Rhesis International Journal of Linguistics, Philology and Literature

Marred in transmission? A new proposal for the questioning sequence in the Old Norse *Svipdagsmál*

Giorgio Basciu

(University of Cagliari)

Abstract

The Old Norse *Svipdagsmál* is a composite piece of eddic poetry which comprises two complementary poems, *Grógaldr* and *Fiǫlsvinnzmál*. These two poems date to the 13th century, but they are only preserved in late paper manuscripts (17th-19th century). The text transmitted in the manuscripts shows several signs of corruption, and many aspects of its form and content have been subject to debate. Among other concerns, some incongruities have been pointed out regarding the progression of the core section of *Fiǫlsvinnzmál* (sts 7-42). Möller (1875) attempted to resolve these apparent structural anomalies by revising the arrangement of twelve stanzas (sts 13-24). Through a detailed structural analysis of the poem, this article shows that Möller's proposal is not entirely satisfactory, and proposes a new arrangement of stanzas 9 to 40 which removes the oddities inherent in the original sequence. The structure of the rearranged sequence follows a neat and plausible pattern and appears quite consistent with the poet's taste for symmetry and numerological references which is apparent throughout the poem.

Key words – *Svipdagsmál*; Old Norse; eddic; stanza order; fréttatal

1. Introduction

The title *Svipdagsmál* "The lay of Svipdagr" conventionally identifies a set of two Old Norse poems, *Grógaldr* (*Gg*) and *Fiǫlsvinnzmál* (*Fi*), of sixteen and fifty stanzas respectively. For a long time, *Gg* and *Fi* were thought to be separate, independent lays. It was not until the 1850s that Grundtvig and Bugge recognized that they actually related complementary segments of one and the same story, and therefore belonged together (cf. GRUNDTVIG 1856: 238-239, 668-673; BUGGE 1861). It was Bugge himself who conceived the collective title *Svipdagsmál* (1867).

According to recent scholarship, *Svipdagsmál* was composed in the first half of the 13th century (EINAR ÓL. SVEINSSON 1975: 306-307; ROBINSON 1991: 397-407). Style and prosody place the poem within the tradition of eddic poetry[1], however Svipdagr's story is not attested in the most important eddic manuscript, GKS 2365 4° (Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, Reykjavík), nor in AM 748 I 4° (Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, Reykjavík).

[1] *Grógaldr* and *Fiǫlsvinnzmál* have been included in many editions of the *Edda*, either separately or under a common title. To my knowledge, nineteen editions of *Svipdagsmál* exist (including Peter Robinson's unpublished doctoral thesis). These are: *Arnamagnaean Edda* (1787 [*Fi*] and 1828 [*Gg*]); Rask (1818); Munch (1847); Lüning (1859); Möbius (1860); Bugge (1867); Grundtvig (1874); Bergmann (1874); Gudbrand Vigfusson and Powell (1883); Gering and Sijmons (1888); Detter and Heinzel (1903); Hildebrand (1904); Bray (1908); Boer (1922); Neckel (1927); Finnur Jónsson (1932); Briem (1968); Robinson (1991); Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (2014).
The quotations and names used in this essay are taken from Neckel's 1927 edition (*Svipdagsmál* was left out by Kuhn in his revised editions of Neckel's *Edda*). All translations are mine.

Nor does Snorri make any mention of it in his *Prose Edda*. All this suggests that *Svipdagsmál* found its way into the eddic tradition at a later stage, probably after about 1300 (HARRIS 2014: 426).

