although not absolute, is fairly consistent, with some important exceptions, as in *Hyndluljóð*, which features an awakened giantess who does not spew forth numinous knowledge in the manner of the *vǫlur* but rather engages, formally at least, in a wisdom contest with Freyja on their ride to Valhǫll (*Sennom við þr sǫðlom*, etc. v. 8). Another exception, in this case of stunning proportions, comes in Book I of Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum*. Here, in a gender-reversing scene, we witness a recently dead man being used by a female worker of magic, when the giantess, Harthgrepa (significantly, perhaps, dressed as a man), and Hadingus come upon a house where the funeral of the master of the place, who has just died, is occurring.²² Then, Saxo, continues, Harthgrepa calls his spirit in this manner, with the following results:

Ubi magicę speculationis officio superum mentem rimari cupiens, diris admodum carminibus ligno insculptis iisdemque linguę defuncti per Hadingum suppositis hac uoce eum horrendum auribus carmen edere coegit:

Inferis me qui retraxit, execrandus oppetat
Tartaroque deuocati spiritus poenas luat! etc. (*Gesta Danorum* 1.6.4–5, 1: 108)

²¹ On these types, see my comments in Mitchell 2009. In his fine, wide-ranging discussion of death and the dead in Icelandic literature, Vésteinn Ólason notes of the ungrateful dead, the sort we see in Kárr, that “they are resentful of the living, or some of them, and a strong desire to cause damage and destruction binds them to earthly life” (Vésteinn Ólason 2003: 169; on related concepts in Old Icelandic, such as the *draugr*, see Ármann Jakobsson 2011).

²² I note here the similarity of this scene to that in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* (ch. 3), when Angantýr’s daughter, looking to fulfill a male warrior’s role, goes to his mound and awakens him.

(Desiring to probe the will of the gods by magic, she inscribed most gruesome spells on wood and made Hading insert them under the corpse's tongue, which then, in a voice terrible to the ear, uttered these lines:

Let the one who summoned me, a spirit from the underworld, dragged me from the infernal depths, be cursed and perish miserably, *etc.* (p. 23))

This “spirit” eventually foretells their fate, but most of all he curses in direct terms “the one who summoned me ... dragged me from the infernal depths.”²³

This scene is perhaps the closest we come to a literary presentation of what Óðinn suggests in *Hávamál* 157, when he says of the *virgilmár* that “I can so carve and colour the runes that the man walks and talks with me.” In Saxo, the dead man responds to Harthgrepa’s use of runic magic, not only speaking with her but also journeying back to the world of the living. Other loquacious corpses occur in Old Norse literature, of course, such as Guðriðr’s deceased husband, Þorsteinn Eiríksson, in *Eiríks saga rauða* (ch. 6) and in *Grænlendinga saga* (ch. 6). He too prophesies, but unlike the dead man in Saxo, his supernatural feats are generally understood to relate to the Christian-themed tone of the saga, and in any event, he is not responding to the manipulation of a magician.²⁴ The rune-awakened corpse in Saxo does not walk, as Óðinn’s comments might lead us to expect, at least not in a normal sense, but he does move from the underworld to our world, the world of the living. And certainly he talks, if reluctantly and with ire, once the rune stick has been placed under his tongue. Saxo’s presentation is then not that distant from what *Hávamál* 157 suggests.

That this charm, among others, focuses on the tongue of the dead is not surprising: after all, Old Norse *tunga* refers to the physical entity, as well as to the general concept of a language (e.g., *á danska tungu*), that is, both to one of the busiest muscular organs in the human body, the one necessary for the production of speech, *and* to the resulting product of such activity. It has been conjectured that Óðinn’s cognomen, “god of the hanged”, a name that comes to us in

²³ On this passage, see further the comments in Davidson and Fisher 1980: 30, as well as my remarks in Mitchell 2008b.

