Beowulf’s Swimming Contest with Breca: Old Norse Parallels

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W I T H O U T a Scandinavian analogue to Beowulf’s aquatic encounter with Breca, several rather close Celtic parallels lead to the plausible assumption that Celtic folklore was responsible for the version in Anglo-Saxon literature. However, the Icelandic mythical-heroic sagas, an often uneven marriage of folklore and history, frequently adulterated by romance, do contain a parallel in the very important, but hitherto sadly neglected, saga of Hálfdan, the fosterling of Brana.2

In this work, the titular hero sails to England and the court of King Ólaf. There he is challenged to a swimming contest by Aki, the highly regarded protector of the king’s territory. Hálfdan, like Beowulf, is clad in a suit of armour and the aquatic battles against monsters which the Anglo-Saxon hero undergoes are reserved for the adversary in the Old Norse version. Hálfdan holds his antagonist underwater from morning until mid-afternoon. After parting from the exhausted and beaten Aki he continues to perform ‘many athletic feats’ in the sound before returning to land. Beowulf, too, encounters many aquatic adventures after being separated from Breca, including being dragged underwater by a ‘hostile foe’.

The swimming match, actually pitting the two men against each other, a battle in the water, the hero’s being clad in his armour, and the parting from the antagonist while continuing on to demonstrate further swimming prowess, make this interlude in Hálfdanar saga closer to the conflict between Beowulf and Breca than are the feats of Dubhdiadh and Cuchulain.

That which makes this swimming contest even more striking is its occurrence in the middle of a larger collection of motifs linking Unferth, the evil counsellor of King Hrothgar, to Aki, the evil counsellor of King Olaf in the saga. Just as Unferth begrudges Beowulf’s high position at Heorot, so too does Aki resent Hálfdan’s favourable standing at Olaf’s court. Both Unferth and Aki taunt the stranger, but while Unferth undergoes a sudden, unmotivated, and unexplained character change away from the prototypical evil Germanic counsellor, Aki continues in the mould of the infamous Hogni/Hagen. He attacks the hero on his way to the woods, but the happy-ending syndrome which pervades the mythical-heroic sagas precludes the famous tragic outcome.

Although to date regarded as an obscure saga, the presence in Hálfdanar saga of other well-known motifs from Germanic literature further underscores its importance as a repository of Germanic folklore. The saga contains a parallel remarkably close to the fight with Grendel’s mother, more striking
in this portion of the battle with the monsters than the famous Grettis saga. Furthermore the songs of Sigemund, in which the Beowulf poet darkly but unmistakably alludes to the famous tales of Sigmund and Sigurd in the Volsunga saga (and Nibelungenlied), are also to be found, darkly but unmistakably, in Hálfdanar saga. Not only are the names Signy, Sigmund, and Sigurd used in the saga, but the first is made the mother of the hero, Hálfdan, and the two renowned men have become brothers who, along with their obviously later-added blood-brother, Hálfdan, forge together, defeating two-headed trolls, the second time down in a cave. On another occasion Hálfdan and Sigmund, while visiting the court of King Ólaf, are treacherously attacked by Áki, the evil counsellor, who attempts to burn them in a hall, but they are saved by the intervention of the troll-woman, Brana. Finally, Hálfdan is attacked in a forest a second time by Áki, who bears a resemblance to the figure of Högni/Hagen, but this time the evil counsellor does slay Sigmund.

Another parallel, related in some way to the first, occurs in Órvar-Odds saga, an early mythical-heroic saga preserved in one fourteenth-century manuscript, one from around 1400, and three from the fifteenth century. The hero, a newcomer at the court of King Herraldr and under the alias, Viðförull, is challenged to an aquatic wrestling match by two of the king’s jealous liegemen. The challengers, in their swimming garb, hold Viðförull, dressed only in everyday attire, underwater for a long time. The hero counters by holding them under so long that all are amazed, repeating the trick again until people think they must all be dead. When they surface, the brothers are bleeding from the nose and must be helped to shore. Viðförull floats to land and then returns to the water to play numerous games before returning to land and the congratulations of the king.

Although Órvar-Odds saga is generally regarded as one of the oldest mythical-heroic sagas, it does not appear that it can have been the donor to the episode in Hálfdanar saga. The antagonist at court in the latter, Áki, still preserves the prototype of the evil counsellor, while the two antagonists in the former smack of doubling for dramatic effect. In Hálfdanar saga the hero swims in his armour, as does Beowulf, while Órvar-Odds saga preserves only a trace of the original motif, stating that the antagonists had on swimsuits while the hero had on his street clothes! If the present form of Órvar-Odds saga is indeed older than Hálfdanar saga, which is likely, then the two versions must go back to a common source, either different from both or similar to an older oral or written form of one of the sagas.

