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## ‘[...]f Sueins .k.’: *Glælognskviða* and Its Contexts

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Þórarinn loftunga’s *Glælognskviða* (Sea-Calm Poem) was first performed in the early 1030s, some time between its subject, Óláfr Haraldsson’s, translation on 3 August 1031 and its addressee, Sveinn Álfifuson’s, hasty departure from Norway in 1034/5 (Magerøy, 1948: 43–4). Its nine verses are recorded in manuscripts of Snorri’s *Óláfs saga helga* (cf. Louis-Jensen, 1997, on these manuscripts and their interrelationships), where v. 1 is introduced as follows: *Þess getr Þórarinn loftunga í kvæði því, er hann orti um Svein Álfifuson, er kallat er Glælognskviða* (“Þórarinn loftunga tells of this in the poem which he composed for/about Sveinn Álfifuson, which is called *Glælognskviða*”).

This passage occurs near the top of fol. 1v of AM 47 fol, *Eirspennill*, written in Iceland in the first quarter of the fourteenth century. Although parts of the leaf are missing, the rubric is still partly visible: [...]f Sueins .k. This is the only medieval manuscript to preserve this wording. With missing letters supplied from the Kringla transcript (AM 35 fol, c. 1675–1700), it reads [*Uppha*]f Sveins konungs (“beginning [of the saga] of King Sveinn”). In this branch of the transmission, then, *Óláfs saga helga* is interrupted by a saga of the Dane Sveinn Álfifuson, son of Knútr inn ríki and much-disliked ruler of Norway 1030–1034/5. The majority of *Óláfs saga helga* manuscripts do not go so far. There Sveinn’s name often receives a large decorated initial, as it does here, but the key word *Upphaf* is absent, relegating Sveinn from saga protagonist to a blip in the royal line from Óláfr Haraldsson to his son Magnús Ólafsson. But the unfortunate Sveinn not only ruled Norway under the shadow of his sainted predecessor; his only named skald composed a poem that is, although *um Svein Álfifuson*, about St Óláfr.

This context goes some way towards explaining Þórarinn’s surprising choice of the meter *kviðuháttr* (disputed; perhaps ‘poem’s meter’) for *Glælognskviða*. *Kviðuháttr*, a catalectic variant of *fornyrðislag*, is the meter of 14% of the lines in the encomiastic corpus.<sup>1</sup> And it was the skaldic medium of choice for praising one’s addressee by means of a poem about other people altogether, usually dead ones.<sup>2</sup> As Kari Gade has shown (2005), the metrical and syntactical constraints imposed by the brevity of this meter’s odd lines gave *kviðuháttr* verses their characteristic shape, that of a concatenated series of subordinate clauses with copious nominal variation.

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Tarrin Wills for this information.

<sup>2</sup> *Erfikvæði* in *dróttkvætt* address the immediate descendants, usually the sons or brothers, of the dead man. The usual explanation for Þórarinn’s choice of *kviðuháttr* is that its simplicity made the poem comprehensible to his young, English-speaking patron (Lindow, 2008: 112; Townend, 2005: 257).







Along with (and to some extent determined by) this catenulate structure go commonalities in subject-matter and diction that arguably originate in a particular performance setting and social context, namely, the aristocratic funeral: so much so, I would suggest, that we are justified in seeing this poetry as a key medium of funeral memoria.<sup>3</sup>

Þjóðólfr of Hvin's ninth-century composition *Ynglingatal* (Yt) provided the template, as far as we can tell. Its final verse reveals that it was composed for Rognvaldr heiðumhæri, but it is *about* 28 notoriously deceased rulers, whose relationship to Rognvaldr is unclear. The *Háleygjatal* (Hál) of Eyvindr skáldaspillir ('skalds' despoiler'), composed in the late tenth century for Hákon jarl Sigurðarson, reckons its patron's lineage back to Óðinn and Skaði and takes the *kviðuháttr* memorial in the genealogical direction implied, but nowhere stated, in *Ynglingatal*. This pattern of imitating and outdoing, seen also in Eyvindr's *Hákonarmál* vis-à-vis the anonymous *Eiríksmál*, is likely to be the origin of Eyvindr's wry nickname. Finally Egill Skallagrímsson, in his *Sonatorrek* (St) and *Poem for Arinbjörn* (Arbj), gives the form a characteristic spin, praising his sons and his friend Arinbjörn in poems that are primarily about the poet himself and his quotidian and mythic adversaries. These are the only *kviðuháttr* poems that pre-date *Glælognskviða*, but it continued to be a viable medium for praise poetry, with Sturla Þórðarson's *Hákonarkviða* (c. 1270) a fascinating late composition in the meter.