²⁴ Perhaps a more proximate example comes through the manipulations of Þrandr in *Færeyinga saga*, when he apparently causes three dead men, or their apparitions, to appear in order to discover the causes and places of their deaths. The description of his preparations includes setting a large fire in the fire pit, making four trellises or frames, drawing nine squares, and requesting that no one speak to him: “Þrandr hafde þa latit gera ellda mykla j ellda skala ok grindanna fíorar lætr hann gera med fíorum hornum ok ix ræita Ristr Þrandr alla uega vt fra grindunum en hann setzst astol mille eldz ok grindanna hann bidr þa nu ekki vid sig tala ok þeir gera suo” (ch. 40). (Thrand had had big fires made in the hearth-room, and he had four hurdles [frames] set up with four corners, and he scratches nine squares all around out from the hurdles, and he sits on a stool between the fires and the hurdles. Now he gives orders that nobody is to talk to him, and they do as he says” (p. 81)).

a variety of forms (e.g., *hangatýr*, *hangaguð*, *hangadróttinn*, *heimþinguðr hanga*),²⁵ should be understood in relation to sacrificial hanging of the sort pictured on Figure 1 (Lärbro Stora Hammars I), especially where asphyxia (rather than breaking the cervical vertebrae) is understood as the cause of death. Hanging in this way typically causes a protruding, purplish tongue, just the sort of image useful, necessary even, for forced thanatological revelations of great secrets, of being “between two worlds” in Jens Peter Schjødt’s evocative phrase (2008). It is also one of the reasons scholars have been inclined to believe that the one-eyed figure from the stave church at Hegge, Norway, should be understood with reference to Odinic belief systems (Figure 2²⁶).

I note, however, that Saxo’s reluctant, revelatory corpse is not the only case where tongues play an important role in stories involving interactions between the living and the dead. In fact, we have something of an inversion of Saxo’s story pattern in *Þorleifs þáttr jarlsskálds*; here it is the dead poet, i.e., Þorleifr’s *haugbúi*, who comes out of his mound, on which the aspiring but inadequate poet, Hallbjörn, regularly sleeps. Hallbjörn’s attempts at composing poetry never go further than the opening line, “Here lies a poet” (*Hér liggr skáld*). Þorleifr pulls the tongue of the would-be poet (*togar hann á honum tunguna*), recites a verse for the aspirant to memorize, and instructs Hallbjörn to compose a poem praising Þorleifr and to be certain that the poem is complex with regard to both meter and metaphor. Hallbjörn succeeds and goes on to become a great skald (*Þorleifs þáttr jarlsskálds* ch. 5–8; pp. 222–29). Here, the tongue as the generative organ of speech, and thus of poetic production, is essentialized and its manipulation by the dead poet, Þorleifr, is the turning point in Hallbjörn’s endeavor to acquire poetic ability.²⁷

²⁵ *Víga-Glúms saga* ch. 27; *Hávarðr halti ísfirðingr* 14; *Ynglinga saga* ch. 7; *Heiðarvíga saga* ch. 26. Cf. the additional *heiti* enumerated in Falk 1924: 59–61, and his discussion concerning *haptaguð* “god of fetters” (?) (62).

²⁶ “Hegge stavkirke, maske på stav - 1” by John Erling Blad - Own work. Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hegge_stavkirke,_maske_p%C3%A5_stav_-_1.jpg#/media/File:Hegge_stavkirke,_maske_p%C3%A5_stav_-_1.jpg

²⁷ Without wishing to strain the soup too thin, I note that Hallbjörn’s poem specifically praises Þorleifr’s libeling of Earl Hákon and that the story, which is, after all, about Þorleifr, follows with the comment that his brothers go to Norway the summer after his death, but it was not in the cards for them to kill Hákon, that is, “to have his head [lit., scalp; ‘head-skin’] at their feet” (En þeim varð eigi lagið þá enn at standa yfir höfuðsvorðum Hákonar jarls (ch. 8)). When in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, Hákon is dispatched, is it then mere coincidence that the following scene takes place:

Sá hólmr var þá hafðr til þess at drepa þar þjófa ok illmenni, ok stóð þar gálgi, ok lét hann þar til bera höfuð Hákonar jarls ok Karks. Gekk þá til allr herrinn ok æpði upp ok grýtti þar at ok mæltu, at þar skyldi níðingr fara með öðrum níðingum. Síðan láta þeir fara upp í Gaulardal ok taka þar búkinn ok drógu í brott ok brenndu. (*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* ch. 50; emphasis added)



Figure 2. The one-eyed figure from the stave church at Hegge, Norway.
Photo by John Erling Blad/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0.

The tongue and its relation to the production of speech also plays a key role in *Þorsteins þáttur uxafóts*. This story tells of how the hero of the *þáttur* enters a grave mound, where he finds there two fraternal *haugbúar* and their retinues.