A further swimming parallel of interest is found in Vílmundar saga víðutan, a romance preserved in three fifteenth-century manuscripts, which has been related to Hálfdanar saga Eystraioinnar by Finnur Jónsson, but denied by Franz Schröder. It contains, besides the oldest version of the Cinderella story, an encounter by the hero with two of the king’s liegemen. The first, Rudi, loses his life after challenging Vílmundr, a newcomer at the court, to a wrestling match. The second, Hjarrandi, the king’s son, then challenges the hero to a swimming battle. Each holds the other underwater until all feel they must be dead. As the day wears on, Hjarrandi is defeated and must come ashore, so stiff that he must be helped by his men in order to walk. Vílmundr continues to perform miraculous aquatic feats, tipping out of the water a large stone upon which he then rests.

The king subsequently unleashes a polar bear which attacks Vílmundr, who then grabs the animal. The bear drags the hero to him until Vílmundr takes his knife, which he wore on a string, and pierces the heart of his adversary. After the water becomes like blood, the hero disappears, finally appearing again, exhausted and floating in the gore. Hjarrandi then swims out to Vílmundr and helps him ashore.

Of prime importance is the wrestling match against Hjarrandi, for the battle against the bear may ultimately be a borrowing from Grettis saga, where the hero also wrestles with a bear, finally killing it with a sword which he had tied with a string to his wrist. The swimming match against Hjarrandi is obviously related to the aquatic contests undergone by Hálfdan and Órvar-Oddr, but neither must of needs be the donor. Given the dating of Vílmundar saga to around 1350, it seems that this saga has been the borrower, but what is it that the mythical-heroic saga or from a common source cannot be stated on the basis of this short passage.

Obviously related to the sequence of battles in Vílmundar saga is Finnbogi’s duel with Earl Hákon’s black liegeman and following aquatic battle with the earl’s bear in Finnboga saga rauma. The duel is a wrestling match as in Vílmundar saga, but very reminiscent of troll battles in Hálfdanar saga Brúrafóstra, Órvar-Odds saga and related stories. In fact, Finnbogi remarks that his opponent looks more like a troll than anything else and the phrase ‘síðan þu gisst þér til glímu, ok varð þá atgangr þæði hárðr ok langr’ is suspiciously close to ‘ok þóku þau at glímu, ok var þeirra atgangr þæði hárðr ok langr’ in one of the troll encounters in Grims saga loðincinna, a tale related to Hálfdanar saga Brúrafóstra. Finnbogi breaks his opponent’s back (i sunndr) on a stone much as Vílmundr impales Rudi (i sunndr!) on a sword embedded in a stone. In the aquatic match with the bear, both Finnbogi and Vílmundr use the noteworthy tygknifr, a sword tied by a string to the hero, while the former goes on to sport about in the water as do Vílmundr after his first battle, Hálfdan, and Órvar-Oddr.

Also related to the above-mentioned tales is a passage in Hemings þáttur-Áslakssonar, a popular tale preserved in one early fourteenth-century and two fifteenth-centuryvellums. King Harald receives the hero at his court, puts him through a William Tell-type test, and tries to goad his reluctant men into a swimming contest with Hemingr. Nikulás finally agrees, but the hero swims so far from land that his opponent tires and will drown, but Hemingr helps him to land. Then the hero sits on a rock out in the water, while his opponent is said to be stiff and sore. In a repetition of the action, the king swims out to Hemingr, who descends from his perch to engage in a battle. The king holds the hero underwater, the sea becomes choppy and they become lost to sight. Much later, after it has become dark, the king returns, defeated, to his men.

The presence of the reluctant opponent is evidently paralleled in Finnboga saga, where it has been given a somewhat farcical turn, for there it
is the bear who is reluctant to fight with the hero. Perhaps an original feature in *Hemings hattur* is the swimming contest, with its lack of hostility between the contestants, as opposed to the aquatic battle, for Beowulf, too, has his aquatic fights after the distance swim with Breca, who seems to be more of a boyhood companion than an antagonist.

Slightly more embellished, but still recognizable, is the hero’s battle with Fæx in *Porsteins saga* *Vikingssonar*. After a battle on a boat, Fæx swims to land, chased by Dorstein, and both wind up in the water, each trying to drown the other. As Fæx attempts to bite apart Porstein’s windpipe, a tactic evidently employed by trolls, not men, and the hero is on the brink of defeat, he calls out for the dwarf, Sindri, to help him and is enabled to draw his *tygilknifr* and slash open his opponent’s belly. Meanwhile, the hero’s companions see the waters reddened with blood and think him dead. Finally the exhausted Porstein, so overcome that he can no longer keep aloft, is aided into the boat by his friends.

