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# The Carving of a Contest over a Mythic Ornament in *Húsdrápa*

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## Abstract

The central research question of this paper asks what a wood-carved depiction described by Úlfr Uggason in his poem *Húsdrápa* may have looked like. Úlfr weaved together kennings to verbally illustrate mythic scenes that he observed adorning the magnificent Icelandic hall Ólafr Páir had built on his farm. A fragment of this poem remains. In *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning*, Finnur Jónsson has compiled 12 extant stanzas or helmings attributed to Úlfr under the heading *Húsdrápa*. Along with opening and closing helmings in praise of Ólafr and the hall, that arrangement of the poem consists of descriptions of three mythic episodes. The last section is most extensive with 5 helmings portraying the funeral procession of Baldr. The middle section describes a version of the fishing expedition resulting in a confrontation between Þórr and the Midgarðsormr. In particular, this paper focuses on the mythic scene related in stanza 2 of the poem as compiled by Finnur interpreted as a struggle between Heimdallr and Loki over the Brísingamen. Although questioning the appearance of each of the scenes is both intriguing and worthy of inquiry, it would not be possible to do justice by including all of them in an article length paper. Furthermore, stanza 2 is particularly interesting because there are no known extant artifacts depicting the struggle over the mythic necklace.

Arriving at a particular design and producing a carved frame and panel depicting an artifact that is described in a poem forms a peculiar hybrid between the applied arts and literary analysis, i.e. scholarship. One might question the value of such an effort. Namely, Murray

Krieger writes, “(...) any attempt at a reverse *ekphrasis* by a graphic artist or sculptor (...) must be vain, and may very well have been undertaken partly in order to reveal the impossibility of an adequate rendering because of the unmatched superiority of the text” (xv). While I acknowledge the innumerable possibilities of what the carvings in the hall at Hjarðarholt looked like and certainly would not challenge the skill of the poet, I argue scholarship may be gained by researching the avenues of derivation. Close-readings of pertinent texts lead to several areas of investigation. Although Krieger in his study of ekphrasis does not take my route, he acknowledges it as a viable option: “As yet another alternative, we could relate the actual painting being produced in a given period with the poetry being written and trace the



relationships, if any, between these products” (3). By taking this approach in my study of the carving of a contest over a mythic ornament, options reveal themselves and the choice of routes taken to arrive at a particular design creates both an interesting project and a contribution to the field of Old Norse scholarship. By researching archeological finds of Viking Age art, taking into consideration historic dates and geographical trends in Viking expansion, and applying scholarship about the mythic content of the stanza, a visual representation takes shape.

### *Laxdæla saga as a source for Húsdrápa*

A close reading of the events in chapter 29 of *Laxdæla saga* provides clues to the origin of the carvings. Óláfr pái simply announces to his wife Þórgerðr, without giving her any reason, that he intends to go abroad. That summer he buys a ship, sails east to Norway and lands in Hörðaland. Óláfr is greeted by a “retired” Viking named Geirmundr, who has settled down and become a follower of Hákon jarl ins ríka. Óláfr spends the winter with Geirmundr; he is well entertained and taken care of. It is only when spring approaches that Óláfr speaks of the purpose of his voyage: it is of the greatest importance that he find a prime selection of timber. Geirmundr responds by telling him that Hákon jarl has the best forest around. That spring Óláfr requests permission from Hákon jarl to cut lumber, and the favor is granted. The next thing we learn from the saga is that Óláfr loads his ship, and he is ready to return to Iceland that summer. He reluctantly brings Geirmundr with him, as the troublemaker has secretly made arrangements and brought his belongings on board.

By the following winter, Óláfr has built a new *eldhús* at Hjarðarholt. Backing up a little, in chapter 24, Óláfr and his wife Þórgerðr had recently married and were living with relatives. Óláfr’s foster-father, Þórðr goddi, took ill and died. Óláfr took over the farm at Goddastadir and soon became an important chieftain. It is mentioned that among his household were three good carpenters, two brothers Án inn hvíti and Án svarti, along with Beinir inn sterki. The redactor writes, “Þessir váru smiðar Óláfs of allir hraustir menn” (66). [These were Óláfr’s (wood) smiths and strong men.] To be called “smiðar” emphasizes that they were very talented. Óláfr purchased some adjoining land, and using wood from the meager forest and driftwood, these men helped him build the first dwelling, and he named the farm Hjarðarholt. Following Óláfr’s return from

Norway in chapter 29, with these carpenters still in his household, it is conceivable that they could have, with the rest of the farm laborers, during the course of a few months put together a more magnificent hall with the new choice supply of wood. The redactor of *Laxdæla saga* writes, “Þat sumar lét Óláfr gera eldhús í Hjarðarholti meira ok betra en menn hefði fyrr sét” (79). [That summer Óláfr made an eldhús better and greater than men had previously seen.] However, it is highly unlikely that the elaborate carvings described by Úlfr in the poem *Húsdrápa* were made that winter, given such a short amount of time had passed.