(This island was at that time used for putting to death thieves and evildoers, and a gallows stood there. *The king had the heads of Earl Hákon and of Kark fastened to it. Thereupon the whole multitude came with great shouts and stoned them, saying that they should fare thus like every other villain. Then they sent men up to Gaular Dale who hauled away Hákon's trunk and burned it.* (p. 192, emphasis added))

The helpful brother, Brynjarr, explains that his brother Oddr, the evil one, has a special piece of gold that, when placed under the tongue of a dumb person, gives them the power of speech.²⁸ Importantly, Þorsteinn's mother, Oddný, had been born without the ability to speak and must respond to others by writing on a rune stick or *kefli* (*Oddný reist rúnar á kefli, því at hon mátti eigi mæla*). Þorsteinn wrests the gold piece from Oddr and gives it to his mother; when it is shortly thereafter placed “under the root of her tongue” (*undir tungurætr henni*), Oddný acquires and retains the power of speech.²⁹

These plays on “tongue-power”—the gold object that cures Oddný, said to have been placed *undir tungurætr henni*; the gift of mantic speech in Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* that comes with the insertion of a rune charm under the tongue of the corpse; and so on—suggest that the various authors had degrees of familiarity with the same tradition from which *Hávamál* 157 derives. Of related interest to these later literary sources are examples of actual “tongue objects”, or “Charon's obol” as archaeologists often term them (on which see below).

Such mortuary practices, although not common, are in evidence in early Scandinavian graves from, for example, Gotland and Sjælland. In fact, instances of the “Charon's obol” have been documented in Scandinavia dating back to at least the late Roman Iron Age (e.g., Almgren 1903; Shetelig 1908; Stjerna 1912: 101–02; Davidson 1943: 37; Gräslund 1965–1966). Summarizing much of this research, Signe Horn Fuglesang writes, “the best evidence for the custom in the Viking period comes from eastern Sweden, while it seems to have been rare in Denmark and the evidence from Norway and Finland is inconclusive” (Fuglesang 1989: 21–22). She notes further that “graves of the 13th and 14th centuries have documented [the practice] from Sweden, Scania and Norway” (Fuglesang 1989: 22). The tradition arguably continued even into modern folk beliefs, as there are graves from the 1700s that reflect the continuity of the practice.³⁰

²⁸ “Oddr hefir at varðveita gull þat, er sú náttúra fylgir, at hverr maðr, sem mállaus er ok leggþr þat undir tungurætr sér, þá tekr þegar mál sitt, ok af því gulli má móðir þín mál fá” (*Þorsteins þáttur uxafóts* ch. 6). (Odd keeps a piece of gold whose nature is that whatever dumb person puts that gold under the root of his or her tongue will then gain the power of speech and by means of that gold your mother will be able to speak (p. 346)).

²⁹ Noteworthy here are the Philolmela-like aspects of the story line in the *þáttur*, i.e., inability to speak, pregnancy, and so on.

³⁰ See especially Gräslund 1965–1966. The recent excavation of an early eighteenth-century site in which 14 small silver coins were found in 13 graves suggests the possibility that this practice continued up to modern times:

Myntfynden för tanken till den grekiska mytologin, som omtalar att färjekarlen Charon. [...] Att denna hedniska sedvänja kan ses i gravar från tidigt 1700-tal är ovanligt, och har möjligen att göra med att begravningarna inte ägde rum på den vanliga kyrkogården, och att de som begravts avlidit i en fruktad farsot. Mynten kan således ha fått följa de döda i graven som en extra försäkran om att man trots detta skulle få komma till himmelriket. (Jacobsson 2002: 17).

Hávamál 157 and the Learned and Ecclesiastical Tradition

As we have seen, there exists a rich native tradition that touches, or appears to touch, on the images suggested by *Hávamál* 157. But is that sufficient to explain the background against which Óðinn formulates his claim to know how to reanimate the dead and make them talk? Perhaps, but certainly there is more to the medieval cultural tapestry concerned with the dead and dying than these native traditions alone. In the end, we may decide that the influence of foreign learned and ecclesiastical materials is slight and favor instead the domestic traditions, but let us first examine the external materials and assess the effects they might have had.

