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Carving of the Contest for a Mythic Ornament in *Húsdrápa*

(slide 2)

Ráðgegninn bregðr ragna

rein- at Singasteini

frægr við firna slægjan

Fárbauta mög - vári.

Móðöflugr ræðr mœðra

mögr hafnýra fögru

—kynni ek—áðr ok einnar

átta—mærðar þáttum.

(slide 3) This stanza is one of several recorded in Snorri's Edda which together make up a fragment of the poem known as *Húsdrápa* attributed to Úlfr Uggason. It states in *Laxdæla saga* that as a guest at a wedding feast, Úlfr praises the mythological scenes he sees adorning the hall.

(click for animation) Although Finnur Jónsson and Ernst Kock offer slightly different interpretations, I prefer to use Anthony Faulkes' reordering of the stanza and translation. (slide 4) Who and what the kennings refer to are in brackets: "Renowned defender [Heimdallr] of the powers' way [Bifrost], kind of counsel, competes with Farbauti's terribly sly son [Loki] at Singastein. 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."

What did the woodcarving Úlfr described look like? (slide 5) Although the possibilities are endless, and it is impossible to answer this research question precisely, by conducting a close reading of the stanza describing the struggle between Heimdallr and Loki over the hafnýra fögru

in *Húsdrápa* in relation to relevant saga literature, by observing remnants of Viking Age art and by taking into consideration historic and geographic trends in Viking expansion, I have compiled a wood carving design suggesting *one* possible depiction of the mythological scene.

In *Laxdæla saga*, Óláfr pái, or peacock, announces to his wife Þórgerðr, without giving her any reason, that he intends to go abroad. That summer he buys a ship, sails from Iceland east to Norway and lands in Hörðaland. Óláfr is greeted by a troublemaker Viking named Geirmundr, who has settled down and become a follower of Hákon jarl in ríki. 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.

By the following winter, Óláfr has built a new eldhús on his farm at Hjarðarholt. It is mentioned in the saga that among his household were three *smiðir*, talented craftsmen, the two brothers Án inn hvíti and Án svartí, along with Beinir inn sterki. Following Óláfr's return from Norway, assuming these men were 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 constructed a hall with the new choice supply of wood. (slide 6) However, the redactor of *Laxdæla saga* writes, “Þat sumar lét Óláfr gera eldhús í Hjarðarholti meira ok betra en menn hefði fyrr sét.” [That summer Óláfr made an eldhús better and greater than men had previously seen.] It seems it would be quite an undertaking to erect such a hall, and I reason that it is highly unlikely that the elaborate carvings described by Úlfr in his poem could have been made that fall and winter, given such a short amount of time had passed. It is stated in *Laxdæla saga* that in the hall (slide 7), “Váru þar

markaðar ágætligar sögur á þilviðinum ok svá á ræfrinu. Var þat svá vel smiðat, at þá þótti miklu skrautligra, er eigi váru tjöldin uppi.” [There were marked (and I believe it is generally accepted that they were carved) 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.] Wall hangings were highly valued and hung on special occasions. By making Óláfr’s hall more splendid without the hangings, the woodcarvings were indeed well executed; the renderings were elegantly carved by skilled craftsmen.

I am not suggesting there were not highly skilled craftsmen in Iceland at the time, such as the Án brothers, capable of producing woodcarvings, but based on the literary account I imagine that the carved pieces were purchased or commissioned by Óláfr while he was in Norway. Contemplating the gaps in the *Laxdæla saga* narrative, one cannot help but wonder about the enormous amount of time it would take to fell the lumber, transport it, and build an eldhús of such a size to accommodate a hundred or more wedding guests. It is possible for a chieftain such as Óláfr to have had the wealth and, with assistance from Hákon jarl, a sizable enough crew to acquire the materials in question during the course of the summer. Then it is a matter of how he could have sailed back to Iceland with such a load. It is likely that Óláfr owned a *knörr*, (slide 8) the name given to cargo vessels that made Atlantic voyages during those times. Five ships discovered in Roskilde fjord at Skuldelev in Denmark provide a clue to the amount of weight such a ship could transport. For example, Jan Bill describes the *knörr* called Skuldelev I as having a capacity for up to 24 tons. As a point of comparison, a cord of firewood can weigh over one ton. Given the projected size of Óláfr’s eldhús and the amount of lumber required to build it, it is likely that Óláfr would have needed to be very concise in his material selection. It is reasonable to conclude that the lumber for his eldhús was precisely planned and precut, like a kit. Following this line of thinking the carvings that were to decorate the hall could have been

purchased and integrated into the parts of the pre-built eldhús prior to transporting the load to Iceland. That would have made it possible for them to assemble the building in Hjarðarholt within the amount of time mentioned in the saga, that is, within one season.

In his article “Die Húsdrápa von Úlfr Uggason und die bildliche Überlieferung Altnordischer Mythen,” Kurt Schier makes a strong argument that the origin of the mythic content engraved on the panels stem from Hákon jarl’s district around Hlaðir. Perhaps the carvers of the panels were from that district and/or were part of Hákon jarl’s court. (slide 9) The Oseberg ship-burial found in Vestfold, Norway, shows that as early as the 800’s professional woodcarvers could be commissioned to produce high quality applied art for wealthy patrons. There could have been a woodcarving shop during the period in question somewhere in the Lade district of Norway.

