

Zeitschrift: Beiträge zur nordischen Philologie
Herausgeber: Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Skandinavische Studien
Band: 72 (2022)

Artikel: Wooden performances : carving and versifying níð and idolatry
Autor: Finaly, Alison
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-976347>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 14.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Wooden Performances: Carving and Versifying *níð* and Idolatry

Alison Finlay (Birkbeck, University of London)  0000-0003-3300-6321

Keywords: carved images, destruction of idols, ekphrasis, Old Icelandic literature, ritual insult

Among the insults traded by the two rival poets in *Bjarnar saga Hítdælakappa* is the raising of *níð*, the most serious kind of insult proscribed by the Old Icelandic and Norwegian law codes.¹ Scholars refer to it as “carved” or “wooden” *níð* (*trénið*) or even as a *níðstöng* “insult-pole”, but in fact the saga is not specific about the genre, configuration or material of the image. In this article I will examine the possibilities and implications of this visual manifestation of *níð*. I do not expect to be able to show what *níð*-effigies or images really looked like, whether in the thirteenth century when the saga was written, in the early eleventh century when the narrative is set, or in the pre-Christian past when the ideology of *níð* must have developed. Rather, I am interested in the associations this concept had for the saga writer and audience, the mental picture it conjured up, and the memories of the pagan past that would have been attached to such images or effigies.

Pess er nú við getit, at hlutr sá fannsk í hafnarmarki Þórðar, er þvígit vinveittligra þótti: þat váru karlar tveir, ok hafði annarr hött blán á hofði; þeir stóðu lúti, ok horfði annarr eptir qðrum. Þat þótti illr fundr, ok mæltu menn, at hvárs kis hlutr væri góðr, þeira er þar stóðu, ok enn verri þess, er fyrir stóð (*BjH*: 154–155).

It is now mentioned further that a thing appeared on Þórðr’s harbour marker which seemed by no means more friendly: it was two men, one with a black hood on his head; they stood bending over, and one was facing the back of the other. That seemed a bad encounter [or “bad discovery”], and people said that the situation of neither of those standing there was good, and yet that of the one standing in front was worse.²

The image is not described in detail; it is a *hlutr* (“thing”), that *fannsk* (“appeared”) *i hafnarmarki* (“on the harbour marker”) of Þórðr Kolbeinsson. It is fixed in a sequence of

1 *Níð* appears in Old Norse legal and saga texts as a category of insult, attracting, in the most serious cases, a penalty of death. It attacks the target’s masculinity usually by alleging sexual impotence or perversion, in either a realistic or fantastic vein; in particular, likening him to a woman or a female animal confirms the gendered focus of the attack. In either case the sexual taunt stands in a symbolic relationship with more general imputations of physical cowardice, treachery or dishonour. For classic studies of *níð*, see Meulengracht Sørensen (1983) and works cited there.

2 All translations are the author’s own, unless otherwise stated.

escalating exchanges of hostility, including offensive verses, by the comparative adjective *þvígít vinveittligra* (“by no means more friendly”). The power of the graphic version of *níð* is comparable to that of offensive verse, in the currency of aggression piled up on either side by the contestants in this saga.

The image represents two male figures: *karlar* rather than *menn*, emphasising their gender and the sexual implication of their positioning: “þeir stóðu lútir, ok horfði annarr eptir qðrum” (“they were standing bending over, one facing the other’s back”). This is clearly not a naturalistic description of an artefact: it is implied that the figures represent Bjørn and Pórðr, but it is not specified which is which, whether the effigy is in two separate pieces or a single image, or even which man is wearing a *høttr blár* (“blue/black hood”). The image is referred to as *níð*, a word that covers both verbal and visual insult,³ but there is no detail of its material, or whether it is carved or painted. The ensuing prosecution makes clear that Bjørn is responsible for producing the image and that Pórðr is the target of the insult – that is, the figure standing in front, the passive figure in a male-on-male act of sexual penetration. Critics have pondered why Bjørn, in producing the image, should be implicating himself in such a shameful scene, but have not dwelled on the actual appearance of the offensive image.