As literature and as homily, a striking Judeo-Christian parallel to *Hávamál* 157 in which a dead person is raised and speaks specifically, like Mímir, for the purpose of prophesying, is the so-called “witch of Endor” (I Sam: 28), a narrative known to have been used in sermons in northern Europe (by, e.g., Ælfric [*Marcarius and the Magicians, Saul and the Witch of Endor*]). In this necromantic narrative, the spirit of the dead prophet Samuel is raised by a female medium; the shade converses with Saul and, like the spirit of the dead man in Saxo, he complains of having been disturbed and of having been “brought up”, apparently out of the world of the dead.³¹

On a related issue, namely the role of the severed head, the story of John the Baptist’s decapitation (Matt. 14: 1–11; Mark 6: 14–29) naturally meant that trunkless heads often played a key role in medieval Christian iconography. The Baptist is the most obvious figure of this sort to modern eyes; however, medieval hagiology includes a large number of saints whose legendary martyrdoms include decapitation. And among these, there are dozens of particular interest in the current discussion, such as the cephalophoric saints, that is those saints who, after being beheaded, pick up their detached heads and carry them, sometimes speaking as they go.

(The discovery of coins makes one think of Greek mythology, which speaks of the ferryman Charon [...]. That this pagan custom is to be seen in graves from the early 1700s is uncommon, and may be connected to the fact that the burials did not take place in a normal cemetery, and that those buried died in a dreaded plague. The coins may thus have followed the dead in their graves as extra assurance that one would despite that enter Heaven.)

³¹ On this scene and Nordic mortuary beliefs, see Davidson 1943: 168–69. Cf. the comparison Clive Tolley makes between the biblical scene and *Völuspá*, in which he concludes that the echoes of the Bible in the poem are “clear and intentional” (Tolley 2009: 485–86). He goes on to say, in an excellent statement about the full range of purportedly pre-Christian materials, that this view “does not mean that the pagan elements [...] are not genuine, but it suggests these elements are being structured and perhaps interpreted in a way which may not have taken place in earlier, more purely pagan times.”

Very likely the most famous of such saints in the Middle Ages was St. Denis, the first bishop of Paris and one of the city's patron saints, who was martyred in the mid-third century CE. Over time, the legend of St. Denis developed considerably (cf. Spiegel 1983) and by the thirteenth-century *Legenda aurea* of Jacobus de Voragine, it acquired the form in which it is best-known today: having been beheaded, St. Denis picks up his head and walks several miles to the site of the present cathedral basilica of Saint Denis, accompanied by the singing of angels (*Legenda aurea* p. 685).³² Some later versions of the legend add that the head of St. Denis preached throughout the journey.³³ The point is, in other words, that there existed a notable emphasis in the Middle Ages on cephalic imagery in religion and law: this theme, as Esther Cohen argues, intensified over time, and by the high Middle Ages there is, as she writes, “a gradually growing shared perception of the head as the most important organ for life and identity, which derived from different fields of action and influenced different fields of knowledge” (Cohen 2013: 73).³⁴

A similar type of decapitation narrative as that which came to signify St. Denis can be seen in the story of St. Edmund. According to the tenth-century *Passio Sancti Eadmundi* of Abbo of Fleury, the East Anglian king, Edmund, is martyred by the Danish army; according to the legend, he is tortured and beheaded due to his unwillingness to reject his Christian faith. The severed head of the martyr is deposited in a forest by the invaders and when the locals finally venture forth, they discover his headless body and begin a search for the missing head. In response to their cries, the head identifies its location by yelling, “Here, here, here!”³⁵

³² This part of the legend is faithfully reproduced in the Old Swedish translation of *Legenda aurea*, *Ett fornsvenskt legendarium*, here from Codex Bildstenianus (early 1400s):

Sidhan ledhis han ther wt ater (at / for) hedhan domara (mz sinom kompanom) at thola manga nya pinor: Ok halshuggus mz yxe. The thre. vm sidhe. Dyonisius ok hans compana rusticus ok eleutherius widher mercurii mønster. Sancti dyonisii (liikir / licame) reste sik wp siælfuir. Ok grep howdhit mz armomin. Ok gik æpter ængla ledsagh(ara) Ok himna liuse. thwo mila wægh fra halshuggeno som nu kallas martyrium biærgh til thæn stadh han ligger nu. (*Sagan om Sankt Dionysius* I: 344)

(Then he was led before a heathen judge with his companions and suffered many new torments. And the three, Dionysius and his companions, Rusticus and Eleutherius, were beheaded with an axe at the temple of Mercury. The body of Saint Dionysius raised itself up and grasped its head with its arms and followed angels and heavenly light for two miles from the place of the beheadings which is now called the hill of martyrs (i.e., Montmartre) to that place where he now lies. (My translation))

³³ I note, however, that I have not been able to identify this particular embellishment in any of the medieval sources.