The poem tells the story of a youth who is compelled by his malicious stepmother to set off on a long and perilous journey to find a maiden called Menglǫð. Fearing for his young life, the boy seeks help from his mother Gróa, whom he awakens from the dead. Gróa chants nine protective charms to her son, then sends him on his way with a heartfelt blessing. This concludes *Grógaldr*. In *Fiǫlsvinnzmál* the boy's journey, of which no explicit account is given, finally takes him to the gate of Menglǫð's hall, where he is confronted by the giant Fiǫlsviðr. The watchman asks for the traveller's name, and the boy introduces himself as Vindkaldr. After a brief altercation, the story moves on to the core section of *Fi* (sts 7-42), i.e. a series of thirty-six stanzas consisting of eighteen questions, which Vindkaldr asks Fiǫlsviðr, and eighteen answers[2] (I shall hereafter refer to this section with a term of my own coinage: *fréttatal* "catalogue of questions"). Through his questioning, Vindkaldr learns about Menglǫð's realm, its defences, its inhabitants and its extraordinary landmarks. The hero's ultimate goal is to find a way to gain access to the maiden's hall which, however, appears to be impenetrable, as entering requires the completion of a series of ultimately impossible tasks. Fiǫlsviðr's answer to the intruder's final question, however, reveals that no one will ever be able to make it past the defences except for a man called Svipdagr; for him alone is Menglǫð destined. Hearing this, the boy orders the giant to open the gate, for indeed he is Svipdagr. At this the house unlocks itself of its own accord, the ferocious dogs that had been guarding the gate start to fawn, and Menglǫð welcomes her suitor with a kiss. The poem then closes on the maiden's promise to Svipdagr of a lifetime of bliss together.

Svipdagsmál is a fascinating and skilfully crafted piece of poetry with its unique combination of motifs and its original mythological veneer, but its long and complex manuscript tradition has not left it unblemished. The 13th century vellum on which it was first written has long been lost, and no medieval copy has been recovered. The story of Svipdagr survives in a wealth of late paper manuscripts (forty-six), mostly dating from the 18th century[3]. Almost all of the extant manuscripts bear the signs of corruption and late revision, and only a handful of the oldest ones – dating from the second half of the 17th century – contain versions of the poem that, however imperfect, appear to be less corrupt then the others (ROBINSON 1991: 1-14). The poem is therefore obscure or incongruous at times, and although many of the text's doubtful passages have been plausibly emended, a number of them still appear quite opaque, and some might be irredeemably corrupt.

This essay addresses one of the aspects of *Svipdagsmál* that has caused perplexity, i.e. the order of the *fréttatal* stanzas attested in the extant manuscripts. A schematic outline of the dialogue between Svipdagr and Fiǫlsviðr in this specific section of *Fi* is provided in Table 1 below, which the reader might find useful in order to put the remarks that

---

[2] The poet exhibits a keen interest in numerological references throughout his poem. For many cultures, including the Germanic societies, three is a number that holds a strong symbolic significance, and its multiple, the number nine, recurs frequently in Old Norse literature. Óðinn hangs on a windswept tree for nine nights to gain the knowledge of runes (*Hávamál* 138); he enumerates eighteen charms (two times nine) in *Hávamál* 146-163, and asks Vafþrúðnir eighteen questions in *Vafþrúðnismál* 20-54; in the final battle of *Ragnarǫk*, Þórr takes nine steps before succumbing to the World Serpent's deadly venom (*Gylfaginning* 51; *Vǫluspá* 56); Freyr must wait for nine nights before Gerðr, the giantess he ardently desires, will give herself to him (*Skírnismál* 39, 41).

[3] In his unpublished edition of *Svipdagsmál* Peter Robinson – to whom I am grateful for having provided me with an electronic copy of his doctoral thesis – collates the largest number of manuscripts compared to other editors. In fact, he analysed all of the extant manuscripts save one (JS 497 8°) (1991: 162). His work has proven a valuable tool for investigating *Svipdagsmál*.

follow into context.

