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GRENDL, GRETTIR AND TWO SKALDIC STANZAS

By PETER A. JORGENSEN

Ever since Guðbrandur Vigfússon first mentioned in 1878 that similarities exist between the Old English epic, Beowulf, and the Old Icelandic Grettis saga, scores of scholars have worked at enumerating, reconstructing, and rearranging their common motifs. The most striking parallels are to be found in Beowulf’s battle with Grendel in the beleaguered Heorot, in which the hero eventually kills the intruder by tearing off its arm, and in Grettir’s fight with a monster in the harassed house at Sandhaugar, where the marauder is dispatched in the identical manner. In each instance the opponent manages to escape although mortally wounded, and its trail leads to a cave behind a waterfall, where the champion finds and kills with a sword the giant dwelling there. Similarities to the second encounter have also been seen in other battles in Grettis saga, the most recent addition to this list having been made by Richard L. Harris.

To date, the two skaldic stanzas occurring after Grettir’s subterranean struggle with the giant at Sandhaugar have either been neglected or excluded from consideration because they were thought to be later than the saga. However, the scrambled syntax of the second stanza contains a number of details which are also found in the fight with Grendel’s dam in Beowulf, but not in the corresponding prose version of Grettis saga. It is known that writers of the thirteenth century used in their prose redactions pre-classical or Old Norse verses which they no longer completely understood, and if this can be shown to be the case in Grettis saga, then the existence in Iceland of a poem older than the saga treating the Grendel legend must be assumed.

The stanzas in question are the following:

Gekk ek í glýfr et dekkva,
gein veltifug steina
við hjörgruð hríðar
kluðuns úrsýllum munn;
fast lá framan at brjóstí
flugtraumar í sal Naumu;
heldr kom á herðar skaldi
hord fjón Braga kvánar.

Ljótr kom mór í móti
mellu viur or helli;
hanf fekksk heldr á sýnnu
harðfengr við mik lengi;
harðeggjat létik höggyvit
heptisæ af skepti;
Gangs klauft brjóst ok bringu
bjartr gunnlogi svarta.


“I went into the dark chasm. The tumbling waters gaped to receive the sword-wielding warrior with a mouth cold and dank. The rushing current in the hall of the troll-woman firmly girded my breast. Moreover, the hard hatred of the whirlpool came round the shoulders of the skald. —The hideous friend of the giantess came toward me from the cave, truly fought with me for a long time. I chopped the sharp sword from the shaft. The flashing battle-sword clove his chest, the black breast of Gangr.”

Stanza two links the giant with the giantess, calling him mellu vínr, literally the “friend of the troll-woman.” Nowhere in the prose of Grettis saga is any relationship implied between these two foes of Grettir, but in Beowulf the two monsters are mother and son. Although frændi is the usual word in Old Icelandic for ‘relative,’ possible meanings for vínr are ‘parent,’ ‘lover,’ and ‘husband.’ 1 Occurring as they do in a skaldic line, the words mellu vínr could also be a kenning for ‘lover,’ although it is possible that the words are only a circumlocution for ‘giant.’ 2

The stanza also states that the giant battled with Grettir for “a long time,” lengi in the Icelandic verses. In Beowulf, too, the encounter in the underwater cave is long and fierce indeed, occupying slightly less than a hundred lines and almost proving to be the death of the hero, but the episode in the prose version of Grettis saga moves surprisingly rapidly. Upon capping the giant in the prose text, Grettir unleashes two deadly swings of his sword that leave the entrails of his adversary strewn out on the water.

Most convincing, however, is the occurrence of the much-discussed nonce word heptisax, found both in the second stanza and in the alleged prose expansion of the verses, corresponding to its generally accepted counterpart in Old English, the hapax legomenon hastmēcē (in Beowulf, line 1457). It seems highly improbable that the word heptisax should occur only once in all of the extensive battle descriptions in Old Icelandic prose and, by chance, at precisely the same point in a narrative where

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point the manuscripts offer three divergent readings. The main discrepancies involve the use of the forms harðeggiar (fem. acc. pl.) vs. harðeggiat (nt. acc. sg.) and hógva (inf.) vs. hógvit (pp.). The fourth possible combination, employing harðeggiar and hógva is not attested, but may have been the original version, reading, in prose word order: *ek lét heptisax hógva harðeggiar af skepti* ‘I caused the heptisax to chop the hard edges from the shaft.’ The extant variants can all be derived from this sentence.

Delagardie 10, fol., now housed in Uppsala, has preserved the infinitive hógva, but has formed the neuter participial adjective harðeggiat to modify heptisax, giving the reading: ‘I went and chopped the hard-edged heptisax from the shaft.’ AM 551 and 556, dó have changed the infinitive to a past participle which, with poetic ellipsis of *era,*² left harðeggiur identical with heptisax in an appositive construction, ‘I caused the hard edges, the heptisax, to be chopped from the shaft.’ AM 152, fol., which may be derived from either of the above two manuscript groups, employs both the change to hógvit as in AM 551 and 556, dó and to harðeggiat as in Delagardie 10, fol. and must be read: ‘I caused the hard-edged heptisax to be chopped from the shaft.’

