Introduction

Asmundar saga kappabona 'The Saga of Asmundur, Slayer of Champions' (Asm) is a short fornaldarsaga, thought to have been composed c. 1300, although parts of the tale are considerably older. The story is related to that told in the ninth-century Old High German Hildebrandstale 'Tale of Hildebrand' (de Boor 1923, 1926; Kolk 1967; Gutenbrunner 1976) and a version of the Old Norse stanza was probably used by Saxo Grammaticus in Book VII of his Gesta Danorum (Saxe 2015, I, vii. 9. 14-19, pp. 506-13; Friis-Jensen 1987, 59). Saxo’s Latin version probably goes back to a source common to it and Asm, which relates the following story. In the saga Hildbr, daughter of the Swedish king Buði, marries Helgi, prince of the Huns, and meets Hildibrand, who becomes a famous of overbearing champion of the Hunnish king. After Danish attacks on Sweden, Hildbr is carried off and married to Alfi, a powerful warrior in Denmark, eventually bearing a second son, Asmundur, who attains fame as a warrior. In order to win the hand of aunn, daughter of the Danish king Alfi, Asmundur must avenge the death of her father at the hands of the Huns. Aunn aids Asmundur in acquiring the second of two special swords forged for King Buði, which had had the weapon amidst the waves near Aginath upon learning that it would bring death to his grandsons. Asmundur then aids the people of Saxland, oppressed by Hildibrand, by duelling with over-increasing numbers of Huns. The Hunnish champion, aware that he was Asmundur’s half-brother, had been reluctant to battle against him, but upon learning that his bravest warriors had been defeated, a berserk rage overcomes him, causing him to slay his own son, and he rushes off to fight against his half-brother. Asmundur mortally wounds Hildibrand and returns to marry Aunn.

Asm is preserved in twovellum ms, Holm perg 7 4° (7) of the first quarter of the fourteenth century and AM 586 4° (386) of the second half of the fifteenth century, but the latter has lost all the stanzas in a lacuna. For this reason, 7 is the base and only ms. used in this edition. Both 7 and 586 go back to a common source, and forms like of (1/5), fóðnar (6/4), synjöldar (4/6) and sáldir (3/5), as well as the use of the free-standing definite article (in 3/2, ínir 3/4, ínir 4/1, 10/1), indicate the stanzas to be indebted to a much older, written tradition.

Of the ten stanzas in Asm, seven contain eight lines, st 5 and 4 each contain six lines, and st. 6 comprises four lines. The metre is fornaldarslag, with each line containing two stressed and, quite often, two unstressed syllables. Each odd line contains one stave altering with the first stressed syllable of the following line.

The saga and its stanzas, together and separately, have been edited a number of times. The first edition of the saga is Peringsköld (1722), followed by PSN 2, 461-87, Detter (1891, 79-100), Valdimar Asmundarson (1885-9, 2, 337-56) and FSGJ 1, 385-408. The stanzas have been edited separately in Skj and Skald, as well as in CPB I, 190-2, Edd. Min. 53-4 and 87, Halvorsen (1951) and NK 31-14 (sts 1-6 only).

Introduction to sts 1-6

The following six stanzas, which may originally have been from an independent poem sometimes referred to as 'Hildibrand’s Death song', are said to have been recited by Hildibrand as he lay dying. Poems reviewing their lives are said to have been recited by several fornaldarsaga heroes, like Hjalmarr and Örvar-Oddr, just before they die. These stanzas correspond, though with much elaboration on Saxo’s part, to Saxo 2015, I, vili. 9. 14-15, pp. 506-9.

Hildibrand (Hildibrand L1 1)

1. Mjök er vanðgætt, hlev verða skal
   um borinn öðrum · at banaði.
   Pík Drótt um bar · of Danmarka
   en mik sjáflan · á Svipjóðu.

Mjök er vanðgætt, hlev skal verða um borinn öðrum at banaði. Drótt um bar þik af Danmarka en mik sjáflan á Svipjóðu.

It is very difficult to deal with how one must be born to become the slayer of another. Drótt gave birth to you in Denmark and to me myself in Sweden.

Ms: 7(633) (Asm).


Context: After Asmundur has slain a succession of Hildibrand’s best warriors, Hildibrand breaks into a berserk rage, slays his own son, and meets Asmundur at the River Rhine. Hildibrand’s sword breaks on his adversary’s helmet and flies into the Rhine. Mortally wounded, he utters a poem of six stanzas.