Woodcarving and carpentry are quite different skills. The two brothers Án inn hvíti and Án svarti, along with Beinir inn sterki may have overseen the assembly of the hall in Iceland, but it is unlikely they were the artists who engraved the wood. Since the reader was already introduced to the Án brothers by name, if they had carved the hall so magnificently, one might question why they were not specifically credited for it. In the case of Þorðr hreða, for example, in his saga he is also described as a “smiðr.” His craftsmanship was highlighted and his legendary talent lived on. In chapter 16 it states, “Þorðr var manna hagrastr” (443). [Þorðr was the most skillful of men.] He was commissioned to build a hall in Flatatunga, and he was praised for the longevity of the house. In contrast, no one was specifically credited for the crafting of perhaps the most splendid eldhús ever built in Iceland. It is stated in *Laxdæla saga* that in the hall, “Váru þar markaðar ágætliga sögur á þilviðinum ok svá á ræfrinu. Var þat svá vel smiðat, at þá þótti miklu skrautligra, er eigi váru tjöldin uppi” (79). [There were marked famous tales on the wainscot and on the roof. It was so well crafted (in wood) that it seemed more splendid when the tapestries were not up.] As made evident in *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, wall hangings were highly valued and hung on special occasions: “Þorgrímr ætlaði at hafa haustboð at vetrnóttum ok fagna vetri ok blóta Frey.” [Thorgrim intended to have a harvest feast on the first night of winter, and

to sacrifice to Frey.] In preparation for the feast, the household “láta upp tjöldin” [hung the tapestries.] By making Óláfr’s hall more splendid without the hangings, the woodcarvings were indeed well executed: the elegant renderings were carved by skilled craftsmen. Such workmanship takes a lot of time and could not be completed in a couple of months. This is an important juncture for my conclusions regarding the content and design of the mythic carving described by Úlfr. Had adequate time elapsed for the Án brothers to carve the hall, based on remnants of other carvings from Iceland, it likely would have taken on a quite different appearance than I propose (see: “A Comparison of Carved Panels Found in Flatatunga and Bjarnastaðahlíð”). Rather, in this case I look abroad for evidence.

I am suggesting that the carved parts of the hall were purchased or commissioned by Óláfr pái while he was in Norway. Or, reading into the gaps of the narrative, perhaps the woodcarvings were an unmentioned gift to Óláfr. Typical of Old Norse texts, of most importance to the *Laxdæla saga* scribe was Hákon jarl’s parting gift to Óláfr of a weapon, an inlaid axe. Just who the woodcarvers were is a mystery, but in his article “Die Húsdrápa von Úlfr Uggason und die Bildliche Überlieferung Altnordischer Mythen,” based on nuances in the version of the stanzas regarding Þórr’s fishing expedition, Kurt Schier makes a strong argument that the origin of the mythic content engraved on the panels stem from Hákon jarl’s district around Niðaróss. Perhaps the carvers came from that district and/or were part of Hákon jarl’s court.

Later that winter, when the hall is completed, Ólafr holds a feast for his daughter’s wedding. The redactor states, “Þar var at boði Úlfr Uggason ok hafði ort kvæði um Ólaf Höskuldsson ok um sögur þær, er skrifaðar váru á eldhúsinu, ok færði hann þar at boðinu. Þetta kvæði er kallat Húsdrápa ok er vel ort.” [Among the guests was a poet, Úlfr Uggason, who had composed a poem about Ólafr Höskuldsson and the tales carved on the wood of the fire-hall

which he recited at the feast. It is called ‘Húsdrápa’ and is a fine piece of verse.] The actual poem the redactor calls *Húsdrápa* is not provided in the extant manuscripts of *Laxdæla saga*, but stanzas and helmings are listed scattered throughout Snorri’s Edda where he uses them as examples of kennings. The poem is also in Finnur Jónsson’s *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning* under the heading *Húsdrápa*. The content of the second stanza listed by Finnur, the struggle between Heimdallr and Loki over what is presumed the brísingamen – the brísinga necklace, is a fascinating account with some variations and numerous possibilities for interpretation:

Ráðgegninn bregðr ragna  
 rein- at Singasteinni  
 frægr við firna slægjan  
 Fárbauta mög - vári.  
 Móðöflugr ræðr mæðra  
 mögr hafnýra fögru  
 —kynni ek—áðr ok einnar  
 átta—mærðar þáttum.

Faulke translates and reorders the stanza as: “Reknowned defender [Heimdallr] of the powers’ way [Bifrost], kind of counsel, competes with Farbauti’s terribly sly son [Loki] at Singasteinn. Son of eight mothers plus one, mighty of mood [Heimdallr], is first to get hold of the beautiful sea-kidney [jewel, Brísingamen]. I announce it in strands of praise.”

Again, what did the woodcarving look like? As stated in my abstract, by conducting a close reading of the stanza describing the struggle between Heimdallr and Loki over the hafnýra fögru in *Húsdrápa* as I have done in relation to relevant saga literature, by examining archeological finds of Viking Age art, and by taking into consideration historic and geographic

trends in Viking expansion, in answering this question I both present these findings as a research paper and offer a visual representation by constructing an ornamental wood carved depiction of the mythological scene.

### **Archaeological finds, Viking art and trade**

Ólafr made his journey and built his éldhus during the time when Hákon Sigurðsson jarl was the sovereign ruler of Norway, from about 975 to 995. Finnur narrows the composition of the poem to 983. These dates can help answer the question of where these carvings were made, and the influences of contemporary styles and trends can help in a reconstruction of their appearance. Were these carvings made by Icelanders, Norwegians, or possibly even Anglo-Scandinavians? As previously asserted, due to time restraints they were not likely made by the Án brothers. Although carvings from Flatatunga and a carved door that came from a church at Valþjófstaðir show that fine specimens of woodcarvings were created in Iceland, they were made during a later flowering of the arts from the Christian period and hence, a later style. There could have been a shop in Hlaðir, Norway, or in spite of Schier's observations, the panels could have been imported from abroad. During the Viking Age the demand for applied arts by royal patrons and urban development led to specialized craft shops that also supplied the wealthy with commissioned crafted works.