During the Viking Age the demand for applied arts by royal patrons and urban development led to an increase of specialized craft shops that supplied the wealthy with commissioned crafted works in population centers in many parts of Scandinavia and the North Atlantic Isles. Excavations have shown that craftsmen provided a variety of services in workshops. Long-distance trade in luxury items created a demand for specialist industries as various Scandinavian settlements expanded. In any case, there were reciprocal influences in style at this point between the Anglo-Scandinavian and Norwegian trade centers. Unfortunately, since wood is so rarely preserved, there are no wooden artifacts that I have come across that date from the late 900’s. However, during the period in question, stone sculptures produced in Northern England and the Isle of Man provide clues to the styles and ornament that were prevalent at the time.

Following the Oseberg ship ornamentation dating from the early 800’s, as the Viking Age progressed styles have been 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. (slide 10) In his book *Viking Age Sculpture*, Richard Bailey notes that perishable media like wood and fabric were brought from Scandinavia to England. The Borre ring-chain appears on stone sculpture in the north of England and on the Isle of Man. (slide 11) Among the Manx stone sculptures is a cross at Kirkmichael which boasts “Gaut made this cross and all on Man.” His work is dated to the period 930-950, which is just prior to the composition of *Húsdrápa*. His grave-slabs incorporated interlaced bands in a ring-chain motif. The Borre-style ring chains executed by Gaut are similar to ones in Northumbria. What is most important for my thesis is that there was contact that spread the style throughout the North Atlantic where it remains documented by the stones.

In regard to the Borre style on the stone sculptures in Northern England, the important identifying characteristic is the use of the ribbon braid because the dating of this type of ornament is partially based on its occurrence on coins, from the mid-ninth century up through the late 10<sup>th</sup> century, the period of the composition of *Húsdrápa*. Mythological scenes also appear on many crosses and hogbacks during this period, and these are of particular interest. (slide 12) The North Atlantic stone carvings help reconstruct the iconography circulating at the time. In fact, Bailey speculates that renderings of the 10<sup>th</sup> century poem *Húsdrápa* may have inspired the North British stone sculptors. None of the stones have been identified to depict the struggle between Heimdallr and Loki over the brísingamen. Both of these gods are identified, however, on the Gosforth cross, (slide 13) which also serves as a source for my constructed design. The episodes carved on the cross depict scenes from ragnarök. Heimdallr is recognized by his horn. (slide 14) There is also an engraving that is considered a rendering of the bound Loki, with Sigrún standing over her husband catching poison in a bowl so it will not drip on him. (slide 15) 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.”

(slide 16) Regarding other considerations for my rendering of the stanza, 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. The craftsmen of the day must have been aware of its favorable properties for carving. One of the primary commodities of trade in the region was lumber. The species grows as far north as Lade, or it could have been imported. 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. Otherwise, I have used chisels and gouges for the woodcarving that were available to the craftsmen of the period.

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.

I find what is regarded as the second stanza *Húsdrápa* particularly interesting because there is no known surviving iconography depicting it. The content, the struggle between Heimdallr and Loki over what is presumed the brisingamen – the brising necklace, which belongs to the goddess Freyja, is a fascinating account with some variations and numerous possibilities for interpretation.

Much has been written about the mythological subject matter of the poem. Faulke's translation follows Snorri's information to the extent that Singastein is a place (unknown today), perhaps a cliff, skerry or island out in the mythic sea. In *Skáldskaparmál* Snorri lists stanzas from *Húsdrápa* in a scattered fashion in order to present various kennings. He lists the sea-kidney as one of the kennings for *brísingamen*, 'Brísings' necklace.' As he describes Heimdallr, he mentions the incident. Heimdallr is described as the visitor to Vagasker and Singastein, and there he contended with Loki for the brísingamen. Snorri writes, (slide 17) "Úlfr Uggason kvað í Húsdrápu langa stund eptir þeirri frásögu; er þess þar getit er þeir vǫru í sela líkjum." [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.] 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. (slide 18) In my carving there are two depictions of each character, as the figures in the woodcarving move up their legs transform and merge into a seal-like lower body. Other than the figures on the Gosforth cross, there are few remnants from the period depicting the Norse gods. (slide 19). Yet, the Oseberg prow carvings also provide some clues for visual representation of deities.

Recall Faulkes' interpretation of the stanza. (slide 20) The figures are engaged in a struggle for the hafnýra fögru, the sea-kidney, a kenning for the brísing necklace, with their arms entwined with it and thereby each other. The 'gripping beast' motif seen in the Oseberg prow and art styles throughout the Viking Age inspires my pattern. The 'sea-kidney' kenning for a necklace is an obscure term and hence the ornament is depicted in my rendering as abstract kidney shapes between the two gripping deities. (slide 21) 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. (slide 22), The nine mothers of Heimdallr used as a kenning to identify him are fittingly depicted in the top of the panel as waves (slide 23), as the scene is portrayed as taking place under the water, and there are references in Norse mythology that link these mothers to the wave shaped daughters of Ægir, a ‘giant’ associated with the sea. The top kidney shape is emerging from the water, 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 cliff woven in the ring chain and rising out of it. It is crowned by a rainbow shape, as Úlfr also uses a kenning for Bífrost, the ‘rainbow bridge,’ to identify Heimdallr as the watchman of the gods.

(slide 24) Although I am certain there were craftsmen in Iceland capable of producing carvings as described by Úlfr in *Húsdrápa*, based on the description of events in *Laxdæla saga* I doubt they could have been crafted in one season. I prefer to think that the carvings were produced by professional carvers and brought to the farm at Hjarðarholt. In addition to the Oseberg ship burial, I look beyond Norway to the North Atlantic islands on the stone carvings dated 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 the Lade district of Norway.