Table 1 – Summary of Q&As in the *fréttatal* – MS order

Sts 7-8	Q	Who rules over this land and this hall of riches?
	A	Mengloð rules over this land and this hall of riches.
Sts 9-10	Q	What is this gate called?
	A	It is called Þrymgiǫll, and it will seize anyone who tries to open it.
Sts 11-12	Q	What is this wall called?
	A	It is called Gastropnir, and it will stand until the end of time.
Sts 13-14	Q	What are these dogs called?
	A	They are called Gífr and Geri, and they will guard the entrance until the end of the world.
Sts 15-16	Q	Is there any man who may sneak in while the dogs sleep?
	A	No, because they sleep in turns, so that one is always on guard.
Sts 17-18	Q	Is there any food that one may give them to sneak in while they eat?
	A	There is only one such food, and that is the meat from Viðofnir's body.
Sts 19-20	Q	What is that huge tree called?
	A	It is called Mimameiðr.
Sts 21-22	Q	What of Mimameiðr's fruits?
	A	They are to be burned in front of ailing women so that they will be cured.
Sts 23-24	Q	What is the name of that golden cock perching on Mimameiðr?
	A	His name is Viðofnir.
Sts 25-26	Q	Is there any weapon that can kill Viðofnir?
	A	Yes, it is called Lævateinn, and Sinmara keeps it in a casket with nine powerful locks.
Sts 27-28	Q	Is it possible to obtain this weapon?
	A	Yes, but you will have to give the goddess of gold [Sinmara] something which nobody possesses.
Sts 29-30	Q	Is there any treasure that one might give the pale giantess [Sinmara] so she will be pleased?
	A	Yes, you will have to give her a feather taken from Viðofnir's bones. Only then will she be willing to give you the weapon to kill Viðofnir.
Sts 31-32	Q	What is this hall called?
	A	It is called Lýr. Men will forever know of this hall of riches only by hearsay.
Sts 33-34	Q	Who built it?
	A	(catalogue of names)
Sts 35-36	Q	What is the name of this rock on whose slope I see the famous maiden [Mengloð]?
	A	Its name is Lyfiaberg, and it cures any woman who climbs it.
Sts 37-38	Q	What are the names of the maidens who are sitting at Mengloð's feet?
	A	(catalogue of names)
Sts 39-40	Q	Do they assist those who offer sacrifices to them?
	A	Yes, they will save from any peril those who offer sacrifices to them.
Sts 41-42	Q	Is there any man who may sleep in Mengloð's sweet embrace?
	A	No man may sleep in Mengloð's sweet embrace, except for Svipdagr. She is destined for him alone.

2. The oddities in the order of stanzas 13-24 and Möller's emendation

Several scholars agree that the segment embracing sts 13-24 shows certain inconsistencies. Specifically, it seems odd that the cock Viðofnir should be mentioned in

passing in st. 18, with no explanation as to who or what he is, five stanzas before he is properly introduced to Svipdagr and the audience. Also, the transition from the segment on how to get past the dogs Gífr and Geri (sts 15-18) to that regarding the tree Mimameiðr (sts 19-22) is abrupt: in st. 18 Svipdagr learns that the only food he can give the dogs to distract them is meat from Viðofnir's body, then in st. 19 he changes the subject and asks a question about the tree; st. 25, where he asks how the cock may be slain, would be a more fitting follow-up to st. 18.

In the light of these observations, Möller (1875) proposed to alter the sequence by moving the segment concerning the dogs (sts 13-18) after the segments concerning the tree (sts 19-22) and the cock (sts 23-24). This way, the youth's questions about the defences of Menglǫð's hall (the gate and the wall) are followed by his questions about the tree, the cock and the dogs – that can only be distracted with food obtained by slaying the cock – and finally those aimed at learning how the cock may be slain (sts 25-30)[4].

The rearranged sequence effectively removes the issues mentioned above. Also, putting sts 15, 17 and 25 in straight succession generates a series of three questions based on the formula '*hvárt sé* ("whether there is") + genitive plural + *nøkkot* ("any")'[5]. Finally, with sts 25-30 directly following sts 17-18, the verses that illustrate the impossible circle of tasks are appropriately grouped together.