In *Porsteins saga*, the reception at a foreign court and challenge to aquatic contests are missing, but the attempt by Fæx to bite asunder the hero’s throat, the latter’s call for aid when helpless and apparently vanquished, his ensuing ability to reach a weapon, the nomenclature *tygilknifr*, and the hero’s companions who think him dead upon seeing the bloody waters link this recension to Beowulf and to other saga versions.

With the establishment of numerous versions where a hostile king actually has one of his men or a bear fight the hero in an aquatic battle (as in *Vilmundar saga*, *Finnboga saga*, *Hemings hattur*) or even takes on the hero himself (as in *Hemings hattur*), the short interlude in *Laxdæla saga* and in *Ólafr saga Tryggvasonar*, where Kjartran the Icelander and the King of Norway engage in a rough ducking contest, can with some probability be related to the Beowulf analogue. In the latter cases it was probably the reputation of King Ólaf as a good swimmer which was responsible for the borrowing and Icelandic pride which allowed the popular Christian king to be fought to a draw. The wrestling match on land against the king’s (or earl’s) black liege-man, appended to the aquatic contests in *Finnboga saga*, and against Ræði in *Vilmundar saga*, is preserved alone in *Gunnars saga* *Keldungsolfis*, where the earl’s favourite wrestler is broken in two after being slammed down against a rock.

Even two swimming adventures in *Grettis saga*, which ordinarily could not be connected with the above, since they amount to little more than having the hero swim a great distance to fetch fire from the mainland, can be tentatively accepted, for they are linked to a hero related to Beowulf, also known for his swimming prowess, and they occur in a saga which has varied the Old Norse equivalent of Beowulf’s fight with Grendel and his dam at least six times. In the first incident bad weather forces a boat with Grettir in it to land, but without fire the men think they will not survive. Grettir is goaded into swimming across the sound to fetch fire, but when he arrives at a house there, he is mistaken for a troll and attacked. He defends himself and the house eventually burns down, but he returns with the fire. Probably related is a passage in *Illugha saga* *Gríðarföstra*, where bad weather forces a boat with Illugi on it to land, but without fire the men think they will not survive. Illugi is goaded by Björn, the king’s evil counsellor, to row across the fjord to fetch fire, but when he arrives there, he is attacked by a troll, whom he befriends, and they are in turn attacked by seven giantesses, who are defeated and burned. He subsequently returns with the fire. A third episode preserves only the prodigious long-distance swim by Grettir and his host and friend, Björn Hítdekkappi, from a lake, down a river to the sea. Significantly, they set up large stepping stones in the river, much as is related in *Vilmundar saga*. Perhaps this feature is ultimately responsible for the hero’s perch between battles in *Hemings hattur*.

In *Áns saga borgsvegis*, the hero is ill received by King Ingjald’s liegemen upon his arrival. An is asked if he would like to fight with Björn, who turns out to be a man, but which also can mean a bear! He finally throws his formidable adversary into a fire and severely burns him. (The breaking apart—*i sundr*—of an opponent’s back on a rock is reserved for a battle against a highwayman several pages later.) Of interest are the aloof behaviour of the hero, similar to that of Vilmundr viðutan, and the fact that although the king is not hostile, An senses that he is, despite the protestations of his brother and the unjustified nature of the accusation at that time.

*Egil saga sinkenda* seems to be very conservative in preserving the aloof, intractable, querulous youth who challenges twenty-nine of his companions to an endurance swim. One after the other they turn back until fog and a cold wind separate him from the rest of his companions. Egill spends two days in the water before reaching land and a series of troll encounters. Although the first of these is related to the Polyphemus tale, it ends with the hero hacking off the monster’s right hand. In the immediately ensuing troll encounter, Egill chops off a giant’s right arm, which was so large that a man could barely lift it. The saga is preserved in three fifteenth-century manuscripts, one of them from the beginning of the century, and the original has dated to around 1325.