In visualising the scene, it would be useful to have some idea of what a *hafnarmark* (“harbour marker”) might be like. According to the Cleasby–Vigfusson *Icelandic–English Dictionary* (1957: 307), it is “a kind of beacon, being a pyramid of stone or timber” and, citing the *Bjarnar saga* passage, “a carved figure in the shape of a man”. For Fritzner (1886: I, 687), it could consist of “a tall stone, a tree trunk, a cairn or the like”. Both cite the Eddic poem *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* 31, in which a giantess is turned into stone to serve as a *hafnarmark*:

hafnar mark
þykkir hlægiligt vera,
þars þú í steins líki stendr (HHj: 265).

In Patricia Terry’s (1969: 124) translation:

You’ll mark the harbor / and make men laugh,
when they see you turned to stone.

In this legendary context the harbour marker itself has human, or humanoid, form, as a block or pillar of stone that looks like a giantess. In *Bjarnar saga* the placing of the *níð* on Pórðr’s harbour marker identifies him as its target, but it is also suggestive that other examples of *níð* are located on a boundary or border. In *Egils saga*, for instance, Egill erects his *níð* against Eiríkr blóðøx and Gunnhildr on a rocky eminence on an island facing the mainland of Norway, where he plants a horse’s head fixed on a pole, turning the head landwards to address the guardian spirits of the land whom he is calling on to drive out his victims (see *Eg*: 171).

The reference to the giantess Hrímgerðr suggests that a *hafnarmark* could be in human shape, formed out of timber or stone. Alternatively, if it is envisaged as a tree trunk or cairn,

³ The term occurs in *Grágás* and in the Norwegian *Gulapingslög* (see Gunnar Karlsson/Kristján Sveinsson/Mörður Árnason 1992: 273); see also Meulengracht Sørensen (1983: 15–17 and 28).

the image could be thought of as a picture, carved and/or painted, attached or placed against the marker. For evidence that figurative designs carved on wood were known in thirteenth-century Iceland, I refer you to the Valþjófsstaður door, on a church in eastern Iceland, in which scenes from chivalric sagas are carved within circular medallions. The date, around 1200, is just about right for *Bjarnar saga*, and the circular roundel design would be very suitable for depicting men who *stóðu lútir* (“stood bending over”). Another example, famous but not surviving, is the elaborate carving said to decorate the *eldhús* of the grand farmhouse Hjarðarholt built by Óláfr pái in *Laxdæla saga*, which would date back to an earlier period ca. 985, the time of the events of the saga rather than its writing.

A church door, or an ostentatious farm hall, is rather a formal context compared with the scene envisaged in *Bjarnar saga*. A closer comparison, though sadly without a surviving image, appears in an anecdote recorded in *Landnámaþók*:

[S284, H245] Tjørvi enn háðsami ok Gunnarr váru systursynir Hróars. Tjørvi bað Ástriðar manvitsbrekku Móðólfssdóttur, en broeðr hennar … synjuðu honum konunnar, en þeir gáfu hana Þóri Ketilssyni. Þá dró Tjørvi líkneski þeira á kamarsvegg, ok hvert kveld, er þeir Hróarr gengu til kamars, þá hrækði hann í andlit Þóris, en kyssti hennar líknesi, áðr Hróarr skóf af. Eptir þat skar Tjørvi þau í knifsskepti sínu ok kvað þetta:

Vér hófum þar sem Þóri,
þat vas sett við glettu,
auðar unga brúði
áðr á vegg of fáða.
Nú hefk, rastakarns, ristna,
réðk mart við Syn bjarta
hauka skopts, á hepti
Hlín qlbœkis mínu.

Hér af gerðisk víg þeira Hróars ok systursona hans (*Ldn*: 301–302).

Tjørvi the Mocker and Gunnarr were the sons of Hróarr’s sister. Tjørvi asked for the hand of Ástriðr Woman-Wisdom-Slope, daughter of Móðólf, but her brothers, Ketill and Hrólf, denied him the woman, and they gave her to Þórir, son of Ketill. Then Tjørvi drew their likeness on the wall of the privy, and every evening, when Hróarr and his people went to the privy, he spat into the face of the likeness of Þórir and kissed her likeness, until Hróarr scraped it off. After that, Tjørvi carved them onto the hilt of his knife and spoke this:

Earlier, I have painted
the young bride of destiny
there on the wall, as well as Þórir.
That was placed with banter.
Now I have carved
the goddess of the ale-cask
on my hilt. I spoke much [...]⁴ with
the fair goddess of the maelstrom-acorn.