While offering these advantages, however, Möller's proposal also introduces new difficulties. Firstly, in the MS sequence the three barriers that stand between the hero and his destination – the gate Þrymgiǫll, the wall Gastropnir and the dogs Gífr and Geri – are mentioned in a row. This logical (and symbolic)[6] order is disrupted in the emended sequence. Secondly, the transition from the segment about Viðofnir (sts 23-24) to that regarding the dogs (sts 13-18) is just as abrupt as the original transition from the segment regarding the dogs to the one regarding the tree, as noted above.

The order suggested by Möller, therefore, does not offer an entirely satisfactory solution to the problems outlined, nor in the end does it appear to be more acceptable than the MS order. In fact, only Gering and Sijmons (1888: 203-206), Hildebrand (1904: 201-204) and Bray (1908: 166-171) adopt it in their editions of the poem. All other editors follow the MS sequence[7].

3. A broader analysis: sts 9-40

The emendation proposed by Möller may be ultimately unsatisfactory, but it has the merit of tackling an interesting and meaningful aspect of the poem, one that warrants further investigation. Möller's intuition is right in principle. However, it lacks in scope. Indeed, a more wide-ranging examination of this section of *Fi* reveals that the oddities inherent in it are not limited to sts 13-24 alone, but rather affect a broader portion of the *fréttatal*. In the following paragraphs I shall examine the progression of the thirty-six stanzas of the *fréttatal* more closely.

Svipdagr opens the sequence (sts 7-8) with a crucial question: who rules here? Understandably, his first concern is to confirm that he has in fact found the place he was

---

[4] Möller's proposed sequence is therefore 12, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 25.

[5] On the other hand, the '*hvárt sé* + genitive plural + *nøkkot*' formula also appears twice elsewhere in the text, in sts 29 and 41.

[6] That Svipdagr is faced with three barriers is hardly a coincidence (cf. note 2).

[7] Cf. note 1.

looking for. He then asks about the three obstacles that separate him from Menglǫð: the gate, the wall and the dogs (sts 9-14). After that the youth asks two questions (sts 15-18) that aim at finding a way past the dogs and into the hall. He thus learns that his only hope is to feed the menacing sentinels two morsels of Viðofnir's meat. The implicit consequence is that he will have to kill Viðofnir, of whom however we still know nothing.

The subject then changes abruptly from how to distract the dogs to the tree (sts 19-24): what is its name? What of its fruits? And what is the name of the cock perching on its boughs? In the last of these stanzas (st. 24), Viðofnir is finally properly introduced.

Now Svipdagr picks up the thread that he had dropped in st. 18 and asks three more questions (sts 25-30) aimed at finding a way past the barriers: is there a weapon that can kill Viðofnir? Can it be obtained? How? Fiǫlsviðr's answers leave little room for hope: the giantess Sinmara will only give Svipdagr the weapon to kill Viðofnir in exchange for a feather plucked from the body of Viðofnir himself. Essentially, in order to kill Viðofnir one must first kill Viðofnir. The only discernible conclusion is that the hero will never reach his final destination.

After learning that the palace is impenetrable, Svipdagr asks five additional questions (sts 31-40) about the landmarks and inhabitants of Menglǫð's realm, apparently out of sheer curiosity: what is the name of the hall? Who built it? What is the name of the rock on which the noble maiden lies? What are the names of the maidens who sit at Menglǫð's feet? Do they assist those who sacrifice in their honour? This is certainly an odd reaction for someone who has travelled a long way and through many dangers only to see all of his hopes shatter just a few steps away from gratification.

Finally, the direction of Svipdagr's questions once again changes abruptly when he asks if there is anyone who may sleep in Menglǫð's arms after all (sts 41-42).