As the Oseberg burial-ship finds demonstrate, a range of wooden items with wood-carved ornamentation were produced. Although those who lived in the countryside must have possessed a variety of craft skills, the expertise seen in the production of the Oseberg carvings is so highly developed that the items were certainly executed by professional artisans. As stated in *The Vikings*, the era was full of technological advancements. Increases in trade led to localized harvest and shipment of natural resources to urban centers. These raw materials were used for

craft production in centralized workshops.

Excavations in towns have revealed specialized craft industries. As Scandinavian settlements grew, a simultaneous increase in wealthy patrons who could afford luxury items led to a demand in service-oriented shops. Wood has long been valued and used as construction material, but it does have a limited durability, so we are



Oseberg burial-ship bow detail

fortunate to have a few remnants that testify to the execution and ability of Viking craftsmen using the medium. Nevertheless, we are missing what must have been an incredible array of outstanding wooden articles with applied art. Indeed, a complete lack of surviving wood carved items from the period of question regarding *Húsdrápa*, the late 10<sup>th</sup> century, poses significant problems for recreating how the carvings in the eldhús may have appeared. However, ornamentation found on other media provides clues regarding the talents of Scandinavian sculptors and patterns that also could have been executed in wood.

Most of what does remain of ornamented objects from the ninth and tenth centuries come from pagan graves, for example the Oseberg ship-burial, in the form of metal objects such as weapons, armor and items of everyday use. There are also artifacts made of amber, jet, bone and walrus ivory. Due to durability, stones are an important source of ornamentation. Aside from much older rock pictographs, stone-carving was relatively rare in Scandinavia until the later part of the 10th century. The Gotland picture stones are an exception. There are older slabs dating from the beginning of the Viking age and some seem to provide a mythic narrative, but it is largely speculation as to what myths or tales may be signified or their meaning, as there is no



extant documentation providing contemporary literary versions. Some of the iconography resembles accounts provided by Snorri and Eddic poetry, but disparities of themes also lend credence to an oral tradition with varying versions. The Ardre image stones are of particular interest for this study because of the mythological content they contain. The Ardre VIII stone,



dated to the 8th or 9th century, is thought to depict scenes from *Völundarkviða*, Óðinn riding on Sleipnir and perhaps Þórr on his famous fishing expedition. Other images on the stone do not seem to conform to any known Norse myth that has survived to the present time. Although a considerable distance from Hlaðir, I argue that iconography was circulating due to trade and expansion, and therefore the Gotland picture stones provide clues to

how other mythic scenes would have been represented.

Archaeological finds provide stylistic clues for the *Húsdrápa* carvings. As seen from numerous examples in *The Vikings*, the craftsmanship of the period is primarily a decorative,

applied art, found on everyday objects. Animals with contorted and convoluted bodies formed the main motifs. Aside from the occasional depicted face, head or body, naturalism was largely rejected in Scandinavia. Many of the patterns are unintelligible to the inexperienced eye. A continuous development is seen in styles beyond the scope of this paper. Viking art remained distinct until the end of the 11th century; simultaneously as expansion declined, the designs became increasingly influenced by the continental Romanesque style.

The Oseberg carvings provide a wealth of examples of early Viking style motifs. These include ornamentation on the bow and stern of the burial ship, sleighs and a cart, bedposts and chests. On the cart a carved scene with a man surrounded by snakes is reminiscent of Gunnar's last hours as told in *Völsunga saga*. Of

particular interest is the prow of the ship.

The pattern consists of human-like figures clutching each other, their beards and feet.

The 'gripping beast' is perhaps best illustrated by descriptions of the Broa find on Gotland, which consists of twenty-two bridle mounts from the early Viking age. The designs on the mounts are frameworks that contain abstract zoomorphic shapes. These are elongated animal forms in profile with twisted bodies. The body is pierced through with tendrils. Sometimes these animals appear as a bird. However, the main feature



Oseberg burial-ship carved prow



of the motif is the gripping beast: "These vigorous animals are the new invention in Scandinavian art. They take their name by their most obvious characteristic - the paws that grip the frames around or under them, that grip themselves, or even each other (several beasts may be interlocked together in compositions resembling wild melees.) They appealed so greatly to Viking taste that they enjoyed wide popularity and even survived as a motif into the 10th century" (Campbell, 155).

*The Vikings*: bridle-ornaments from Broa



Other examples of the 'gripping beast' include a pair in jet from Tresfjorden, and a silver disc brooch found in Traaen, Norway, from the late 10<sup>th</sup> century. Based on its enduring presence, I find it likely that the 'gripping beast' motif would appear as part of the iconography depicting Heimdalr and Loki contesting for the brisingamen on the artifact described in *Húsdrápa*, also from



*The Vikings: jet, Norway*

the late 10<sup>th</sup> century. The 'clutching man' motif carved on the prow of the Oseberg burial-ship is



*The Vikings: Silver disc brooch*

an important clue to how the gods may have been arranged. Indeed, along with the Broa 'gripping beasts,' in spite of dating from the early 800's, the prow carvings are a primary source inspiring my interpretation of stanza 2.

Just as the Oseberg-Broa, as the Viking Age progressed new styles are identified named after the places where ornamental objects have been found.

The Borre style is based on a barrow-burial find in Vestfold, Norway dating from the mid 9<sup>th</sup> century. The Borre motif of importance to this study is the 'ring-chain' - an interlace pattern made up of a multiple ribbons forming a series of rings. The Borre ring-chain appears on stone sculpture on the Isle of Man and there is evidence that the designs are due to Scandinavian



influence. Prior to the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the Isle of Man was inhabited by Celts, but during the Viking period it became an important strategic island for raiders and later settlement. Names show the extent of the Scandinavian arrival and sway. Among the Manx stone sculptures is a cross at Kirkmichael which boasts “Gaut made this cross and all on Man.” In *Viking Expansion Westwards* Magnus Magnusson informs, “From another cross at Kirk Andreas we learn that his full name was Gaut Björnsson, and that he lived at Kuli, possibly the farm of Cooill or Cooley in the parish of Michael, or else the Scottish island of Coll. His work is dated to the period 930-950, and he seems to have been the first Scandinavian to introduce and adapt Celtic crosses in Man. His grave-slabs were relatively simple interlaced bands in a Norwegian ring-chain motif” (61).