This led to the slaying of Hróarr and his sister’s sons.⁵

⁴ The meaning of the words *hauka skopts*, left untranslated here, is obscure, but the proposed solutions (see *Ldn*: 301 n. 27. *vísá*) have no bearing on this discussion.

⁵ The English translation here is by Matthias Egeler.

As usual with *Landnámabók*, we lack the detail of this story, but there are some intriguing parallels with *Bjarnar saga*. The perpetrator of the image is a slighted lover; he is *háðsamr* (“mocking”); there is a performative aspect to the ritual of spitting on his rival’s image and kissing that of the desired woman in the course of communal visits to the privy; and there are hints of the danger the image could cause, first in Hróarr’s scraping it off the wall of the privy, and second in the statement that “this” led to the killing of the artist, his uncle and his brother (though we may be missing some stages in the story, of course).

It is also interesting that each anecdote is accompanied by a verse, both arguably examples, on a modest scale, of *ekphrasis*, the genre in which a poem describes scenes, usually mythological or legendary, carved or painted on an artefact; an example is the *Húsdrápa* of Úlfr Uggason, said in *Laxdæla saga* to have been composed and recited to commemorate the carvings in Óláfr pái’s hall. Tjørvi’s stanza fulfils one characteristic of the genre, the tendency for the poem itself to refer to the creation of the image it describes.

The verse accompanying the *níð* in *Bjarnar saga* does not, but it does fulfil some other criteria of *ekphrasis* in that it describes what is going on in the artefact:

Standa stýrilundar
staðar
glíkr es geira soekir
gunnsterkr at því verki;
stendr af stála lundi
styrr Þórrøði fyrri (BjH: 155).

The *steering-trees of the place* [...] [= men, i. e. Bjørn and Þórðr] stand [...] ; the *war-strong seeker of spears* [= warrior; Þórðr?] is fit for that deed; trouble from the *tree of steel weapons* [= warrior, i. e. Bjørn] comes to Þórðr sooner.

It is assumed that the incompleteness of the verse is the result of censorship of its originally more explicit indecency. E. A. Kock’s (1923–1925: § 755) attempted reconstruction of the second line, drawing on the description in the saga prose, along with the first line, would give the sense “the steering-trees of the boat’s harbour stand bent over”. Another relevant detail in the *Bjarnar saga* scene, though not in the verse, is that one of the men is wearing a blue or black hood on his head. It is hard to imagine this featuring in a representation of men as stone or wooden pillars, but it fits with the characteristics of *ekphrasis* poems which tend to feature colour words, particularly in the context of scenes painted or carved on shields.

In a scene from *Orkneyinga saga* identified by Russell Poole as an example of *ekphrasis*, Jarl Røgnvaldr kali challenges a visiting Icelandic poet to compose a verse on a scene depicted in a tapestry:

Pat var einn dag um jólin, at menn hugðu at tjoldum. Þá mælti jarl við Odda inn litla: “Gerðu vísu um athófn þess manns, er þar er á tjaldinu, ok haf eigi síðarr lokit þinni vísu, en ek minni. Haf ok engi þau orð í þinni vísu er ek hefi í minni vísu”. [...]⁶ Oddi kvað:

6 At this point in the text, there follow two stanzas: one spoken by the jarl, one by Oddi, of which I cite only the latter.

Stendr ok hyggr at høggva
 herðilútr með sverði
 bandalfr beiði-Rindi
 Baldrs við dyrr á tjaldi.
 Firum mun hann með hjørvi
 hættr; nú's mál, at sættisk
 hlœðendr hleypiskiða
 hlunns, áðr geigr sé unninn (*Orkn*: 202–203).

