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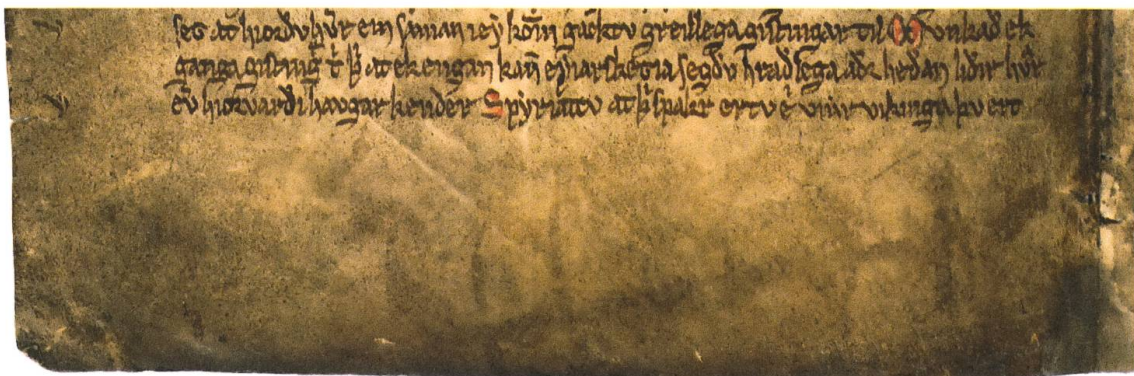
## A Textscape: On Sámsey

CAROLYNE LARRINGTON (OXFORD)

*Hervör kvað:*

*Munkat ek ganga gistingar til  
því at ek engan kann eyjarskeggja.  
Segðu hraðliga áðr heðan líðir:  
hvar eru Hjörvarði haugar kenndir?  
(Herv Lv 5<sup>VIII</sup> (Heiðr 19))*

I will not go to any lodgings, for I know none of the island beard-wearers. Say quickly before you go from here: where are the mounds named after Hjörvarðr?



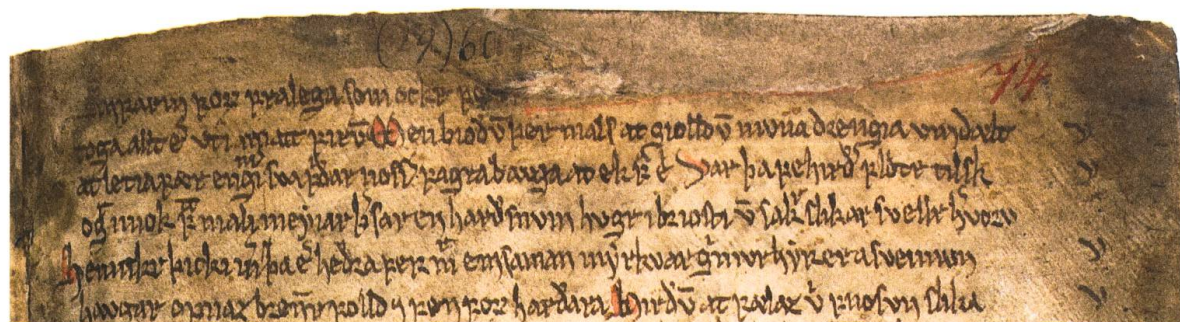
*Hirðir kvað:*

*Heimskr þykki mér, sá er heðra ferr,  
maðr einn saman myrkvar grímur.  
Hyr er á sveimun; haugar opnaz;  
brennr fold ok fen; förum harðara.  
(Anon, 3<sup>VIII</sup> (Heiðr 22))*

Foolish seems to me anyone who journeys from here, a person alone in the dark night. Fire is flickering; the mounds opening; earth burns and so too the fen; let's go more quickly!<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Lausavísur from *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, cited from Hannah Burrows, ed. *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages*, vol. 8, gen. ed. Margaret Clunies Ross (Turnhout: Brepols, forthcoming). Cited with permission from *Skaldic Poetry of the Middle Ages* website. All translations in this essay are my own (CL).





My textscape is also a landscape; a real place viewed in mythic time. According to *Hervarar saga*, Hervör learns that her father is buried on Sámsey with his ancestral sword Tyrfingr. Dressed in men's clothes, she commands a Viking ship and crew to sail there, but no one else dares disembark. *Svá miklar meinvættir gangi þar öll dægr, at þar er verra um daga en víða um nætr annars staðar* ("many evil beings walk there by day, and it is worse there during the day, that it generally is by night in other places") (*Hervarar saga*, ch. 4), the crew aver. Hervör alone steps on land, finds an interlocutor who points her in the right direction, but who is too terrified to accompany her – and Hervör approaches the mounds alone for her confrontation with her dead father. These verses are preserved in Copenhagen, AM 544 4to (*Hauksbók*), 73v and 74r (from between 1300-1325), as illustrated here. Other manuscripts which preserve the two stanzas are in Reykjavík, GKS 2845 4to, 65r (from around 1450), and the paper manuscript Upps UB R 715, 12v from 1650.

The Bronze Age burial-mounds on the Danish island of Samsø must, for Viking-Age inhabitants of the island, have been highly mysterious landscape features. Passage graves, dolmens, chamber graves and other monuments abound on Samsø: the impressive mound complexes in Holbæk county includes the striking Dalby Rævehøj Jættestue with its 2.5 metre high burial chamber.<sup>2</sup> Although dating from a much earlier era, these mounds must have been understood as having a funerary function in the period in which the verses constituting *The Waking of Angantýr* were composed. There is good evidence from Anglo-Saxon England for new meanings to be made within old landscapes, for monuments of the past to generate new associations (Semple, 2013; Semple, 1998). Wayland's Smithy, a Bronze Age chamber-grave near the Ridgeway long-distance track in South Oxfordshire, is one such site; it has been associated with Weland/Völundr, the legendary Germanic smith since the tenth century. Elsewhere in England, prehistoric monuments were used as burial-places for criminals and outcasts; they become places of execution, the antithesis of the Christian churchyard where the bodies of the Christian dead are protected from supernatural harm.