The commonality, and mediality, of these poems goes deeper than this, however. Shared characteristics – also shared by much of the later *kviðuháttr* poetry – include:

1. the poem is about the dead:
  - Yt (the kings), Hál (Hákon's ancestors), St (Egill's parents, brother and sons).<sup>4</sup>
2. it mentions particular landscapes (the place of death and/or burial of the poem's subjects):
  - Yt: á beði Skútu, v. 3, við Fýri, v. 6, í Limafirði, v. 12, at Uppsölum vv. 13 and 16, á Vendli, v. 15, á Lófundu, v. 17, etc.; Hál: Straumeyjarnes, v. 5, á Fjölum, v. 7, á Qglói, v. 9; St: á nesi, v. 25; Arb: ?possibly í Fjórðum, v. 22.
3. it includes complex, unusual kennings, often involving *ofljóst* on personal names:
  - Yt: e.g. *slongupref verðar Sleipnis* ('flung grasper of the meal of Sleipnir' [HAY > PITCHFORK], v. 8, *mær bróður Býleists* ('maiden of the brother of Býleistr') [= Loki > = Hel (*hel* 'the underworld')], v. 23; Hál: e.g. *mogr Hallgarðs* [*hallr* 'stone' = *grjót* 'gravel', Grjótgarðr > Hákon Grjótgarðs-

<sup>3</sup> Cf. already Wessén, 1915; Ohlmarks, 1944, argues similarly for the *erfíkvæði* genre as a whole; objections to this in Fidejestøl, 1982; cf. also Harris, 2006. For a recent argument for funerary practices as embodied memoria, cf. Williams, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Arinbjörn is still alive at the point that *Arbj* is referred to in *Egils saga*, but the prose framing of *Egils saga*'s long poems is not above suspicion.

son], v. 8, *brúðr valty's* ("bride of the slaughter-god") [= Óðinn > = Jorð (*jorð* 'land')], v. 12; *Arbj*: e.g. *björn bjóða ótta birkis* ("bear of the table of the terror of the birch") [FIRE > HEARTHSTONE (*arinn*), *Arinbjörn*], v. 16.<sup>5</sup>

4. it has a list- or chain-like (catenulate) structure:
  - *Yt* lists 28 kings, the surviving verses of *Hál* seven, and both poems' names end in *-tal* ('list'); *St* mentions the deaths of two sons, father, mother and brother, using the verb *telja* (v. 5); *Arbj*, in a self-reflexive moment, observes that *valið liggja / tvén ok þrén / á tungu mér* ('two or three [ideas] lie chosen on my tongue'), v. 15.
5. it mentions the afterlife (Óðinn; Valhøll) and female psychopomps (*Hel*, *Hildir*, *Rán*):
  - *Hel*: *Yt* 7, 23, 24, *St* 25; *Hildir*: *Hál* 7; *Rán*: *St* 7-8; Óðinn: *Yt* 3, *Hál* 1-2, 6, 8, *St* 21-24, *Arbj* 6-7, 13; *Valhøll*: *Arbj* 14, *St* 10-11.
6. it mentions commemorative monuments of stone or wood:
  - *Yt*: *sá frømuðr \*reyrs Høgna vas of horfinn beinum foldar* ("that wielder of the reed of Høgni [WARRIOR] was surrounded by the bones of the earth [STONES]", v. 19; *Hál*: *náreiðr vingameiðr drúpir á nesi* ("the corpse-bearing swaying tree droops on the headland"), *fjòlkunnt Straumeyjarnes merkt steini of hrør fylkis* ("well-known Straumeyjarnes [is] marked by a stone over the ruler's body"), v. 5; *St*: *mærðar timbr, máli laufgat* ("timbers of praise, adorned with the foliage of speech"), v. 5; *Arbj*: *mærðar efni, auðskæf ómunlokri* ("stuff of fame, easily shaped with the voice-plane"), v. 15, *lofkøst* ("praise-cairn"), v. 25.