One day during Yule-tide, people were seeing to the wall-hangings. The jarl said to Oddi inn litli, “Make a verse about the behaviour of the man who is there on the hanging, and have your verse completed no later than I have mine. Also, don’t have the words in your verse that I have in my verse”. [...] Oddi recited:

The wounded warrior (bandage-elf) stands with stooped shoulders and thinks to strike the woman (Baldr’s requesting goddess) with his sword by the door on the hanging. He will be a menace to men with the sword; now is the moment that the seafarers (loaders of the running skis of the roller) should reconcile, before injury is done.⁷

The scene depicts a crouching figure – “with stooped shoulders” in Oddi’s verse, *aldrænn* (“elderly”) and *beinrangr* (“with bent legs”) in Røgnvaldr’s – threatening to strike a woman with a sword. Poole identifies the figure as the aged warrior Starkaðr, from a story told by Saxo Grammaticus. As in *Bjarnar saga*, though with a very different narrative justification, the figure is represented as *lutr* (“stooped”), and the woman he is about to strike may also be bending, as indicated by the kenning *Baldrs beiði-Rindr* (requesting-Rindr of Baldr). Poole (2007: 250) comments: “Perhaps we should envisage the woman in Oddi’s stanza as depicted in supplicating pose on the tapestry”. As is also the case with the images on the Valþjófsstaður door, stooping figures would be particularly suitable for depiction in a roundel, such as may have been familiar to Icelanders (or indeed Orcadians) from visual imagery.

This is as far as I have been able to take the speculation that the figures described in *Bjarnar saga* might have been painted or carved in relief on a flat surface such as that of the *hafnarmark*. It is more likely that the figures were free-standing, and made of wood, as suggested by the word *trénið* used in the Norwegian *Gulabingslög* and in *Grágás* in opposition to *tungunið* or “verbal *níð*”: “Pat eru *níð* ef maðr sker manni *trénið* eða rístr eða reisir manni *níðstóng*” (Grg: 273; “It is *níð* if a man cuts or carves wooden *níð* against a man, or raises a *níð*-pole against a man”). This suggests that graphic *níð* was generally made of wood. The verbs here are ambiguous as to what one does with one’s potentially insulting bit of wood: a *níðstóng* or “insult pole” is something that one raises; *skera* can mean “to carve” generally, as can *rísta*, but the latter is more often used for the carving of runes. These are often said to be carved on poles, such as Egill’s mentioned earlier, and obviously increase the potential for insult by combining verbal and graphic modes. Might the vision described in *Bjarnar saga* be representing the two male figures as poles? Cleasby–Vigfússon (1957: 640) seems to plump for this in a further definition, this time of the word *trémaðr* (“wood man”): “carved poles in the shape of a man seem to have been erected as harbour marks”. But references to the *níðstóng* elsewhere do not describe it as in the form of a man, as in *Egils saga*, where the pole is topped with the head of a mare, for reasons that are not explained.

7 The English translation here is taken from Poole (2007: 245–246).

Vatnsdœla saga offers one suggestive example, where two men are mocked for failing to turn up for a duel:

[Þeir] tóku súlu eina ok báru undir garðinn; þar váru ok hross [...] Jókull skar karlshófuð á súluendanum ok reist á rúnar með qllum þeim formála, sem fyrr var sagðr. Síðan drap Jókull meri eina, ok opnuðu hana hjá brjóstinu ok færðu á súluna ok létu horfa heim á Borg (*Vatn*: 91).

They took a pole and carried it near the yard; there were also horses there [...] Jókull carved a man's head on the end of the pole and carved runes on it with all the wordings that were mentioned before. Then Jókull killed a mare, and they opened it near the breast and placed it on the pole, and made it face towards the house at Borg.

There is only one pole, but the whole assemblage may represent two men who are jointly shamed in a symbolic sexual act – one, the chief target of the insult, represented by the whole body (not, as in other instances of *níð*, the head alone) of the female animal, the other by the pole that penetrates it (see Almqvist 1965: I, 96–111).

The closest analogue to *Bjarnar saga* is found in the version of *Gísla saga* in AM 556 a 4to, where a similar *níð* is proposed (but never actually erected) to shame two men who have failed to come to a duel at the appointed time:

Refr hét maðr, er var smiðr Skeggja. Hann bað, at Refr skyldi gera mannlíkan eptir Gísla ok Kolbirni, “ok skal annarr stand aptar en annarr, ok skal níð þat standa ávallt, þeim til háðungar” (*Gísl*: 10).

There was a man called Refr, who was Skeggi's workman. He ordered Refr to make an image [or “images”] of Gísli and Kolbjörn, “and one is to stand behind the other, and this *níð* is to remain forever, to their shame”.