If one of the three extant variants had been the original version, there is no reason why the syntax of the other two versions was altered, for the meaning of all three readings remains the same, in each case the giant loses his use of the heptisax. There are several advantages to assuming that the fourth possibility, containing harðeggiar and hógva, was the original version, for the three extant variants can then be viewed as attempts to change the meaning of a text which was no longer understood. It is always possible that the original deviation in the Icelandic text was caused by a scribal blunder which later copyists had to come to grips with, but it is more likely that scribes intentionally made


changes in the verses, for the word heptisax had obviously become archaic by the saga-writing period, making it almost impossible for a familiar, beloved Icelandic hero to brandish a mysterious weapon no one had ever seen or heard of. Our attested texts are simply various ways of solving this problem.

If the emendation suggested above was indeed the original, then it would be Grettir’s victorious sword, the heptisax, which was meant to be praised, in true heroic style, as the bjart gynnlopi two lines later. This would also put both the hefðmœc and the heptisax into the hands of the Germanic heroes again and would further support the already existing theory that the failure of Beowulf’s hefðmœc and chance finding of another sword on the wall of Grendel’s dam’s cave, is a confusion of two variants in the English epic.¹ It is even possible that the legend of Beowulf’s fight in the cave as we now have it preserved in Old English found its way to Iceland in some form not preserved in Grettis saga, although the motif of the monster vulnerable only to its own weapon was quite widespread, being found in Ireland at well as in several stories from Iceland.²

The point which caused scholars to regard both stanzas as products of the fourteenth century is the occurrence of the full syllabic rhyme fjón meaning ‘hate’ (fem. nom. sg.) and kvína ‘wife’ (fem. gen. sg.) in the eighth line of the first stanza.³ Presumably the stem vowel of Old Icelandic kvóð had the value of a long, low back vowel, ɔ, by 1250, which became ʊ when immediately following tautosyllabic v, the latter change being indicated in Icelandic manuscripts from around 1340, or after the saga had already been composed.⁴ Since the earliest extant manuscripts of Grettis saga are from the fifteenth century, all naturally con-


tain the spelling kvón. However, a verse composed by Sigmundr Ógull
in the middle of the twelfth century makes the dating of the form
kvónar even earlier. Furthermore, the not infrequent spelling confusion
of ò and ø in examples such as vão : vón 'hope, expectation' and vör : vór
'our'; nom. sg. fem., nom. acc. pl.' in the Norwegian Homilybook, in a
manuscript from around 1200, would tend to confirm the earlier dating.¹
It should also be remembered that orthographic conventions must post-
date the sound changes which they represent, and that examples of
the lag between spoken and written forms lasting several centuries are not
uncommon.

It is possible that the first stanza is a later poetic achievement,
written after the prose version as a companion piece to the older stanza
two and, indeed, there are no motifs in its verses proving it to be older
than the prose. Not even the words in line six, i sal Naomi, need
necessarily link the two monsters by implying that the giant is dwelling
in the hall of the giantess or troll-woman, for they may simply be a
kenning for "in the cave."² If the stanzas are really independent of each
other, then there is absolutely no terminus post quem for stanza two.
We know only that it faithfully preserved matter found in the Old
English epic, but cannot determine when the motifs were given their
skaldic form.

On the other hand, the absence of old motifs in stanza one not present
in the prose does not prove the verses to be late. Indeed, if the saga
writer did base his account on the verses, it would be more likely that
no differences, certainly no obvious ones, could be found between the
two versions. The fact that the two stanzas occur together would rather
indicate their sharing a common origin. If this is the case then the skal-
dic version of the hero’s encounter with the monster must have been
composed in West Norse in its present form after the middle of the
twelfth century and before the original prose version of Grettis saga,
generally dated to around 1300.¹

The material to which the skaldic verses are eventually indebted stems
from the same legend which also became part of the Beowulf epic,² and
the skaldic stanzas later formed the basis for the corresponding prose
portion of Grettis saga. However, the evidence available at the present
time will unfortunately not allow one to determine whether the extant
stanzas in the saga are immediately derived from an older skaldic
version, from oral or written prose, or from older Germanic alliterative
lays.

University of California, Riverside

¹ See Guðni Jónsson’s edn., p. lxx; R. C. Boer’s edn., p. xxxii–xxxiii.
² This is also borne out by the fact that the Icelandic poetic version pits
the hero against the male monster during the second encounter, down in the
cave, while Beowulf defeats the female and decapitates the male, but this
difference has also been copied by the expanded prose version in Grettis saga.

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¹ Konráð Gíslason, "U- og regresiv v-omlyd af ð i islandsk," Arkiv för nordisk fílo-
gogi, VIII (1892), pp. 80–82. "Til slutning anføres nogle exempler på den progressive
v-omlyd der består i, at et på v umiddelbart følgende ð forandres til ð. At denne slags
omlyd allerede forekommer i midten af det 12e århundrede ... fremgår af følgende
’visa’ af Sigmundr Ógull (Orkn. 2922–25; Flat. udg. II 482–2-): Pau beref afstr
er òvar i orh hylm skóglar borpa i fjallfrís þøgglödlo fløyvang til Orknøyja, i at engr
þar’ slig anglo i sogn und kastala vegjom i or ðott eirre voro i år drengur framarr
genge. Nøpp for end i det 14e århundrede, da den finere sprogfælde, der for-
droede fjernelse af ð, var forevunden, begynder et at brede sig med stor frodighed.”
The stanza is dated 1152 in Finnur Jónsson, Skjaldesagnir, A, I, 532; B, I, 512–
513. Cf. also Elias Wadstein, Fornordiska homilebokens ljudlära, Uppsala univers-
itetets årskrift, vol. II (Uppsala, 1890), pp. 64, 76–77.