The Borre-style ring chain executed by Gaut appears similar to ones seen in Northumbria, although each area presents a different version. The link to Norway may not be a direct one; however, there is little doubt that the Borre style originated in Scandinavia and was introduced into England during the Viking period. In *Viking Age Sculpture*, Richard Bailey notes that perishable media like wood and fabric were brought from Scandinavian to England, so the Borre ring-chain motif could have been brought to the sculptors in the form of other media. What is most



Gaut's Cross

important is that there was contact that spread the style to the North Atlantic where it remains documented by the stones. The Borre ornament provides dates, partially based on its occurrence on coins, from the mid-ninth century up through the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the period of the composition of *Húsdrápa*. In my re-production, I have used a ring-chain motif with a tendril offshoot that binds together the crossing of two interlacing strands on the vertical members of the frame as produced originally by Gaut on Man.



The Leeds Cross

Mythological scenes also appear on many crosses and hogbacks in England during this period, and these are of particular interest. Bailey uses the similarity of iconography on the Ardre stone and a cross from Leeds, Yorkshire depicting the Völundr myth as an example of how designs spread from Scandinavia to England. “It was presumably on wood carvings and tapestries that the Wayland layout was carried to Britain, and we can get some impression of the type of models which might have been available both from the surviving archaeological evidence and from the literature.” In regard to *Húsdrápa* he adds, “It is material like this which bridges the wide geographic and chronological gap between the Ardre stone and the Yorkshire sculptures” (106). Inversely, North Atlantic stone carvings help reconstruct the iconography. Just as Bailey mentions that the 10<sup>th</sup> century poem *Húsdrápa* may have

inspired the North British stone sculptors, they likely produced similar depictions to those described by Úlfr. None of the stones have been identified to depict the struggle between

Heimdallr and Loki over the Brísingamen. Both of these gods are both identified, however, on the Gosforth cross, which also serves as a source for my reconstructed design. The episodes carved on the cross are scenes from ragnarök, another point in mythic time. Among the characters depicted are Heimdallr, recognized by his horn. There is also an engraving that is



considered a rendering of the bound Loki, with Sigyn standing over her husband catching poison in a bowl so it will not drip on him. Another figure is thought to be Viðar fending off a monster in defense of the attack on the gods. Yet another slab at the graveyard appears to be a rendering of Þórr. As Bailey puts it, “The 10th century church at Gosforth is decorated with a continuous line of narrative, analogous to [...] the wooden carvings of Icelandic halls” (131).

Returning to *Laxdæla saga*, Ólafr’s ancestry and his earlier travels should also be taken into consideration. Höskuld, a prominent farmer in Iceland, purchases a slave woman in a market in Norway. He brings her back to Iceland with him, and she bears his son, Ólafr. For several years she pretends she cannot talk. One day, when their son is two, Höskuld overhears her talking with her boy. He confronts her, and she reveals her name is Melkorka, and she is the daughter of the Irish King Mýrkjartan. Later, when Ólafr is eighteen, his mother persuades him to make a journey to prove his ancestry. Ólafr first sets sail to Norway, and he befriends King Haraldr and his mother Gunnhildr. They support him in a voyage to Ireland, where Ólafr not only finds his grandfather, but also serves him valiantly for a year. King Mýrkjartan asks him to stay on and inherit the kingdom, but Ólafr wishes to return to Iceland. He does so via Norway,

and he arrives having acquired much wealth and fame from the journey. As described in the saga and his epithet testifies, Ólafr clearly has a love for finery. He is wealthy and likes to display it. People don't resent it because he is also generous, and he gains considerable power and influence. More importantly, he has become worldly, and it is likely that his tastes are reflected by what he has seen on his journeys. He has been exposed to the art found in Hlaðir and the North Atlantic islands he has visited.

To summarize thus far: Ólafr pái was wealthy enough to commission carvings, or purchase panels that had already been carved, by shops that were in Hákon jarls service. Given the amount of trade and the industry prevalent in York, for example, these carvings may have been imported to Norway, but this is less likely. There is ample evidence that a wood carving tradition existed in Norway and pieces were produced at a professional level. However, it is not unlikely that there were reciprocal influences in style at this point between the Anglo-Scandinavian and Norwegian trade centers. During the period in question, the late 10<sup>th</sup> century, there is a lack of evidence of mythic ornamentation outside of the ones shown on the Borre style stone sculptures in Northern England and the Isle of Man. Therefore, these, in combination with the Oseberg burial-ship and Broa finds, along with the Gotland image stones provide examples from which to reconstruct and execute a proposed design.

### **Analysis of the mythic content in Stanza 2:**

Much has been written about the mythological subject matter of the poem and its possible content. Faulke's translation follows Snorri's information to the extent that Singasteinn is a place (unknown today), perhaps a cliff, skerry or island out in the mythic sea. In *Skáldskaparmál* Snorri lists stanzas and helming from *Húsdrápa* in a scattered fashion in order to present various kennings. As he lists the alternate names for Heimdallr, he mentions the incident.