The origins of the Samsø mounds are accounted for in two distinct accounts preserved in *Hervarar saga* and *Örvar-Odds saga*. These relate the battle on Sámsey in

<sup>2</sup> See: <http://www.megalithic.co.uk/article.php?sid=40524>.



(© The Arnamagnæan Institute, Copenhagen. Photo: Suzanne Reitz)



which Angantýr the berserk and his eleven brothers fell in battle against the legendary hero Örvar-Oddr and his sworn-brother Hjálmar. In *Hervarar saga* the island battle functions as a kind of mass *hólmgangr*, fought to settle the rival claims of Hjörvarðr, the second eldest of the berserks, and Hjálmar to the hand of Ingibjörg, daughter of the Swedish king (*Hervarar saga*, ch. 2). On arriving at the island, the brothers massacre Oddr and Hjálmar's men while their leaders are absent. Hjálmar has misgivings when he sees from afar the berserks arrive:

*Fara halir hraustir af herskipum,  
tólf menn saman tírarlausir.  
Vit munum í aptan Óðin gista,  
tveir fullhugar, en þeir tólf lifa.*  
(Hjálmar Lv<sup>VIII</sup> (Örv 9))

Vigorous men disembark from the war-ships, twelve inglorious ones together. We two great-hearted men will be Óðinn's guests this evening, while those twelve live on.

In *Örvar-Odds saga*, the encounter with the berserks comes about by chance. In both sagas the battle becomes a formalised ritual: Hjálmar fights against Angantýr, and Oddr against the other eleven brothers. The rules for the battle are carefully specified; the dead will be buried with respect by the survivors and there will be no looting of weapons or other treasures. By the end, all the brothers are dead, and Hjálmar is fatally wounded. In his 'death-song', a sequence of verses differently preserved across the two sagas and their differing recensions, Hjálmar laments the heroic life he has lost, and the joys of the royal hall. In a poignant verse he contrasts the expansive estates he holds on the mainland with the little space he now occupies on Sámsey:

*Áttak at fullu fimm tún saman,  
en ek því aldri unda ráði.  
Nú verð ek liggja lífs andvani,  
sverði undaðr, Sámseyju í.*  
(Hjálmar Lv 5<sup>VIII</sup> (Örv 15))

I had five whole estates all reckoned, but I never enjoyed that lot in life. Now I must lie, despairing of life, wounded by a sword, in Sámsey.

Hjálmar's words in this verse suggest a tradition in which he is entombed in Sámsey. Here he will occupy only a little patch of land rather than enjoying his land-holdings at home; the contrast between the land one owns and the narrow confines of the grave is a frequent topos in medieval lament. In both sagas, however, Oddr takes his friend's corpse back to Ingibjörg at the royal court. Hjálmar explicitly requests that he should not be left in Sámsey: *at þú látir mik eigi verða lagðan í haug hjá svá illum vættum sem berserkirnir eru* ("do not let me be laid in a mound with such evil creatures as these berserkers are") (*Örvar-Odds saga*, ch. 14).





*Image 2: The Bronze Age burial-mounds of Dalby Rævehøje and Vagthøje on Samsø  
(Photograph: Hanne Methling, reproduced with her kind permission)*

*Örvar-Odds saga* details the topography and construction of the island burial-mounds: Angantýr and his brothers are buried in one place, earth is piled up and faced with timber, then turf and sand placed on top, while Oddr's own men are laid in a particular mound on the beach. The separate sites not only mirror the actual monuments on Samsø, where one sizeable mound (Alstrup Jættestue) is located on the north-west shore, but also manifest the crucial distinction between the evil and the good dead. Oddr's nameless crew lie quietly in their mound, but the mound(s) of Angantýr and his brothers become a place of horror, where the dead walk and talk and where supernatural fire burns in the middle of the night.

Sámsey/Samsø is thus figured as a site of memory and regret in Hjólmarr's stanzas. Play is made in the verse with the idea of 'lodging', *gistingar*, *gista*. Hjólmarr thinks that he and Oddr will be Óðinn's guests by nightfall; Hervör echoes this trope in her refusal to seek other *gistingar*, insisting rather on going to the alternative lodgings of her father and uncles, the uncanny anti-halls of the burial-mounds. Echoing through *The Waking of Angantýr* are words which alliterate on *haugar*: *hugr*, *heill*, *heimr*. The graves test Hervör's resolution (*hugr*) and luck (*heill*), and they open a vision into another world (*heimr*). They also figure the un-homeliness (*Unheimlichkeit*) of the berserks' dwellings: not Valhöll after all, but a space of horror situated between worlds where violence still lingers and through which actors (dead and alive) move.

Islands are, by definition, distinctively marked-out spaces in the landscapes of Norse imaginative literature: enclosed, only reachable by crossing water. They have a particular social/ritual function in saga texts as sites for the *hólmgangr*, containing the rage of men fighting to the death, so that their anger does not contaminate the community. Islands thus generate emotional resonances – the sorrow and regret of the dying and their mourners, and they preserve a lingering cultural memory of trauma and horror that colours the landscape thereafter, as *lieux de mémoire* (see Nora, 1989). Hervör's exchange with the shepherd, harking back to Hjálmar's verses a generation earlier, bridges the gap between past and present, between heroic death with entry into Valhøll and the uncanny afterlife of mound-dwelling evil-doers. Slipping between genders, sliding between worlds, Hervör walks unafraid into the realm of the undead.

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