This adds some detail to the configuration saga-writers envisaged. The commissioning of a *sniðr* (“craftsman”) suggests that the *níð* is to be carved in wood (and *sniðr* is widely rendered as “carpenter” in translations of the saga). The word *mannlíkan* (“likeness(es) of a man”) indicates recognisably human figures rather than the abstraction suggested in *Vatnsdœla saga*. Although as a neuter noun, it could be either singular or plural, the word itself implies that each man is represented by a separate figure, the two, as in *Bjarnar saga*, standing “one behind the other”. An added detail is the aspiration that the visual representation is intended to *standa ávallt* (“remain forever”).

The word *mannlíkan* evokes accounts in Conversion narratives of the graven images of idols; it is used in *Heimskringla* for the image of a god encountered by Óláfr helgi:

Um kveldit þá spyrr konungr son Guðbrands hvernug goð þeira væri gjort. Hann segir at hann var merkðr eptir Þór, “ok hefir hann hamar í hendi ok mikill vexti ok holr innan ok gjorr undir honum sem hjallr sé, ok stendr hann þar á ofan, er hann er úti. Eigi skortir hann gull ok silfr á sér.” [...] Þá sá þeir mikinn fjölda búanda fara til þings ok báru í milli sín mannlíkan mikit, glæst allt með gulli ok silfri. En er þat sá boendr, þeir er á þinginu váru, þá hljópu þeir allir upp ok lutu því skrímsli. [...] En í því bili laust Kolbeinn svá goð þeira, svá at þat brast allt í sundr, ok hljópu þar út myss, svá stórar sem kettir væri, ok eðlur ok ormar (*Hkr*: II, 188–189).

Then in the evening the king asks Guðbrandr's son how their god was constructed. He says that he was patterned on Þórr. ‘And he has a hammer in his hand and is of great size and hollow inside, and under him there is made something like a scaffold, and he stands up on top of it when he is outside. There is no lack of gold and silver on him.’ [...] Then they saw a great multitude of farmers coming to the assembly and carrying between them a huge image of a person, adorned with gold and silver.

And when the farmers that were at the assembly saw that, they all leapt up and bowed down to this monstrosity. [...] And at that moment Kolbeinn struck their god so that it broke all to pieces, and out of it ran mice, as big as cats, and adders and snakes.

The reality that beneath its splendour this idol is hollow and full of rottenness provides a ready metaphor for the emptiness and deceitfulness of the old religion in the rhetoric of hagiographical writers. This is an early example, found both in *Heimskringla* and in the older *Legendary Saga of St Óláfr*. As stories of the idol-smashing proselytising kings proliferated in the later thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the emphasis on the materiality of these pagan symbols becomes more pronounced. In *Sveins þátr ok Finns*, quoted here from the late fourteenth-century *Flateyjarbók* but also found in the early fourteenth-century *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, the story is of a Norwegian farmer who is so attached to his fine temple that he is allowed to keep it by an uncharacteristically lenient Óláfr Tryggvason. It falls to the farmer's son Finnur to rebuke the king with a reminder of the importance of destroying every material trace of an old and decadent religion:

Hafði Sveinn hof mikit á bæ sínum ok búit virðuliga. Váru þar í mörg skurðgoð, en þó tignaði Sveinn Þór einna mest. [...] Því sýndist sumum mönnum [Finnr] vitlítill, ok ekki mjök var hann trúaðr at sið þeirra, því at þá sjaldan, er hann kom í hofit föður hans, lofaði hann ekki goðin, heldr hæddi hann þau í hverju orði ok kallaði þau rangeyg ok rjúka dust af, sagði þau eigi mega öðrum hjálpa, er þau höfðu eigi afl til at hreinsa saur af sér (Svein: 430).

Sveinn had a large and finely decorated temple on his farm. There were many idols in it, but Sveinn honoured Þórr most of all. [...] To some people [Finnr] seemed slow-witted, and he was not much trusted with their rituals, because now and then, when he went into his father's temple, he did not praise the gods, but abused them in whatever he said, declared them cock-eyed, with dust rising off them, and said they could hardly help others when they had no power to clean the filth off themselves.