³⁴ Cf. the many examples and themes covered by the essays in Tracy and Massey 2012; Gardela and Kajkowski 2013 (many of which concern Old Norse topics); and Baert et al. 2013.

³⁵ *Vispillonum sane more pluribus pedententim inuia perlustrantibus, cum jam posset audiri loquens, ad voces se invicem cohortantium, et utpote socii ad socium alternatim clamantium,*

This well-known motif (Thompson 1966: V229.25, “Severed head of saint speaks so that searchers can find it”) appears to have had recognizable resonance in medieval Scandinavia, if in a modified version: in a legend first recorded ca. 1200 in the officium *Celebremus karissimi*, the eleventh-century English missionary, Sigfrid, undertakes conversion activity in Swedish Småland, at Växjö, accompanied by his nephews, Unaman, Sunaman, and Vinaman, all of whom are also ecclesiastics. They are engaged in the construction of a church at Växjö, dedicated, appropriately as it turns out, to John the Baptist. While Sigfrid is away in Västergötland, purportedly in order to baptize King Olof Skötkonung at Husaby, a group of pagans kills and beheads the three nephews. Their heads are placed in a wooden tub which is then weighed down with an enormous stone and sunk in the middle of the nearby lake. When Sigfrid returns, he is miraculously led to the heads’ location in Lake Växjö when he sees three lights over the lake. The heads are floating on the water and speak to him. This legend gained traction quickly, and already by the end of the thirteenth century, the severed, and seemingly still bleeding, heads of the three nephews formed the seal of Växjö cathedral chapter.³⁶

Thus, the idea of the recently dead being reanimated and regaining their capacity for speech and locomotion might not have been as farfetched or macabre to a medieval audience as it seems to us today. But these scenes apparently play out within the lives of saints as demonstrations of God’s will, miracles with which to show the extent of God’s power and love. Moreover, as noted above, there exists a long-standing Mediterranean tradition of “tongue objects”, generally referred to as the “Ferryman’s Fee” or “Charon’s obol”, special articles placed in the mouths of the dead. “Charon’s obol” is, of course, a name that invokes the most famous classical example of this practice, but it is a tradition by no means limited to the world of the Greeks and Romans.³⁷ Indeed, the same

Ubi es? illud respondebatur designando locum, patria lingua dicens, *Her, her, her*. Quod interpretatum Latinus sermo exprimit, *Hic, hic, hic*. (*Passio Sancti Eadmundi* p. 40)

(A number of the party, like corpse-searchers, were gradually examining the out-of-the-way parts of the wood, and when the moment had arrived at which the sound of a voice could be heard, the head, in response to the calls of the search party mutually encouraging one other, and as comrade to comrade crying alternately “Where are you?” indicated the place where it lay by exclaiming in their native tongue, Here! Here! Here! In Latin the same meaning would be rendered by *Hic! Hic! Hic!* (p. 41))

Subsequent reworkings of the passion, such as Ælfric’s *Life of St Edmund* (II: 324–25), sometimes repeat and build on this scene.

³⁶ See the image in, e.g., Larsson 1975: 13. On the legend, see Schmid 1931; Lundén 1967; Larsson 1975; and *Celebremus karissimi* pp. 9–17.

³⁷ “Charon’s fee: putting coin in dead person’s mouth to pay for ferry across Styx” (Thompson 1966: P613). In her wide-ranging review of the literary and archaeological evidence for the practice in the classical world, Susan T. Stevens summarizes the phenomenon thus: “According to ancient authors, the custom of ‘Charon’s obol’ has four characteristics, though there are some

practice of placing objects (often but not always coins) in the mouths of the dead was already known among the Egyptians, Phoenicians, and others from periods anterior to its use by the Greeks (see, e.g., Grabka 1953: 3, 6; Wolff 2002: 136).