Heimdallr is described as the visitor to Vagasker and Singasteinn, and there he contended with Loki for the Brísingamen. Snorri writes, “Úlfr Uggason kvað í Húsdrápu langa stund eptir þeirri frásögu; er þess þar getit er þeir váru í sela likjum” (19). [Úlfr Uggason composed a long passage in Húsdrápa based on this story, and it is mentioned there that they were in the form of seals (76).] There is no reason to doubt Snorri that a longer poem existed, nor is there good cause to disregard this additional clue we have regarding the myth: that Heimdallr and Loki transformed into seals as they fought over the necklace. Therefore, even though Úlfr does not mention seals in the extant *Húsdrápa* stanza describing the incident, it seems reasonable to hint at a seal-like shape in my imagined rendering of the scene. Hence, in my carving there are two depictions of each character, as the figures in the woodcarving move up instead of two legs they have a merman lower bodice.

Scholars present several interpretations of the myth. Most analysts agree that Heimdallr and Loki are competing, as in Faulke’s translation of *bregðr*, however, as noted by Richard North, the verb may also mean to transform or change shape. This fits with Snorri’s additional information about shape shifting. North sees the myth as renewal



through a changing of the seasons, as Heimdallr retrieves the sun and brings the end of winter. In

order to arrive at this he departs from Snorri and speculates that Singasteinn is not transparent as a place name, but it is a kenning for the sun. This is quite problematic because there is no cognate in Old Icelandic for *singa* and it requires that *singa* is a miscopy of the *signa*, borrowed from the Latin *signum*, to bless or sign over. In that case, the kenning could refer to the sun as a jewel (steinn) blessing creation. North's interpretation of the stanza reads, "as the jewel hits the water, Heimdallr turns into a seal to save the brísingamen from sinking out of reach" (380). Although the shape-shifting part of his translation is interesting, the rest of it seems unsubstantiated. Clearly, Heimdallr is having some kind of encounter with Loki as indicated with the kenning "firna slægjan Fárbauda mög" [Farbauti's terribly sly son] and not alone retrieving a sinking sun.

The kenning *hafnýra fǫgru* representing the brísingamen has also generated a lot of speculation. Although Snorri does not explicitly make the connection, in his description of the encounter between Heimdallr and Loki, it seems he is inferring that the *hafnýra fǫgru*, 'beautiful sea-kidney,' is one of the kennings for *brísingamen*, 'Brísings' necklace.' Snorri adds about Heimdallr as a visitor to Singasteinn: "þá deildi hann við Loka um Brísingamen" (19). [on that occasion he contended with Loki for the Brisingamen. (76)] Following the lead of Edith Marold, Jan de Vries and Schier, Clive Tolley understands the stanza as representing a primordial creation myth. He, however, speculates that the sea-kidney is a kenning for an island and, tracing different problematic etymology, Singasteinn is the necklace, "hence the fight is over the Gleaming Stone which is also conceived as an island raised from the ocean" (88). He argues that the two kennings are parallel as symbols for the earth, and that Heimdallr is instrumental in bringing the land up out of the water. This idea partially corresponds with *Völuspá* 4:

Áðr Burs synir      bioðum um yppu,              First the sons of Bur brought up the earth

þeir er Miðgarð,      mœran skópo;      the glorious ones who shaped the world between;  
 Sól scein sunnan      á salar steina,      the sun shone from the south on the hall of stones,  
 þá var grund gróin      grœnum lauki.      then the soil was grown over with green plants.

(Translation by Carolynne Larrington)

It seems that there is substance to the claim that mythic primordial creation involved raising the earth, perhaps out of the sea. Identifying Heimdallr as one of the sons of Bur is more complicated. Clunies Ross notes that Heimdallr's father is never made clear by the surviving source material (174). In answering, "How shall Heimdallr be referred to?" Snorri ends with "ok sonr Óðins" (19). [and the son of Óðinn.] However, this is confused by stanza 15 in *Brymskviða*:

(Heimdallr, hvítastr ása,)      vissi hann vel fram      sem vanir aðrir. Clunies Ross translates this as, "He was well able to see into the future, like the other Vanir" (176). The statement that Heimdallr is of the Vanir race may be dismissed as an anomaly, or it may be understood that he is the son of Njörðr. As Njörðr lives by the edge of the sea, it would fit the possibility of Njörðr's mating with giantesses, Ægir's daughters, known to be the father of deities in the form of nine waves. These could be the nine mothers of Heimdallr referred to in Úlfr's stanza. Clunies Ross makes a nice observation that the meeting of the earth at the sea's edge is a fertile place, as sea foam likens semen. Stanza 35 of the poem *Hyndluljóð*, known as part of *Völuspá hin skamma* in *Flateyjarbók*, confirms Heimdallr is born of giantesses:

Vard einn borin	There was one born,
i aardaga	in times of old,
rammaukin miok	with wondrous might endowed,
raugna kindar.	of origin divine:
niu baaru þann	nine Jötun maids

nadbaufgann mann	gave birth
iotna meyar	to the gracious god,
vid iardar þraum.	at the world's margin.

(Thorpe's translation at [northvegr.org](http://northvegr.org))

Given emphasis on the patrilineal in Norse society, in spite of being born of giantesses the father of Heimdallr must have been a god. This stands in opposition to Loki, whose father was the giant Fárbauti and mother was the goddess Laufey. In a mythic world of negative reciprocity, where gods were allowed to mate with giantesses but giants mating with goddesses was strictly taboo, it is no wonder that Loki is portrayed as anti-social, and indeed, the ultimate leader of doom. Tolley suggests that Heimdallr is not only the watchman for the gods, but also the guardian of the earth. Most of the interpretations of the myth focus on his role. Clunies Ross theorizes that Heimdallr participates in acts of male pseudo procreation. Indeed, in the poem *Rígsþula* he is portrayed as the father of social order. Loki, on the other hand, as Heimdallr's mortal enemy and combatant at Ragnarök, ultimately brings that order down. Yet, as a marginal figure, Loki has a foot in both the worlds of the giants and the Æsir. He is a blood-brother of Óðinn, and the Æsir are quick to take advantage of his cunning and counsel, even if they hold him responsible when things go wrong.