Finnur returns from Denmark, where has been converted, and is horrified to find his father's temple has not been demolished:

Þar var þá heldr fornligt um gætti, hurðajárn ryðug ok allt heldr fornfáguligt. Finnur gekk inn ok skýfði goðin af stöllunum, en reytti ok ruplaði af þeim allt þat, er fémætt var, ok bar í belginn. Finnnr sló Þór þrjú högg með kylfunni, sem mest gat hann, áðr Þórr fell. Síðan lagði hann band á háls Þór ok dró hann eftir sér til strandar ok lét hann koma eftir þat á bát. Fór hann svá til fundar við konung, at hann hafði Þór löngum á kafi útbyrðis. Stundum barði hann Finnur hann. [...] Klauf hann þá Þór í sundr í skíður einar ok lagði síðan í eld ok brenndi þær at ösku. Síðan fékk hann sér lög nokkurn, kastaði þar á öskunni ok gerði af graut. Pann graut gaf hann greyhundum ok mælti: "Pat er makligt, at bikkjur eti Þór, en hann át sjálfir sonu sína" (Svein: 436).

It was all rather shabby around the gate-posts, the hinges of the door rusty and everything somewhat timeworn. Finnur went in and shoved the gods off the pedestals, and ripped and rifled from them everything that had any value and put it in the bag. Finnur struck Þórr three blows with the club, as hard as he could, until Þórr fell down. Then he tied a cord around Þórr's neck and hauled him behind him to the shore and after that tied him to a boat. Then he went to see the king, having dragged Þórr through the water behind the boat for a long time. Sometimes Finnur beat him. [...] Then he split Þórr apart into splinters and then set fire to them and burned them to ashes. Then he got some liquid and threw it onto the ashes and made a porridge out of them. He gave that porridge to his greyhounds and said: "It is fitting that the bitches eat Þórr, since he ate his own sons".

The symbolism of the dust-covered tokens of the old religion is clear, but it is also striking how stories like this keep hold of the idea that the idols their authors are so keen to reject as insensate lumps of wood also somehow retain traces of animation, however feeble. In some cases, this is articulated as the possession of the idol by the devil, but often, as here, the residual spirit of the god lingers on. At one point in the *pátt*, Pórr appears to Finn's more sympathetic brother in a dream, begging to be taken out of the temple before Finn can get to him. But even in waking reality, only once are the gods referred to as *skurðgoð* ("carved gods"); even in a story insisting on the obliteration of the materiality of the image, the name of Pórr is repeatedly stressed.

Although there is little to no archaeological evidence for life-size images of gods in Scandinavian pagan temples, and later medieval accounts like these may have been influenced by classical sources, there is persistent evidence from the earliest times of anthropomorphic wooden figures, sometimes called pole gods, in areas of Germanic settlement, interpreted as cult figures of some kind. The Broddenbjerg idol, from an early and probably not even Germanic culture, offers a model of how a suggestively phallic-shaped found object could have served Björn's purpose as well as an elaborately fashioned artefact. It would be rash to suggest a definite line of continuity between such figures and surviving written evidence of Norse paganism. There are stories, though, of wooden men – *trémann* – being animated by pagan magic. *Porleifs páttar jarlaskálds* tells of the Norwegian Jarl Hákon who has his two tutelary goddesses build an assassin out of driftwood, animated by placing a human heart in it, which he sends to Iceland to kill the poet who has shamed him (see *Pjsk*: 225–227). Stanzas 17 and 18 of *Völuspá* tell of the creation of mankind by the gods Óðinn, Höður, and Lóðurr, who give breath, spirit, blood and fresh complexions to Askr "Ash" and Embla, probably "Elm" or perhaps "Vine", who are found as inanimate logs lying on the shore (see *Vsp*: 295). In stanza 49 of *Hávamál*, Óðinn speaks of giving clothes, and apparently thereby life, to two *trémann* ("wooden men"), possibly to turn them into warriors (see *Hávm*: 331).