The swimming contests discussed above show that Beowulf’s swimming exploits brought up by Unferth at Hrothgar’s court have numerous analogues in Scandinavia. Even though the saga versions show some interdependence, they bear testimony to the great popularity which the tale enjoyed in northern Europe. By comparing those motifs which are found in what seems to be the most conservative version, *Hálfdanar saga*, with those which keep recurring in the other sagas, one can arrive at a probable Old Norse archetype for the swimming match. By cross-checking with the Old English epic, one can more reasonably say which motifs were present in the older Scandinavian version and common to the source of Beowulf. Certainly archaic are the arrival of the hero at the court of a nobleman and his clash with an antagonistic liegeman there. It would seem that the antagonistic king is a later addition to one branch of the sagas, and he even comes to substitute for his underling. Whether the ensuing aquatic encounters took place elsewhere and are related by the *yle* as in Beowulf or actually take place at the court as in the various Scandinavian versions is more difficult to say. Given that swimming prowess does not seem to be original to the
oral, bear's son precursor to Beowulf and his Scandinavian counterparts,\(^{21}\) and given the greater age of the Old English epic, it would seem that Beowulf has preserved an older, more primitive stage of accretion. The later-attested sagas have evidently gone a step further and integrated the swimming episode to the court, in essence combining the first antagonist ('Breca') with the second ('Unferth'). That the swimming episode originally had two parts is attested to by insular and several saga redactions, and Egils saga einhenda seems to support the epic in having the first part a long-distance swim. The fame of the bear's son hero as a wrestler probably accounts in part for the aquatic wrestling matches in many sagas. Evidently the hero's prowess was originally heightened by having him perform while clad in his armour, to which the epic and Hálfmanns saga Brunnvostra (plus Orvar-Odds saga) attest. Saga accounts of the protagonist's defeat are doubtless earlier than Unferth's exhorting of Breca in his baiting of Beowulf. Both the Old English and Old Norse variants support a Germanic original which already had an immediately following aquatic battle attached.

Without an older source, it is not possible to know whether the second encounter against water monsters is a Germanic innovation, perhaps suggested by the subterranean battle in the bear's son folktales, or whether it has been inherited, perhaps then influencing the underwater entrance to what is more usually a dry, underground cave. Numerous saga versions which have the onlookers agree that the hero must be dead when he disappears from sight for a long time or when they see great quantities of blood in the water, do call to mind the corresponding passage in the bear's son folktales, in both English and Scandinavian versions, where the hero's companions give up hope for the hero when he disappears, or when they see blood and gore rise to the surface of the water. In any case, both Beowulf and the sagas suggest that the second encounter was a compound one, for the hero either defeats many monsters in the epic or performs many aquatic feats in various sagas. Upon completion of the swim, most of the sagas, unlike Beowulf, have the hero return, but this is to be expected if the sagas have innovated the wrestling match against a hostile member of the court. It is very possible that Egils saga einhenda preserves the original motif in Scandinavia and Hemings þáttr provides a transition, with the hero helping his opponent back to land.

With so many features of the swimming contest in Beowulf preserved in Scandinavian, but not in Celtic sources, Celtic influence on the Old English epic could be maintained only if a fuller, lost Celtic source is posited and if this version in Beowulf had directly influenced the sagas. Using the argument of simplicity, the posting of a common Germanic source for the epic and the sagas is more attractive. Whether Beowulf influenced any of the sagas has been debated for many years, with the bulk of more recent scholarship supporting their independent development from an older version or versions.\(^{22}\) The conservative Hálfmanns saga Brunnvostra would support the more recent view, since it preserves a hostile liegeman to the king who does not waver in his view of the newcomer as well as the names Sigurd and

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**NOTES**

4. Beowulf mentions that Sigemund was the son of Wæls and uncle of Fitela and that uncle and nephew went on many adventures together, killing numerous giants. To Sigemund is attributed the subterranean dragon battle. The Volsunga saga has Sigumund the son of Volsung, while Sifjötl is the son of Sigmund and his sister, Sigyn. Together, Sigmund and Sifjötl kill many men in the forest.
5. Whether this episode in Hálfmanns saga is a reversal of the encounter in the Volsunga saga, where Sigmund and Sifjötl burn the evil King Siggeir in his hall, is difficult to say. It is noteworthy that the Volsunga saga has Sigurn come out of the fiery building, inform Sigmund that the Sigurdr is his son, and then return to the inn, while Brana rescues Sigmund and Hálfdan and tells the latter that he is the father of their week-old daughter. She leaves them and never returns to the story. This episode has no parallel in Beowulf.
6. Quite interestingly, it is the continental Niðblæsungslið which contains the close parallel in this instance, with Hagen stabbing Sigurd, son of Sigmund, in the back. Mortally wounded, Sigurd chases Hagen through the woods, telling him with his shield before succumbing to his wounds. In the saga, Hálfdan captures Aki and, in a passage uncharacteristic of even the hellicose sagas, proceeds to mutilate the wicked man in a painfully thorough manner.

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Signy in their proper context in the saga but not mentioned in the epic. If the narrative-loving Celts had indeed influenced a Germanic version, it must have been centuries earlier and on the Continent, engendering a reconstruction too early for the extant literature adequately to support. The plethora of Icelandic analogues point to a well-known Scandinavian source which had taken on numerous accretions by the time they were written down in Iceland in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.


17. Found only in 17th-century paper mss. and edited in Íslandinga sögur, X, 455–86; dated there, p. xii, to not earlier than 1400.

18. Edited in FSN, III, 413–24; first attested in a vellum ms. from around 1600, but perhaps compiled as early as the 14th century, Hermannsson, p. 30.