I have considered these nuances and subtly applied them in my depiction of the gods in the woodcarving. It seems most plausible that the struggle between Heimdallr and Loki is under water, and the idea that the encounter is a creation myth involving dueling forces seems most reasonable. Therefore I have depicted the two gods in two positions, or stages, rising from the depths toward the surface of the sea. The surface consists of nine waves, as a direct reference to the kenning in the stanza referring to Heimdallr as the son of nine mothers. The struggle, seen

literally between the two gods, as they interlock their arms as ‘clutching beasts,’ lifts a mythic ornament that begins to emerge out of “Ægir’s daughters.” Perhaps the result is land being lifted from the depths.

Returning to the ‘beautiful sea kidney,’ another way to consider the myth of the brisingamen is through a thread found in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* in *Flateyjarbók*. In *Sörla þáttur* Heimdallr has no part, but Loki remains the thief. Freyja



is portrayed as a mistress of Óðinn. She spies a beautiful necklace being made by four dwarves. She offers to buy it, but they agree only to let it go if she spends a night with each of them. She complies and brings it back to her bedchamber. Loki tells Óðinn about the necklace, and Óðinn orders him to steal it. In order to enter unnoticed, Loki turns himself into a fly. Freyja, however, is lying in a position such that he cannot release the clasp. Next, he changes into a flea and bites her. That disturbs her enough that she repositions herself, and it allows Loki to remove the necklace. When she awakens and misses the necklace, Freyja confronts Óðinn. He consents to return it to her only if she agrees to a condition: she must arrange that two kings struggle in an endless conflict. As a result, each day two armies destroy each other, yet they are continually resurrected in order to battle anew. That is, until God intervenes. In spite of its Christian ending, there are interesting parallels to *Húsdrápa* 2. Exchanging sex for ownership of the necklace may be seen as a fertility rite. Tolley notes that *hafnýra fōgru* may refer to *vettennyrer*, kidney shaped

molluca beans that are washed up on shore throughout the North Atlantic and were used as birth talismans. This coincides with the view that the *brísingamen* is a fertility symbol. As in the stanza in *Húsdrápa*, it appears Loki has stolen it, thus disrupting Freyja's status as fertility goddess. In the *Sörla þáttr* version, Óðinn is the one who is behind the theft of the necklace, and this fits with his role as seeker of knowledge, often of feminine nature. In other sources, he also learns *seiðr* from Freyja, an art of trance and prophecy with feminine connotations. Óðinn's desire for the 'fertility necklace' may be seen as an appropriation of creativity associated with the feminine, which Clunies Ross would describe as an act of pseudo procreation. Instead of Heimdallr retrieving the necklace, Óðinn agrees to return it. His role, actions and demands point to an odd portrayal of resurrection, but nevertheless bear similarity to the themes of creation and transformation contained in stanza 2 – with the added element of death. The stipulation for an everlasting battle where the slain rise again each morning to fight alludes to natural rotation. This Christian infused story hints at a possible primordial mythic source representing cyclical renewal.

Keeping these interpretations in mind, the myths are obscure, but the *Húsdrápa* stanza seems to represent the cycle of life with an emphasis on fertility as catalyst resulting in birth, the transformation of death and resurrection represented by the struggle between these opposing gods. Heimdallr may be seen as ruling over this order, but the challenge by Loki reveals its volatile nature. As Heimdallr rises victorious with the *brísingamen* (representing fertility and creation), Singasteinn emerges like a skerry at low tide, and the "earth is brought up," or born. In the carved rendering, the outcropping is integrated into the top frame with a depiction of Singasteinn, and above it the 'rein-vári' rainbow bridge, according to Faulke's translation of Heimdallr as the defender of the 'power's way' (*bifröst*).



### **Ekphrasis and a summary of considerations for the design**

In her article “Stylistic and Generic Definers of the Old Norse Skaldic Ekphrasis,” Clunies Ross lists the Skaldic poems that fall into the category. She defines the genre of ekphrasis as: “(...) verbal representations of pictorial subjects that would have been recognizable depictions of specific heroic legends or myths to contemporary audiences” (162). In her table of poems, pictures and evidence, Clunies Ross notes that there is no extant image representing the stanza in question (167). Signe Horn Fuglesang concurs. In “Ekphrasis and Surviving Imagery in Viking Scandinavia,” she writes, “Verse 2 tells of Heimdallr and Loki racing each other for Singasteinn. This story has no surviving illustration” (200). However, as mentioned above, the



Gotland picture stones at minimum provide some clues. The eternal battle of *Hjaðningavíg*, referred to in *Sörla þáttur* has possibly been identified on the Stora Hammar stone.



Detail from Stora Hammar I image stone

The battle may also be represented on Smiss I. If this mythic battle associated with Freyja's necklace is represented on the image stones, perhaps the contest between Heimdallr and Loki are also present but obscure enough to be overlooked. Scholars agree that a scene engraved on Ardre VIII represents the pan-Germanic story of the smith Völundr. Fuglesang notes that Lindqvist, who studied and compiled two volumes about the stones, was skeptical about identifying two men in a boat as representing Þórr's fishing expedition because of the absence of Miðgarðsormr. Þórr's feet through the bottom of the boat and other aspects of the tale are also missing. Yet, after her discussion of numerous representations, Fuglesang concludes that the images on the stones often seem to be a composite of scenes that belong to several different myths, perhaps related more to theme than a single narrative: "Representations do not normally seem to have developed



a story in chronological sequence, but to have juxtaposed single scenes from several different myths and heroic lays, each focusing on a dramatic climax” (219).