Now, several incongruities emerge from this analysis, some of which have already been discussed and are therefore only briefly outlined here. Firstly, Viðofnir is mentioned (st. 18) five stanzas before he is properly introduced (st. 23). Secondly, the transition from the stanzas about the dogs (sts 13-18) to the ones about the tree (sts 19-22) is abrupt, and st. 25 would be the expected follow-up to st. 18. Thirdly, the generic information regarding the landmarks and inhabitants of Menglǫð's dominion is broken up into no less than three segments of unequal lengths (sts 7-8, 19-24, 31-40). Furthermore, the third of these segments (sts 31-40) seems oddly placed in the storyline, and not only because it is strange that Svipdagr should ask five questions motivated by sheer curiosity immediately after learning that his mission is hopeless. The series of seemingly feasible tasks described in sts 25-30 fuels Svipdagr's hopes, then eventually shatters them. This builds up narrative tension, which one would expect to lead to some sort of culmination. Instead, this ingenious progression is broken – and the tension dissipated – by the five questions of sts 31-40 that precede the actual climax, i.e. Svipdagr's final question and the subsequent *coup de théâtre*. Lastly, the structure of Svipdagr's questioning in general seems to lack an underlying organization. Questions appear to follow one another almost randomly, and the major themes of the *fréttatal* are dealt with in a markedly fragmentary manner.

4. A new revision of the *fréttatal* sequence

In my opinion, these observations point to the possibility that the archetypical order of the *fréttatal* may have actually been different from the order attested in the surviving manuscripts, more so than Möller had suspected. By reviewing the sequence in an

attempt to determine whether the original order might have been different, I have come to an interesting conclusion. There is, in fact, a sequence which, by building on Möller's intuition, seems capable of delivering a satisfactory solution to the problems illustrated above. Furthermore, this alternative sequence comes with several additional advantages, as I shall attempt to demonstrate.

In the sequence I propose, sts 7 and 8 are retained as the opening stanzas, as it seems natural that Svipdagr's first concern should be to find out whether the place he has come to, this *auðsalr* "hall of riches" (st. 7.6), is in fact Menglǫð's. Once confirmed that he has found the place he was looking for, it seems reasonable that Svipdagr should ask a series of questions to find out more about this strange place and the *mirabilia* and creatures that catch his attention. Sts 9-18 should therefore be moved to a later point in the storyline as they are concerned with the gate, the wall and the dogs, none of which are actually part of Menglǫð's land; they are the barriers that stand between the boy and the land itself. Instead, Svipdagr's questions in sts 31-40 are quite fitting at this point, and they follow a logical and plausible order: his question about the name of the hall (st. 31) expands on the topic of the *auðsalr*, which was just mentioned in the previous question (st. 7.6); in his answer, Fiǫlsviðr uses the word *auðrann* "hall of riches" (st. 32.4), a synonymic variation of *auðsalr*. Svipdagr then asks about the origin of Lýr (st. 33), and the answer to this question exhausts the topic of the hall. Svipdagr's attention subsequently shifts toward Lyfiaberg – which is hardly surprising considering that the large rock is certainly quite noticeable, and that on its slope he sees his beloved for the very first time (st. 35). He asks the name of the rock itself (st. 35), then the names of the maidens who sit on its slope (st. 37), and finally whether the maidens assist those who offer them sacrifices (st. 39).

Now that he has learned the names and qualities of Lyfiaberg and the maidens, one might expect Svipdagr to move on to the third conspicuous landmark of Menglǫð's residence – i.e. the gigantic tree called Mimameiðr. Sts 19-24 should therefore follow st. 40: Svipdagr asks the name of the tree (st. 19), then he enquires about its fruits (st. 21), and finally about the cock who sits on its branches (st. 23). Viðofnir is introduced (st. 24).

Now that Svipdagr has learned about the wondrous features and inhabitants of Menglǫð's realm, it seems natural that the boy's attention should eventually focus on his ultimate goal, i.e. entering the hall (sts 9-18). In the alternative sequence I am putting forward, his next questions are therefore concerned with the three obstacles that block his way: the gate (st. 9), the wall (st. 11) and the dogs (st. 13). He is studying the ground. Svipdagr apparently believes the dogs to be the trickiest of the three barriers, as the next questions focus on finding a way to get past them (sts 15, 17). He thus learns that in order to get past the dogs he will have to kill Viðofnir (st. 18).