It should be noted too that this concept, or at least something that looks very much like it, is not limited to the Old World but is also found in the pre-Columbian New World, as in the case of the Cañete valley of South America, where, for example, small copper discs were found in the mouths of Peruvian mummies.³⁸ Noting the existence of these cases is not, of course, meant to be an argument about *function*, which, to the extent we understand it, would likely have been quite discursive in these various instances; rather what interests us are the similar techniques, methods, operational elements, and outcomes of such practices.

From the perspective of our medieval data-points, perhaps the single most important aspect of the “Charon’s obol” tradition is how it influenced Christian tradition, specifically, the Church’s adaptation of the “Ferryman’s Fee” into the so-called Last Rites, where the Eucharist is administered to the dying, the so-called *Viaticum*. The history of the relationship of the pagan *viaticum*, the provisions for the journey (< *via* “road”) into the afterlife, and the Christian *Viaticum*, is complex, and it is a history not without its disputes (cf. Grabka 1953). In the early Church, such provisions or preparations might include baptism, prayers, or any other means that could help the dying in their transition into the next world. It could also refer to the Eucharist generally, until, in the words of the *Catholic Encyclopedia* in their entry on *Viaticum*, “finally it acquired its present fixed, exclusive, and technical sense of Holy Communion given to those in danger of death” (*Catholic Encyclopedia* 2003). It was, as Grabka has argued, *both* a Christian bulwark against the need to employ “Charon’s obol” and an adaptation of that same tradition to Christian ritual.³⁹ But either way, whether

variations in their discussions: (1) a single low-denomination coin (2) is placed in the mouth (3) at the time of death (4) to pay Charon’s fare” (Stevens 1991: 216). Among other motifs connected with this tradition are: A672.1.1, “Charon exacts fee to ferry souls across Styx”; E431.11, “Coin placed in mouth of dead to prevent return”; and E489.3, “Forgetting Charon’s fee” (Thompson 1966). On the many, widely dispersed manifestations of the tradition, see Grinsell 1957.

³⁸ Regarding Peruvian practices in the Cañete valley, Kroeber and O’Neale write:

Most mummies had copper or occasionally silver sheets or ornaments bestowed about the head, most frequently perhaps in the mouth, but also about the ears or elsewhere on the face. Where the metal is entirely corroded it shows in green stains on the bone or teeth, as previously mentioned. This burial habit prevails for the Late period of all parts of the Peruvian coast which I have visited, from north of Trujillo to south of Nazca, frequently even as regards the graves of the poor. The most frequent disposal is of a round or oval sheet of thin metal about the size of a coin, apparently laid on the tongue—a sort of Charon’s obol. (Kroeber and O’Neale 1926: 4: 247)

³⁹ The wide-ranging learning displayed by Grabka in his review of the traditions which led to the *Viaticum* does not, however, prevent him from seeming to hold two contradictory views of this history. Cp. “The ancient funeral rite of placing the *viaticum* coin in the mouth of the corpse

the custom was preemptive or adaptive, it was also about inserting something highly symbolic into the mouths of the dead and dying.

A final, further “learned” parallel to *Hávamál* 157 comes from the medieval world of natural magic, specifically the lapidary tradition. In this tradition, certain stones, when placed in the mouth, possessed the occult power to make the speaker reveal truths, including prophecies. Compendious works detailing the power of stones and gems are known already from antiquity, but the best-known example in medieval Europe was the eleventh-century *De Lapidibus* by Bishop Marbod of Rennes.⁴⁰ The earliest Nordic example I have found of this tradition of stones with prophetic properties being placed under the tongue comes from an Old Danish translation of Marbod (ca. 1300),⁴¹ which reads in part:

Haldær man hanum [*Celonites*] undær ren tungæ. tha ma han spa.⁴²
(*Stenbog* p. 191)

(If one places it under a clean [alt., pure] tongue then he may soothsay.)

The same belief later appears in Peder Månsson’s Old Swedish translation of the late medieval *Speculum lapidum* of Camillus Leonardi, which similarly says that by taking *Celonites* and placing it under the tongue one can speak many

was responsible for the superstition in Christian burials of administering the *Viaticum* to the dead” (Grabka 1953: 42) versus “the pagan custom of placing a coin into the mouth of the dead as a *viaticum* for the journey of the soul to its after-life never gained a firm foothold among the Christians. They had their own *Viaticum* with which they provided their departing brethren: the Holy Eucharist” (Grabka 1953: 27) and “Seen in its essentials, the ancient Christian custom of providing the dying faithful with the Eucharist as their *Viaticum* for the journey to eternity was neither derived from nor inspired by the pagan *viaticum*; it was based on the revealed truths of Christianity” (Grabka 1953: 42).