Note: [1] vanðgætt ‘difficult to deal with’: This cpd adj. has only one attested usage in prose, notably in Halflý (Halflý 1977, 52-3), where King Óláfr Tryggvason says to Halldýr that the sword he is giving him will be vanðgætt because it has no sheath. Here Hildibrandr may mean that his fate, of being the killer of his half-brother, is a situation that is difficult to handle. — [3, 5]: In both II. 3 and 5, the first element of the ms. 5 of borinn ‘be born’ and of bar ‘born’ has been normalised to var, to conform to Old Norse usage of the period after 1250. The untranslatable pleonastic particle of occurs most commonly in poetic texts, and its presence here suggests a lengthy transmission
Hildibrandr (Hildibrandr Lv 2)

2. Þveir váru þær, æþærægjaðr,
   Búllanautar; nú er bróttan annarr.
   Sá hóððu ðægðærðu daðurniðað svá,
   sem engi mun aðe ní síðan.

Deir vára tveir, æþærægjaðr, Búllanautar; nú er annarr brótt. Dvergar daður hóððu síðan svá, sem engi mun aðe ní síðan.

They were two, eager for fame, treasures of Bukki: legendary kings; now one is broken. Dwarfs [now] dead had forgot [them] in such a way that no one could before or since.

Ms. 7(43c) (Amst.).


Notes: [All]: The reference is to two swords, forged by Alius and Olius, two dwarfs who visit king Buki and who each fashion a sword for him. The king finds fault with that of Olius and commands him to make another. Olius does so and predicts that it will bring death to the king's grandsons, whereupon the dwarfs disappear. — [2] æþæræ: 'for fame': The noun reads 'írrýræ', which does not correspond to a known Old Norse word. Most eds emend. Kock (FSk §32), drawing on the parallel phrase stríngstrum 'eager for glory' (Hfr Ólfr 6/8), offers the emendation to tímr 'for fame' adopted here. — [6] daður 'now' dead: Skj B emends to Dámskr 'Dálmir's legacy', the name of a sword forged by dwarfs, that belonged to the hero Hogni (Suð. 1998, 1. 72), while Kock (Skáld; cf. FSk §32) emends to daður 'dynamic', but neither emendation has any ms. support.

Hildibrandr (Hildibrandr Lv 3)

3. Stendi mëtt at hóðði hlin í brótna,
   Era þar cabir rigir intir áttu
   manna þeira, er ek at mordi varð.

In brótna hlin stënda at hóðði mér. intir áttu rigir manna þeira er ek varð at mord, era cabir þar.

The broken shield stands by my head. Eighty men, of whom I was the skýrer, are numbered there.

Ms. 7(43c) (Amst.).


Notes: [All]: Some eds (e.g. FSv) collapse sts 3 and 4, which both have only six lines, into a single stanza of twelve lines. Alternatively, to complete an eight-line stanza for each, Eng.明细 points two missing lines between ll. 2 and 3 and two missing lines between ll. 4 and 6 in st. 4. — [1-2]: These lines are mirrored in Saxo 2015, 1, vii. 9. 15, II. 1, 4, pp. 508-9: Ad uparent aeffo effrmore withi Sueticus aesta: By my head stands a Swedish shield', which depicts a pusillanimous subject: 'princes destroyed, champions overthrown'. The reference to a shield painted or otherwise inscribed with images (or possibly names) of dead warriors suggests an affinity with the Carolingian and early Scandinavian pictorial poem or ekphrase (cf. Cluvis Ross 2007: Engelsrag 2007). — [4] intir áttu tigir 'eighty'; Lit. the eight tens'. Skj B, Skáld and Eng.明细 tigir to tigir (gen. sg.) to agree with 7’s 'easts'. Here it is assumed that the scribe mistook the abbreviation symbol for 'tig' for a long 'o'.

Hildibrandr (Hildibrandr Lv 4)

4. Liegar þar inn at sveiði son at hóðði
   eftir, efnaingi er ek eiga gat;
   ðvíðjandis alders atnjaðak.

Inn sveiði son liegar þar eftir, efnaingi, er ek gat eiga; ðvíðjandis atnjaðak alders.

The beloved son lies there behind at my head, the heir whom I begot; unwillingly I deprived [him] of life.

Ms. 7(43c) (Amst.).
Hildibrandr (Hildibrandr Lv 5)

5. Bið ek þók, bróðir, bænan einnar, 
    einnar bærnar þú jú synja.
    Mik skal verja 
    văðum þínun, 
    sem fjörðabið 
    far annars mun.

Ek bið ek þók, bróðir, einnar bærar, einnar bærar, synja þú jú ei. Mik skal verja mik văðum þínun, sem fjörðabið annars mun.

I ask you one favour, brother, one favour, do not deny me [that]. You must wrap me in your garments, as no life-slayer of another [man] would do.