At this point, it seems reasonable that Svipdagr should follow up this crucial piece of information by investigating *how* Viðofnir may be slain; sts 25-30 should therefore be relocated here. The boy asks whether a weapon exists that can kill the cock (st. 25), whether it can be obtained (st. 27), and if so how (st. 29). The narrative tension grows. Fiǫlsviðr's answers raise the hero's hopes, until the circular nature of the tasks that need to be completed in order to enter becomes clear (st. 30). Then, when all hope seems lost, Svipdagr's final, desperate question marks his unexpected triumph (sts 41-42).

In order to better illustrate the adjustments proposed, Table 2 offers a schematic outline of the *fréttatal* dialogue according to this emended sequence.

Table 2 – Summary of Q&As in the *fréttatal* – alternative order

Sts 7-8	Q	Who rules over this land and this hall of riches?
	A	Mengloð rules over this land and this hall of riches.
Sts 31-32	Q	What is the hall called?
	A	It is called Lýr. Men will forever know of this hall of riches only by hearsay.
Sts 33-34	Q	Who built it?
	A	(catalogue of names)
Sts 35-36	Q	What is the name of this rock on whose slope I see the famous maiden [Mengloð]?
	A	Its name is Lyfiaberg, and it cures any woman who climbs it.
Sts 37-38	Q	What are the names of the maidens who are sitting at Mengloð's feet?
	A	(catalogue of names)
Sts 39-40	Q	Do they assist those who offer sacrifices to them?
	A	Yes, they will save from any peril those who offer sacrifices to them.
Sts 19-20	Q	What is that huge tree called?
	A	It is called Mimameiðr.
Sts 21-22	Q	What of Mimameiðr's fruits?
	A	They are to be burned in front of ailing women so that they will be cured.
Sts 23-24	Q	What is the name of that golden cock perching on Mimameiðr?
	A	His name is Viðofnir.
Sts 9-10	Q	What is this gate called?
	A	It is called Þrymgiol, and it will seize anyone who tries to open it.
Sts 11-12	Q	What is this wall called?
	A	It is called Gastropnir, and it will stand until the end of time.
Sts 13-14	Q	What are these dogs called?
	A	They are called Gífr and Geri, and they will guard the entrance until the end of the world.
Sts 15-16	Q	Is there any man who may sneak in while the dogs sleep?
	A	No, because they sleep in turns, so that one is always on guard.
Sts 17-18	Q	Is there any food that one may give them to sneak in while they eat?
	A	There is only one such food, and that is the meat from Viðofnir's body.
Sts 25-26	Q	Is there any weapon that can kill Viðofnir?
	A	Yes, it is called Lævateinn, and Sinmara keeps it in a casket with nine powerful locks.
Sts 27-28	Q	Is it possible to obtain this weapon?
	A	Yes, but you will have to give the goddess of gold [Sinmara] something which nobody possesses.
Sts 29-30	Q	Is there any treasure that one might give the pale giantess [Sinmara] so she will be pleased?
	A	Yes, you will have to give her a feather taken from Viðofnir's bones. Only then will she be willing to give you the weapon to kill Viðofnir.
Sts 41-42	Q	Is there any man who may sleep in Mengloð's sweet embrace?
	A	No man may sleep in Mengloð's sweet embrace, except for Svipdagr. She is destined for him alone.

The revised sequence requires two groups of stanzas to be relocated (sts 19-24 and 31-40). Though this implies a more extensive amendment than Möller's, which involves the relocation of a single group of stanzas (sts 13-18), it would present fewer concerns. As a matter of fact, this alternative sequence comes with significant advantages: it can be divided into two distinct and balanced parts of nine questions each, and within each part a clear pattern can be easily detected.