⁴⁰ On the learned tradition of magic in the Nordic world—lapidaries, alchemy, and so on—see esp. Mitchell 2008a, as well as Mitchell 2011.

⁴¹ On these translations, see *Stenbog*, LXVIII–CII, and Brix 1943: 38–39.

⁴² The complete entry under the heading *Chelonites* runs: “Silenites hetær en steen. oc fòthæs af en snæghæl .i. brittani land. Han ær blalyk røth. Haldær man hanum undær ren tungæ. tha ma han spa. Thænnæ steen ma æi eld skathæ.” (There is a stone called ‘Silenites’ which comes from a snail in Brittany. It is blueish[?] red. If one places it under a clean [alt., pure] tongue, then he may soothsay. This stone cannot be harmed by fire.) I take this opportunity to thank Henrik Jørgensen of Aarhus University for his advice on the treatment of *blalyk røth*. Ny. kgl. Samling 66, 8^{vo} is a composite manuscript, which makes its dating difficult, but it is usually set to ca. 1300. In this instance, the description, although based on Marbod’s lapidary poem, has been altered: India has become Brittany, and tortoise (*testudo*) has become a snail. Cf. Jespersen 1938: 164. Other manuscripts, e.g., Sth. K4, are fragmentary and do not contain an entry for “Chelonites/Silenites.” For a facsimile (and text) of Ny. kgl. Samling 66, 8^{vo} [136v], see Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab’s online site, *Tekster fra Danmarks middelalder 1100–1515*, at: <http://middelalder-tekster.dk/harpestreng-nks66/3/58>.

prophecies about things that will come to pass.⁴³ Although we cannot know with certainty whether this tradition exercised influence on the way Óðinn's powers are presented in our texts, it is likely that the existence of this parallel belief system would have been known among the clerics who possessed Latin learning and the other requirements necessary for engagement with natural magic.

Raising these points about the cephalophoric saints, the Ferryman's Fee, and the *Viaticum* and its history is not the same as claiming that these aspects of learned lore necessarily shaped the traditions we see in Saxo, *Hávamál*, or the other Nordic materials, but given the tendency to adduce parallels between the pre-Christian and Christian worlds, and to see in such analogues, prefigurations, and revelations of the Almighty's power, that such a parallel existed may well have reinforced the pre-existing concept and even allowed for its easier acceptance within clerical culture.

Conclusion

If we consider this problem operationally, as a ritual performed at some point in time, how was such a belief as that suggested by *Hávamál* 157 practiced, or believed to have been practiced? After all, we possess, so far as I know, no *kefli* "piece of wood" or other materials on which appropriate runic inscriptions have been carved to suggest such charms were ever used.⁴⁴ Even though there may exist no surviving recognizable runic inscriptions, we do have Church edicts and synodal statutes condemning the use of runes, listed in collocations with such things as magic, witchcraft, and superstitions. Presumably, mundane runic use was of little interest to the Church but precisely such things as charms to awaken the dead would have been what the bishops looked to eradicate. But, of course, this point is nothing but an inference.

We perhaps get a bit closer when we examine the provincial laws. Here, for example, the Older Law of Frostaping speaks of those who are killed for various deeds, including witchcraft, visiting soothsayers, or sitting out in order to awaken spirits [lit., trolls] and thereby promote heathendom ("fordæðu scapi oc spáfarar oc útisetu at vecia tröll upp oc fremia heiðni með því", *Norges gamle Love* I: 182). This is just one of nearly a dozen such laws in Iceland and Norway specifying prohibitions against "sitting out." Sometimes the laws go one step further,

⁴³ "Celonites är en sten som taks vth aff storom skölpaddom. [...] Hwilken som honom bär wndy twngonne han talar mangan spaadom som komma skal oc ske" (*Stenbok* p. 466). (Celonites is a stone taken from large turtles [...] Whoever bears it under his tongue can speak many prophecies of things that will come to pass. (My translation.))