Notes: [All]: This stanza shows close similarities both to the Old High German Hildebrandlied and to parts of Saxo's poem. — [1-2] þú bænan þú jú synja 'the beloved sohn'; The poetic adj. svæðis 'agreeable, pleasant, gracious, dear' occur exclusively in eddic poetry (cf. LL. svæði); when applied to persons (human members, the gods) it means 'dear, beloved, gracious'. It is cognate with Goth. svæði 'own', OE swæð 'dear, own', OHG svæð 'dear'. Late Anglo-Saxon belonging to oneself, one's own and a number of other Indo-European languages (cf. AEW. svæð). This phrase bears a striking similarity to the svæðis chin 'beloved sohn, boy' of Hildebrandlied I: 53a (cf. Halvorson 1951, 14). The phrase þú bænan þú jú synja (l. 2) may indicate that this episode too was depicted on the father's shield, as it is said to be in Saxo, meaning that the saga prose no longer understood the original story. Thus it may rather be a reference to the dead body of Hildibrandr's son, lying beside his dying father. The lines in Saxo (Saxo 2015, I, viii. 9, 15, II, 6-10, pp. 508-9) are mediochristianæs | Illia conspiciuo speciei celestine consuet. | Cui manus hæc cæremon mec sintis additis. | Vincas hic nobis hæres est, suas paternas | Cura animo supervoca damus salutine matris | there stands the likeness of my son, whose course of life this hand brought to its boundary. He was my only heir, the one I concern of his father's mind, given by the gods to comfort his mother.' — [3]: Here, as with Skj B and Skjald, epirsp in the sense 'after, behind' is contrasted with þegj 'lies' in l. 1, but other eds (e.g. Dædir, Edd. Min., NK and FSGJ) understand the line as a cpl nouns epirsp/þegj lit. 'inheritor after sby' with a sense similar to Saxo's unicus hæres 'only heir'.

Hildibrandr (Hildibrandr Lv 6)

6. Nú verð ek liggja lifs undvana, 
    mæki undað, þeim er magnar sár.

Eik verðu ðú liggja undvana lifs, undað mæki þeim er magnar sár.

Now I must lie bereft of life, wounded by a sword, the one that increases wounds.


Notes: [All]: This helming is sometimes treated as part of the previous stanza, giving a twelve-line stanza (so FSGJ), or as the second half of an eight-line stanza, although there is no indication in the ms. of missing verses (so Edd. Min.). — [2] undvanan 'bereft'. The ms. reads andvana, but it is necessary to emend in order to give an adj. in the n. nom. sg. in agreement with æt 'in' (l. 1). — [3-4]: These lines refer to the dwarf-forged sword destined to bring death to King Budli's grandson (see st. 2. Note to [All]). — [4] þeim er magnar 'the one that increases'. Both emendation of the ms.'s þannan magna and normalisation is required here. The final -e of þannan is a clipped form of the rel. particle es, common in poetry from before 1200. This has been normalised to er, following the practice of normalizing all Skj VIII vers to the standard of 1250-1300. Pann (m. acc. sg.) must be emended to þeim (m. dat. sg.) to agree with mæki 'sword' (l. 3), while the verb should be 3rd pers. sg. pres. indic., not 3rd pers. pl., hence magnar, nor magna. The majority of eds adopt the emendations preferred here, while Skjald keeps þannan and emendates magna to mange (cf. NVN §786), claiming a meaning for the verb 'maim, mutilate', though that sense is unrestored in Old Norse, where the meaning seems rather to be 'trade, barter, haggle' (AEW, CVC, Friz. -manga); according to Edd. Min. 54 n. 6, it suggested interpretation goes back to Möbius (1877, 325); it is interpreted as an unidentified p. n. in CPB I, 191.

Introduction to sts 7-10

In these several lines of prose text follow Hildibrandr's lausavita, and describe his death and Asmundr's journey to ask for the hand of Æsa in fagra 'the Fair'. The two groups of stanzas are separated by only slightly more text in Saxo. The stanzas are again in fornvísing.
Ásmundr (Ásmk Lv 2)

8. bórðum einn við einn en endr við tvá, fimn ok fjóra flestegænings, sex ok við sjau semn á velli, einn ok við áttu, þó ek enn lili.

Fimn ok fjóra flestegænings, sex ok við sjau semn á velli ek minn við áttu, þó ek lili enn.

Wt: [I fought one against one and again against two, five and four hall-fighters, six and against seven at a time on the field, and one against eight, yet I am still alive.]

Ms: 7(45b) (Amg).

