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Poetry as Ritual in Pre-Christian Nordic Religion

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This doctoral dissertation features performance-based analyses of a selection of Old Norse poems (*Grímnismál*, selected stanzas of *Hávamál*, *Eiríksmál*, *Hákonarmál* and *Hrafnsmál*). The underlying assumption is that these are a form of oral-derived poetry which preserves traits of having been performed in collective, religious rituals in a hall-based, Viking Age setting. Any kind of preservation of knowledge in an oral context like that of the pre-Christian North is conventionally thought to presuppose activities connected to memory, and the transmission of such preserved knowledge intuitively entails some form of performance (Gísli Sigurðsson 2018). Furthermore, in pre-literate societies, this performance is often ritualised and formalised (Gunnell 2018a; 2018b; Assmann 2006). The theoretical framework of this dissertation is therefore grounded in approaches to orality, memory, ritual and performance studies.

Orality studies provides a starting point for looking at the poetic tradition and religion in question. Oral societies, their religion, and poetic traditions are vastly different from those based on writing and all the possibilities this technology brings with it, since the transmission of oral religion and oral poetry rests on human memory and ritual performance, as Jan Assmann (2006: 39) has argued. In the Pre-Christian Nordic context, however, the source situation is such that we are only left with medieval manuscript

versions of the poems in question. The medieval manuscript versions of these Old Norse poems may be treated as what orality scholar John Miles Foley (2002) terms *voices from the past*, or later, fixed versions of once-living, oral traditions, with an inherent *vocalité* (Zumthor 1988). This provides us with an opportunity for glimpsing the oral traditions of the Viking Age through the medieval, textual lens. Memory studies (Assmann 2006; 2008) may assist the reading and contextualisation of these poetic sources. Focusing on the role of both autobiographical and collective, cultural memory in ritualised, oral transmission, memory studies can be used to propose models for understanding this transmission process – not least the role of individuals termed memory specialists. The transmission of cultural memory in oral societies is heavily formalised and often takes the form of ritual performances of, for instance, oral poetry. Ritual studies may thus provide suggestions for the functions of this transmission process, especially for the performer and audience of the oral transmission process. The performance of religious, ritual acts often secures continuity through a demand of invariance and formality, while at the same time giving authority to the performer and furthering conformity and acceptance of the validity and reality of the performed rituals. This leads to group coherence and solidarity between the participants in the ritual performance (Rappaport 1999). In ritual

performance, furthermore, the setting – or the performance space – and the content – or the performed space – meld together in the creation of a ‘double scene’ (Lönnroth 1978, 2011: 243–259), transporting and transforming the participants (Gunnell 2011). Performance studies may then be used when analysing the poems. Paying attention to the context of any performance is pivotal, and this holds especially true when dealing with oral poetry (Bauman 1975). The oral-poetic rules of Old Norse poetry are an essential part of the ‘performance archaeological’ (cf. Gunnell 2016) reading of the poems in question.

In the analysis of the poems, various performance markers (the use of self-reference, props and gestures by the performer, as well as a focus on aural and spatial qualities) and the interaction between performer and audience are treated as some of the most important aspects to consider when establishing the poems’ context and connection to oral performance. Having done this, the oral, ritual performances of poetry are then argued to have had transformational qualities for performer, audience and space – with lasting consequences for their notion of identity and self-understanding. These transformations then serve as a basis for placing the individual poems, seen as ritual performances, in a specific ritual context, as summarised below.

Grímnismál may fruitfully be viewed as an initiation ritual for a future ruler represented by Agnarr, with the ritual specialist acting as the initiator represented by Grímnir/Óðinn. The ritual specialist is placed between multiple fires in a ruler’s hall. Whether he has been sitting there for a full eight nights and days, or this is perhaps just implied as a part of the esoteric mythology, is unclear. The participant who will represent the old (deceased) ruler (Geirröðr in the poem) sits in the high-seat and the audience gather in the hall. The initiand ruler-to-be (Agnarr in the poem) enters the hall and the masked ritual specialist begins the performance. The initiand offers the initiator a ritual libation, as described in *Grímnismál* stanza 3, after which the ritual specialist performs the poetic transmission of knowledge to the initiand, addressing him while gradually revealing his identity as Óðinn in the process. This culminates in the last two stanzas where

the old ruler on the high-seat is addressed and ritually ‘killed’ to make room for the new ruler. Thus, the initiation ritual ends and the new ruler has received a new higher status (see also Nygaard 2019).

The selected stanzas of *Hávamál* (138–164) are argued to represent a ritual connected to transmission of secret knowledge of runes, rune carving, and magical spells from one ritual specialist, an initiator, to a prospective ritual specialist, an initiand: an audience of elite warriors and the prospective ritual specialist are gathered in a hall to witness and participate in a teaching ritual, perhaps the public part of the ritual specialist’s initiation. An initiator-specialist performs *Hávamál* stanzas 138–141, during which a mock hanging ritual is enacted. In this situation, the initiator is transformed into Óðinn in order to authenticate the knowledge transmitted in the second and third parts of the performance. After concluding the performance of the self-hanging myth, the initiator performs stanzas 142–145, which consist of knowledge of runes and sacrifice and their proper conduct. In the final part of the poem, the initiator transmits knowledge of the function of the 18 magic spells, but not the spells themselves. Here, the identity of the performer is more ambiguous than before. He may still be performing as Óðinn but he may also be performing as a ritual specialist with Odinic knowledge. In any case, doubled traits are ever-present and the performance is concluded with a reference to the High One and his hall, cementing the fact that this performance stems from Óðinn’s knowledge and has been conducted in an otherworldly location all along. The ritual-specialist-initiand may have learnt the runes and skills in stanza 142–145 and thus have been partly initiated, whereafter he will acquire the actual spells, the functions of which were merely described in stanzas 146–163, perhaps through a secret initiation ritual.