To thirteenth-century readers or listeners, the figures described in the scene in *Bjarnar saga* would have called up a rich field of possibility. They would have been familiar with carved figures in scenes depicted on church doors and perhaps on the walls of grander farmhouses, which are often also said in sagas to boast *qndvegissulur* ("high-seat pillars"), carved sometimes with legendary scenes, and to have been brought from Norway and thrown overboard in order to find the destined place for the foundation of a new family identity. They must also have been familiar with more casual representations of quarrels over contested relationships, such as that in the anecdote cited here from *Landnámbók*; perhaps the uttering of a verse on the subject was seen to give a greater ominous force to a comparatively casual construction. This is certainly the case with *níð*, where the carving of runes and speaking of a verse fixes the import of the insult and identifies its target. At the same time, ancient stories of the animation of figures created out of wood, or occasionally clay or stone, continued in the popular imagination and were renewed by stories of images of the old religion, brought to life by the malign power either of the devil or the persistent spirits of the old gods themselves. These associations must have given force to the representation of *níð*, whether this was elaborately constructed by a craftsman or rendered with casual symbolism through a farmyard pole and the head of a mare, or driftwood gathered from the shore.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

BjH = Sigurður Nordal/Guðni Jónsson (eds.) (1938). *Bjarnar saga Hítdælakappa*. In: *Borgfirðinga sögur* (= Íslenzk fornrit 3). Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, pp. 109–211.

Eg = Sigurður Nordal (ed.) (1933). *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* (= Íslenzk fornrit 2). Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag.

Gísl = Björn K. Þórólfsson/Guðni Jónsson (eds.) (1943). *Gísla saga Súrssonar*. In: *Vestfirðinga sögur* (= Íslenzk fornrit 6). Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, pp. 1–118.

Grg = Gunnar Karlsson/Kristján Sveinsson/Mörður Árnason (eds.) (1992). *Grágás: Lagasafn íslenska þjóðveldisins*. Reykjavík: Mál og menning.

Hávm = Jónas Kristjánsson/Vésteinn Ólason (eds.) (2014). *Hávamál*. In: *Eddukvæði*. 2 vols. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, I, pp. 322–355.

HHj = Jónas Kristjánsson/Vésteinn Ólason (eds.) (2014). *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*. In: *Eddukvæði*. 2 vols. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, II, pp. 259–269.

Hkr = Snorri Sturluson (1941–1951). *Heimskringla*. 3 vols. (= Íslenzk fornrit 26–28). Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (ed.). Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag.

Ldn = Jakob Benediktsson (ed.) (1986). *Landnámabók*. In: *Íslendingabók. Landnámabók* (= Íslenzk fornrit 1). Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, pp. 29–397.

Orkn = Finnbogi Guðmundsson (ed.) (1965). *Orkneyinga saga*. In: *Orkneyinga saga* (= Íslenzk fornrit 34). Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, pp. 1–300.

Svein = Sigurður Nordal (ed.) (1944). *Sveins þátr ok Finns*. In: *Flateyjarbók*. 4 vols. Akranes: Flateyjarútgáfan, I, pp. 430–436.

Vatn = Einar Ól. Sveinsson (ed.) (1939). *Vatnsdæla saga*. In: *Vatnsdæla saga* (= Íslenzk fornrit 8). Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, pp. 1–131.

Vsp = Jónas Kristjánsson/Vésteinn Ólason (eds.) (2014). *Völuspá*. In: *Eddukvæði*. 2 vols. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, I, pp. 291–321.

PorlJ = Jónas Kristjánsson (ed.) (1956). *Porleifs þátr jarlsskálds*. In: *Eyfirðinga sögur* (= Íslenzk fornrit 9). Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, pp. 213–229.

Secondary Sources

Almqvist, Bo (1965). *Norrön niddiktning: Traditionshistoriska studier i versmagi*. Sweden: Almqvist & Wiksell.

Cleasby, Richard/Gudbrand Vigfusson (eds.) (1957). *An Icelandic–English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fritzner, Johan (1886). *Ordbog over det gamle norske Sprog*. 3 vols. Kristiania (Oslo): Den norske Forlagsforening.

Kock, E. A. (1923–1925). *Notationes norroenæ*. Lund: Håkan Ohlssons Boktryckeri.

Meulengracht Sørensen, Preben (1983). *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society* (= The Viking Collection 1). Turville-Petre, Joan (trans.). Odense: Odense University Press.

Poole, Russell (2007). “Ekphrasis: Its ‘Prolonged Echoes’ in Scandinavia”. In *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 3, pp. 245–267.

Terry, Patricia (1969). *Poems of the Vikings*. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company.