There is no space here for a full exploration of the links between these features and the archaeological evidence for Viking Age funeral practices, particularly as the latter are highly variable. Key points include, however: the importance of the gravesite as a locus of memory, sometimes over very long periods (cf. e.g. Hållans Stenholm, 2012; Klevnäs, 2016); the associations between stone and the world of the dead (cf. e.g. Kaliff, 1997; Aspeborg, 2005); the fragmentation of bodies in funeral rituals (cf. Lund, 2013), which finds parallels in the fragmentary rhetoric of the kenning, especially in *ofljóst*; the importance of lists (from the runic inscriptions of Rök and Högby to the husbands, daughters, sisters and brothers whose deaths are recalled by the mourners in *Guðrúnarkviða I*; cf. Harris, 2000); and the self-referential rhetoric of the conclusion, in which the skald compares his poetic memorial with the wooden or stone monuments of the gravesite.<sup>6</sup> Bodies, landscapes and monuments are anchors for memory in these poems.

<sup>5</sup> *St* lacks *ofljóst*, but the sequence of head-kennings in *St* 19: 6-7, *í jorðu grímu, rýnnis reið* 'land of the face, chariot of thought' is reminiscent of *Yt*'s chains of riddling kennings (note, though, the emendation of ms. *í aróar grímu*).

<sup>6</sup> The saga topos of the audience recording these poems in runes, as in the prose frame of *Sonatorrek* (*Egils saga*, ch. 78), may be a reflex of this feature, cf. Clunies Ross in this volume.



*Glælognskviða* is the earliest poem to celebrate Óláfr's sanctity (cf. Lindow, 2008). By presenting him as *rex perpetuus Norvegiæ*, able to grant Sveinn rule over Norway (v. 9), it argues that the succession of Sveinn to the throne is legitimate (v. 2). The *kviðuhátt* tradition provided the skald with a powerful way of making this point. Stating the location of the grave (*í Þrandheimi ... Þars Óleifr áðan byggði ... ok þar varð kykvasettr* ("in Trøndelag, where Óláfr previously dwelt, and there became enshrined alive"), vv. 2-3) and affirming that the deceased has departed to the after-life (*hann hvarf til himinríkis* ("he departed to the heavenly kingdom"), v. 3) emphasizes the old king's departure and the legitimacy of the new one. Even the list motif is vestigially present in *Glælognskviða*, an indication of the abiding force of memorial tradition:

*Þar vas jarl  
fyrst at upphafi,  
ok hverr maðr,  
es honum fylgði,  
annarr drengr  
qðrum betri.* (v. 1)

There the jarl [= Haraldr Þorkelsson] was first and foremost, and every man who followed him, each warrior, [was] better than the next.

But Óláfr's sanctity compelled Þórarinn to an innovative re-purposing of the traditional medium of funeral *memoria*. The saintly king needs no psychopomps, but departs to heaven under his own power: *sonr Haralds hafði harðla ráðit sér til himinríkis* ("The son of Haraldr [= Óláfr] had powerfully taken himself to the heavenly kingdom", v. 4). Óláfr's corpse is uncorrupted, whole and beautiful (v. 5), unlike the disarticulated, fragmented dead body of pre-Christian funeral ritual (*koggla hrørs* ("limbs of the corpse"), *St* 4; the *ægir hjarna* ("sea of the brains") of King Aðils mixes with the mud of the grave, *Yt* 16). The repeated deictic *þar* in v. 3 refers to his shrine's place in the middle of Niðaróss (Trondheim), from where his successor Sveinn will *æ ævi sína ... byggðum ráða* ("always rule the settlements throughout his life") (v. 2); earlier *kviðuhátt* poetry emphasizes instead the peripheral location of its subjects' burial sites, often close to bodies of water. The postmortem activities of the pre-Christian dead among the living could cause anxiety (McKinnell, 2009, and cf. *St* v. 18), but St Óláfr is a "mediator" (*sættir*, v. 4) between God and man. The bulk of Þórarinn's poem is taken up with a sensual evocation of the miraculous new media of communication between heaven and earth that Christianity offered the believer – bells that ring by themselves (v. 6), candles (v. 7), *reginnagla máls bóka* ("the sacred nail of the language of books") (v. 9: the referent of this, the poem's only elaborate kenning, is disputed) – and the healing power of the heavenly grace that they mediate, manifest in the bodies of believers:

*Þar kœmr herr,*  
*es heilagr es*  
*konungr sjalfr,*  
*krýpr at gangi.*  
*En beiðendr*  
*blindir sækja*  
*þjóðir máls,*  
*en þaðan heilir.* (v. 8)

A host comes there, where the holy king himself is, [and] bows down for access. And people, petitioners for speech [and] the blind, make their way [there], and [go] from there whole.

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