Edition: Skj: Anonyme digte og vers [XIII], Í. 12. Vers af darkaldrarger: Af Æsmundar saga kappaháttar II: All, 524, 831, Skjálf II, 183; Petursgðal 1722, 22-3 (ch. 10), PSN 2, 486 (ch. 10); Ólafur, 1891, 99, Ísafjó 1, 407 (ch. 10) (Amg); CCB I, 191, Halvorsen 1953, 19; Edd. Min. 87.

Context: As for the previous stanza.

Notes: [All]: Cf. Egil Liv 42/2-7 (Ag 122). The corresponding lines in Saxo's poem are surprisingly close to those in this stanza and the beginning of st. 9 (Saxo 2015, I, vili. 9, 18, II. 5-10, pp. 510-11: Ymnus quando duasque, | Treu ac quatuor, et max | Quibus indeque sensu, | Post septem, simul octo, | Venient quaque solus | Victor Marte subieci | when I subdued in battle | one alone, then two, | three and four, and soon | five followed by six, | seven, eight together, | then eleven single-handed. — [4] flestegænings 'hall-fighters': This cpd noun is a hept. leg. The first element is flest 'raised platform along the wall of a hall where the benches are and where people sleep, hall (pars pro nono)'; but the meaning of the second must be inferred from the context and possible etymology. LP: flestegænings suggests that the noun may mean 'incompetent, unworthy man', with the implied sense of someone who has only the strength (weging) to sit on a bench in the hall or possibly someone who derives strength from being at home. On the other hand Kock (NN §797) postulates that the cpd is equivalent in meaning to OE flestræd 'hall-tree, flestrestæð 'stitch in the hall' (Beowulf 476, 1788, 2022). — [7] náð 'and': Ms. ek 'I' makes relatively poor sense and may be a case of ditachotomy, anticipating the following line, while the minor emendation of ek gives good sense and syntax and matches II. 3 and 5.
9. På hvarfahlæt hugr í bejosti,
er menn ælflæt ofrækku bjøtu,
átt mér í svefni sögðu disir,
at ek hjörleik þann heyja skyldak.

På hvarfahlæt hugr í bejosti, er ælflæt menn ofrækku bjøtu, átt mér sögðu mér í svefni, at ek skyldak heyja þann hjörleik.

Then courage waved in my breast when eleven men offered violence, until their minor female deities said to me in my sleep that I should engage in that sword play (BATLILL).

Ms: 7(43v) ( án). 


Context: According to ch. 8 of Ásm, Ásmundr almost loses his nerve when Hildibrandr decides to send eleven men against him. However, on the night before the contest, Ásmundr has a dream, in which armed women stand over him and identify themselves as his speidir, supernatural prophetesses, possibly to be identified with Valkyries. The women tell him not to fear the eleven men, saying that they will protect him in the fight.

Note: [8] skyldak 'I should': The ms. form with cliticised pers. pron. ek 'I' usually characteristic of Old Norse from before 1200, has not been normalised to the post-1200 form skyldi ek, as it is needed to give a metrical Type A-line. This and other early forms remaining in 7 probably indicate that the poetry already existed in written form in one or more older texts.

Ásmundr (Ásm Lv 4)

10. På kom ín hári Hildibrandr,
Hunakappi hann var mér ómakr.
Olk ek markadu meðan ò húnum
harkumbl hardlíg fyr hjálm neðan.

På kom ín hári Hildibrandr, Húnakappi; hann var mér ómakr. Okt ek markadu meðan ò húnum harkumbl hardlíg fyr hjálm neðan.

Then came the grey-haired Hildibrandr, champion of the Hun, he was not easy for me to deal with. And meanwhile I marked on him hard war tokens [WOUNDS] beneath his helmet.

Ms: 7(43v) ( án).


Context: According to the saga, after Hildibrandr hears that Ásmundr has disposed of the eleven men, he flies into a berserk rage, and sets out for the River Rhine to meet him.

Note: [2] Hildibrandr: The line as it stands in the ms. is hypothetical, but if extra vowel -u were added in Hildibrandu, the metre would be restored. — [3] Hunakappi 'champion of the Hun': According to Søj A, the final -a of this word is absent, but it appears legible to this ed. — [4] ómakr 'not easy to deal with': Lit. 'unequal'; cf. marka 'more equal, more agreeable', KormQ Lv 9/51 (Korm 9). — [6; meðan 'meanwhile': Enamed by Søj B and Skáld to mark ò with a sword'. — [7-8]: The wording here is grimly playful. The cpl. harkumbl usually refers to a token or mark on a helmet and can also be a hoti for helmet; see Ðú Hvít Skáld 2/2ii, Halti 9/3. A harkumbl beneath the helmet, however, is in the wrong place and hence is a wound to the face.