Both *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál* may find their ritual context at the funerals of the deceased kings they commemorate, their performance functioning as rite-of-passage rituals for the dead kings travelling to the otherworld, Valhøll: in *Eiríksmál*, the ritual specialist begins the commemoration of Eiríkr by taking on the identity of ‘Óðinn’ and setting

the scene of the performance (the performed space) as Óðinn's hall Valhöll, which is being prepared for the arrival of a great king. Shifting between the roles of 'Óðinn' and 'Bragi' in the first stanzas (2–4), the performer establishes the identity of the great king to arrive – the noise of battle comes from Eiríkr and his army approaching Valhöll. Performing stanzas with mixed metre, the ritual specialist shifts between the role of 'Óðinn' and 'Sigmundur' (stanzas 5–7) while adding the mention of Ragnarøk to give the poem its eschatological tenor. Stanza 8 features the ritual specialist, as 'Sigmundur', inviting 'Eiríkr' – perhaps originally represented by his heir to the throne, Gamli Eiríksson – into the hall to be inducted among the ranks of the *einherjar*. In stanza 9, Eiríkr is thus led to the otherworld and included in Óðinn's army.

In *Hákonarmál*, the sources allow us to reconstruct the context in a little more detail. After King Hákon has been interred at Sæheimr in Hordaland (according to *Hákonar saga góða* 32), a ritual specialist recites *Hákonarmál* stanzas 2–9. These describe the Battle of Fitjar in vivid detail, with emphasis on reproducing the aural qualities of the battle. This happens outside by the king's grave. In stanza 10, direct speech commences and a female specialist enacts the role of a *valkyrja*, describing the process of choosing 'Hákon', portrayed by a male ritual specialist, and speaking (stanza 12) and then travelling with him to the home of the gods (stanza 13). Following this stanza's call to go and meet Óðinn, the ritual performance moves into the hall building. In stanza 14, the heir to the throne – acting as 'Óðinn' on his high-seat – sends Bragi and Hermóðr to meet 'Hákon' and invite him into the hall, which occurs in stanza 16. (In stanza 15, 'Hákon' expresses concerns about entering Valhöll, perhaps due to his conflicted relationship with pre-Christian Nordic religion.) Here, a high-ranking warrior – acting as 'Bragi' – invites 'Hákon' to enter the hall with a ritual libation. In stanza 17, 'Hákon' declares his constant vigilance in the face of Ragnarøk, and the ritual performance is concluded with the male ritual specialist stepping out of the role as 'Hákon' offering praise for King Hákon who has been safely conducted into the otherworld.

Hrafnsmál may be a more political ritual performance than a religious one, since, in large part, it lacks clear ritual transformation. Still, it draws heavily on pre-Christian Nordic religion and mythology. We may assume that the battle poem of *Hrafnsmál* stanzas 7–12 was performed in a hall-based setting, although this is not explicitly stated in the stanzas. The performing poet, who may have been present at the battle, could have performed it in pure praise of King Haraldr using Odinic imagery in the kennings of, for instance, stanzas 11–12. The dialogic poem in *Hrafnsmál* stanzas 1–6 and 15–23 features a skald, acting as a ritual specialist, framing the praise of Haraldr and his court as a dialogue between a *valkyrja* and a raven – both characters with strong connections to Óðinn and warfare, emphasising Haraldr's warrior prowess. The performer of the dialogic poem shifts between the two roles using different performance markers, taking on the roles with few transformative consequences for him.

All of these performances will have had consequences for their performers and audiences alike, leading to religious experiences, and likely shaping their group identity. By situating the performances of Old Norse poetry in a ritual studies framework, it is argued that, through Rappaportian *auto-* and *allo-communication* (Rappaport 1999: 51), the ritual participants and the ritual specialist signal a conformity towards themselves and each other. They accept the reality of the rituals as “‘in earnest’ [...] taking place in the world” (1999: 43). By participating in, and thus accepting the rituals as real and meaningful, the participants form a community. The ritual specialists are able to be transformed into otherworldly beings in their poetic, ritual performance using Rappaportian *performatives* (1999: 114–115), and this ability would have had an effect on their religious authority and the perceived authenticity of their knowledge. The audience to the ritual performances is themselves transformed into otherworldly collectives (Rappaport 1999: 40; Schechner 2006: 72–73), like *einherjar* and *valkyrjur*, during the performance. This would have strengthened their group coherence and solidarity, and would have confirmed their notions about the afterlife in Valhöll (Nygaard 2019). Additionally, it may have created

Rappaport's 'high-order meaning' in the group (Rappaport 1999: 71). This entails participation in the sacred and is key to the formation and upholding of groups. These oral-poetic ritual performances and the religious experiences that they entailed may thus be viewed as key expressions of the pre-Christian Nordic elite warrior religion.

In sum, this dissertation argues that the ritual performances of the oral versions behind the medieval, Old Norse poems had specific ritual contexts. These may be gleaned by analysing the poems as performances rather than merely as texts. Furthermore, it is argued that, through participating in the ritual performances, the performer and audience would have had transformative, religious experiences forming their worldview and respective individual and group identities.

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