Ardre VIII image stone stroked to indicate movement in the iconography

That being noted, the images on Ardre VIII could fall under a theme of shape-shifting. Some could also possibly represent Heimdallr and Loki in a state of transformation from human into

seal-like shapes. A struggle is depicted within a chamber below the waterline that resembles a loop - possibly representing a necklace or even a skerry. Next to this figure are contiguous morphing shapes of two figures facing off, which appear to be positioned in a way that depicts motion – animating a story in a curved progression as the shapes are slightly altered.

It is North's conclusion that Úlfr would have been describing two carvings: "In this case we can presume one human image with a definer, such as a horn, to give an idea of Heimdallr before his transformation; and another of two seals adjacent to a necklace, one of them right next to it" (384). Of course, this would only be the case if we accept Snorri's added information. In view of the hints from Snorri, there are more stanzas describing a longer version of the myth that is missing from what we now call *Húsdrápa*. Otherwise, based on what we have, one image may suffice for representing the stanza. It would have been unnecessary for someone familiar with the narrative to see single images of Heimdallr and Loki in two or more separate panels. If the elements on Ardre VIII may be taken for representing motion and transformation, then multiple images of the two in one panel could be perceived as the entire narrative. With these factors in mind, I have "animated" Heimdallr and Loki by depicting them in two positions of their struggle within the same frame.

In imagining the look of the stanza, the wave motif on the Klinte Hunninge I picture stone is also of interest. There are roughly nine waves, and this is the same number as Heimdallr's mothers. This is likely a coincidence, but as mentioned above, there is reason to think that there is a link to these mothers as the giant daughters of Ægir, a giant associated with the sea. This association is also made by McKinnel regarding wave shapes on the Lowther Hogback in Cumbria.



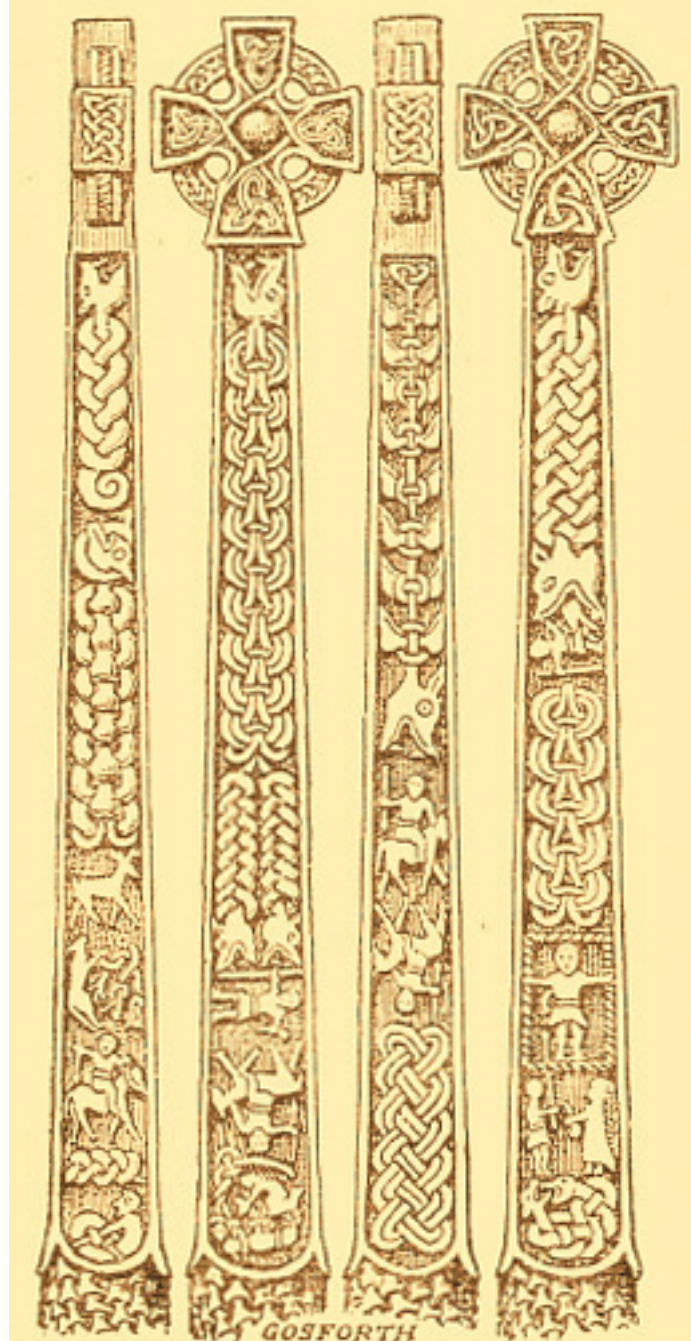
Klinte Hunninge I image stone

Further evaluating the woodcarving's appearance, Schier's arguments about the unique origin of the mythic content is a consideration. For example, he points to discrepancies with other sources regarding Ulfr's stanzas describing Þórr's fishing expedition. Namely, rather than the giant Hymir cutting the line allowing the Jörmungandr to escape, Þórr actually slays the serpent. Schier makes the point that this must be a peculiar version attributed to Hákon jarls district around Hlaðir (428). Using this reasoning, it follows that the woodcarvings also derive from the area. Therefore it would be best to examine the influence of mythic iconography from Trøndelag and Hålogaland during the specific period. Unfortunately, such artifacts are not identifiable with any certainty. Again, I return to the North Atlantic Isles for additional clues.