⁴⁴ Cf. modern narratives concerning "uppvakningar eða sendingar" in *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri* (I: 304–39), on all aspects of which see especially Gunnell 2012.

as in “So also those who attempt to awaken spirits (*draugar*) or mound-dwellers (*haugbúar*)” (“Sua oc þeir er freista draugha upp at ueckia æða haughbua”, *Norges gamle Love* II: 326–27). This asserted practice brings to mind such developments in the mound as those presented in *Þorsteins þáttur uxafóts*, for example, as well as the commands used by saga characters that the seeresses and others should “awaken” (*vaki þú*).

Still, it is highly unlikely that anything like the sort of practice referred to in *Hávamál* 157 was ever practiced in the Christian Middle Ages and thus, our best presentation of such a performance derives from the surviving mythological materials. With respect to the poetry, *Baldur's draumar* provides the fullest information about how Óðinn accomplishes his task of compelling the dead to awaken and speak, as well as expressions in this instance of the *vǫlva*'s reluctance to be awakened and cooperate with the magician.⁴⁵ He rides to Hel and then to the seeress's resting place, where he undertakes a relatively detailed performance (at least compared to the general rule): Óðinn speaks, or more narrowly, chants or intones (past tense, *qvað*), various corpse-related items of word-power: *valgaldr* and *nás orð*, that is, literally, “slain-magic” and “corpse-words”.⁴⁶ The *vǫlva* responds by asking who it is that has forced her to travel such difficult paths. The extant text does not specify that Óðinn does more than to vocalize these powerful charms in order to bend her to his will but we cannot know for sure. It would not be difficult to envision the carving of a *kefli* during the performance of such a charm, just as Harthgrepa does in forcing the corpse to speak in *Gesta Danorum* or as other characters do in performing rune magic, such as Skírnir in *For Skírnis* (see Mitchell 2007).

⁴⁵ How the dead person is raised in *Grógaldur* is unclear. Klare (1933–1934: 16) assumes that in awakening his mother from death and getting her willing assistance, *Svipdagr* does nothing more than speak (“er hatte nicht einmal Zaubermittel gebraucht. [...] Nun genügt ein Wort, sie kommt und hilft bereitwillig”) (he does not even use a magic spell. [...] With just a word she comes and helps willingly). Although the poem gives no explicit information other than his command to “awaken”, the audience here, and elsewhere, may, of course, have assumed other operations were in play. In the famous scene in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* between live daughter and dead father (NB: gender-reversed compared to *Grógaldur*), referred to earlier, *Hervor* too appears to do no more than command that the dead man awaken (*vaki þú*) to begin their dialogue but there may have been much more to it. *Vǫluspá* is, if anything, even less clear than these other cases: the poem begins with the *vǫlva*'s calls for attention, not any act of Óðinn's. It is from the *comparanda* and such clues as her addresses to *Valfǫðr* about what he wants to know and her repeated phrase, “vitoð ér enn, eða hvat?” (do you understand yet, or what more) that scholars draw the reasonable inference that it is indeed cut from the same cloth as the others. And, in fact, rhythmically repeated questions of the “do you understand yet, or what more”-sort characterize most of these poems.

⁴⁶ Cleasby-Vigusson 1982, for example, glosses *valgaldr* as “charms, a kind of necromancy ascribed to Odin” and *nás orð* as “necromancy”.

What happened when Nordic prophetic practices involving the dead encountered similar beliefs from the classical world or Christian interpretations of them? Nordic tradition could easily accommodate these views to its own, where the tongue object was not for the purpose of accompanying the dead into the afterlife but for the use of the living to look into the *arcana coelestia* which could only be known within a certain narrow mantic framework. Given the extensive *comparanda* over time and space, the practice of placing something in the mouth (and under the tongue) of a corpse need not be envisioned as having been borrowed from elsewhere, either the practices of the classical world or the Church, or indeed from adepts of natural magic. It is possible that these necromantic practices and belief systems had evolved in northern Europe over a very long time with ongoing reticulations between vernacular and learned belief systems.

Accusations of *Hávamál* being overly consistent are few for good reason. Certainly, in one respect, the earlier part of the poem may have even been very wrong: in verse 71, *Hávamál* claims “nýtr manngi nás” (a dead man is good for nothing). As we see from verse 157 and its cognate materials, apparently there existed a tradition according to which nothing could be further from the truth.

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