As mentioned above, the Gosforth Cross, dated from approximately 920-950, stands in a churchyard in Cumbria. It has carvings that have been interpreted as representing Norse myths, among them Heimdallr holding his horn. There is also an engraving considered to be a rendering of the bound Loki, with Sigyn standing over her husband. Given the amount of Western



Norwegian Viking settlement of the area and the date, these are the best sources for the appearance of mythic ornamentation missing from Hákon jarls court. The figures in my carving are partially designed based on the Gosforth cross depictions of the gods. They are frontal (not in profile.) They are dressed in tunics with belts. Heimdallr is shown with his horn.



Otherwise, the iconography is depicted influenced by the gripping beasts seen in the Oseberg and Broa finds. I have transferred the ‘gripping beast’ design to the clutching of the hafnýra fögru. The beards and moustaches fit well within the motifs of the Borre style with interweaved tendrils. Jewelry of the time provides additional clues to the shape of the form of the necklace. With some imagination it is possible to perceive an abstract visual of a kidney shape. These shapes are also being clutched and are integrated into the design. When these additional stylistic elements are taken into consideration, I have arrived at the following arrangement in the reconstructed carving:



*The Vikings; An eleventh-century snake-shaped armring*

The framing is made in the Borre ring-chain style based on examples from the Isle of Man along with the terminating serpent heads seen on the Gosforth cross. Framed borders such as these could have been used as members of the wainscoting between and above various panels depicting the mythological scenes described in *Húsdrápa*. The terminating serpentine heads would not necessarily need to represent ragnarök – the world serpent motif may be considered a common pattern to tie things together. The poet weaves his words in a complex manner to fit the form and meter of his art form; and, the inverse: the intertwining patterns are complex in design inspiring the obscure skaldic poetry that describes the iconography. Essentially, the twisted phrases and the woven chains are verbal and visual expressions of Norse representational style.

The gods are figuratively engaged in a struggle for the hafnýra fögru with their arms entwined with it and thereby each other. The ‘sea-kidney’ is an obscure object and hence depicted as abstract kidney shapes between the two gripping deities. Heimdallr, identified by his horn on the lower left, emerges slightly above Loki in his top position, as Úlfr describes him as the victor in the struggle. The nine mothers of Heimdallr used as a kenning to identify him are fittingly depicted in the top of the panel, as the scene is imagined to take place under the water. The top kidney shape is emerging from the sea, suggesting birth or rebirth implied by the fertility symbolism associated with the necklace. Directly above, integrating the top frame with the panel, is a depiction of Singasteinn as an island or skerry woven in the ring chain and rising out of it. It is crowned by a rainbow shape, as Úlfr also uses a kenning for Bifrost, the ‘rainbow bridge,’ to identify Heimdallr as the watchman of the gods.

Regarding other considerations for the rendering, I have chosen Linden wood because it is very suitable for carving. It is a hardwood, but lightweight and not dense, nor does it splinter easily. One of the primary commodities of trade in the region was lumber. The species grows as far north as Hlaðir, and the craftsmen of the day must have been aware of its favorable properties. If indeed the application of the ornament was on the wainscoting and trim, structural elements would not require a different choice of material. Due to practical reasons, I am not designing a scene applied to a house. Rather than on wainscoting and ceilings I have made a smaller frame and panel depicting the scene, more like a *brík*. In *Kormáks saga* it is told how one night he and Steingerðr rest on each side of a panel: “Um nottina hvíldi sínum megin bríkar hvárt þeira” (364). Cleasby defines *brík* as properly a square tablet, but in the sagas frequently a low screen between the pillars (*stafir*) separating the bedrooms (*hvílurúm*) from the chief room. He adds that in modern usage *brík* means a small tablet with carved work. The frame and panel

construction I have made uses slots in the frame that the panel slips into. Although I have not found any evidence of this joinery technique during the period in question, it has been in use for centuries. Otherwise, I have used hand planes, chisels and gouges for the woodcarving.



Although I am certain there were craftsmen in Iceland capable of producing carvings as described by Úlfr in *Húsdrápa*, based on the account of events in *Laxdæla saga* I argue the depictions could not have been crafted in one season. Nor are Óláfr's *smiðar*, the two brothers Án inn hvíti and Án svartí, along with Beinir inn sterki given credit for the designs. I prefer to think that the carvings were produced by professional carvers and brought to the farm at Hjarðarholt. In addition to the Gotland image stones, the Oseberg ship-burial and Broa finds, I look beyond Norway to the North Atlantic islands to the stone carvings dating from the period for influences of style and iconography. However, I propose both the lumber used to build the hall and the carvings depicting mythic scenes adorning it derived from Hlaðir. The mythic content implies that the stanza describes a visual rendering rich with symbolism representing fertility and creation. As scholars such as Schier and Bailey argue, these tales and their depictions would have had a strong presence in Norway during the time in question.

In regard to the value of undertaking a project of “reverse ekphrasis,” one of my aims with this paper has been to demonstrate that it is a worthy task. Namely, by considering a stanza of Skaldic poetry describing a visual portrayal, one is led down several paths of investigation in an attempt to unveil the material object. These trails form a map of useful research in the field. The same appeal that motivated Ólafr pái to cross the Atlantic in order to acquire the sources of his finery is the inspiration for such an inquiry. Creative drive leads to a fruitful hybrid of scholarship and the applied arts. This mode of investigation and production resembles the work undertaken, for example, to design museum installations – resulting in things forged by fact and imagination.



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