In the first part, Svipdagr's questions are aimed at obtaining information regarding the unfamiliar place, and they follow a sensible order – as commented above. Additionally, this group of nine questions can be further broken down into three groups of three questions, each revolving around a particular topic. The first group of three questions concerns the hall – its ruler, its name, and its origin. The second group is centred on the rock – its name, the names of the maidens who sit on it and their function. Finally, the third group revolves around the tree – its name, the nature of its fruits, and the name of the cock that inhabits it.

In the second part, Svipdagr's queries are not motivated by 'curiosity' anymore. They all have a common purpose: penetrating Menglǫð's abode. Once again, the questions follow a coherent pattern, and can be divided into three groups of three. The first group concerns the hall's defences: the gate, the wall and the dogs. The next three questions all use the formula '*hvárt sé* + genitive plural + *nøkkot*' in the fourth line, and focus on how to get past the dogs' ceaseless watch. The youth asks whether one could sneak in while they sleep, or maybe give them some food to distract them, and how one could obtain such food. This last question employs the construct '*knegi* ("may") + infinitive' (st. 25.5-6). The third and final group of questions focuses on how to obtain the weapon Lævateinn from Sinmara, a task which in the end proves impossible. The narrative reaches its climax and the tables are finally turned. The very last question of this group – whether there is any man who may sleep in Menglǫð's arms – also uses the construct '*knegi* + infinitive' (st. 41.5-6).

A further pattern of three introductory questions followed by a coherent set of six questions also emerges within each of the two halves of the revised *fréttatal*. In the first part, the first three questions introduce Svipdagr to Menglǫð's palace, while the following six are concerned with its three attributes – Lyfiaberg, the maidens and Mimameiðr – all of which possess qualities that appear to be particularly beneficial to women[8]. In the second part, the first three questions help Svipdagr familiarize himself with the three defences of Menglǫð's residence. The following six – five of which share the use of the formula '*hvárt sé* + genitive plural + *nøkkot*' – concentrate exclusively on getting past the defences, and form a sequence of impossible tasks, thus generating a crescendo that culminates with the final question.

5. The revised sequence in the context of *Svipdagsmál*

The symmetry which results from this amended sequence is striking, and so is the way it can be consistently broken down into thematic units which form groups of threes and nines. The fact that rearranging the *fréttatal* stanzas could result in such regularity and such a coherent development may of course be purely fortuitous, a mere coincidence. However, many of the poet's stylistic choices in both *Grógaldr* and *Fiǫlsvinnzmál* would appear to suggest otherwise. The first and most obvious hint that this sequence might be in fact closer than the MS sequence to the poet's intention is the fact that numerical patterns of nines are especially frequent in both the structure and the mythology of *Svipdagsmál*: Gróa chants nine charms for his son (*Gg* 6-14); Svipdagr asks Fiǫlsviðr eighteen questions and obtains eighteen answers (*Fi* 7-42); nine girls sit at Menglǫð's feet (*Fi* 37-38); according to Robinson's convincing reading of *Fi* 34 (1991: 133-134), Menglǫð's hall Lýr was built by nine creatures; the weapon Lævateinn is

[8] Any woman who climbs on Lyfiaberg will be cured from any illness (st. 36); the nine maidens assist those who make sacrifices for them (st. 40); Mimameiðr's fruits are to be burned in the presence of ailing women (st. 22).

secured by nine locks (*Fi* 25-26). In the light of the poet's manifest fascination with numerology, it seems possible – even probable – that he should have added to the symbolic significance of a section as fundamental to his work as the *fréttatal* by composing it out of numerically meaningful segments.

The use of symmetry and symmetrical repetition to draw attention to key themes and motifs is another one of the poet's major stylistic features. To name but a few instances: the poet frames the magical sequence of nine charms sung by Gróa (*Gg* 6-14) between two symmetrical lines, i.e. the first line of the stanza preceding the sequence – *Galdra þú mér gal* "Chant me magic spells" (*Gg* 5.1) – and the last line of the stanza following the sequence – *ek þér galdra gól* "I chanted you magic spells" (*Gg* 15.6); similarly, the word *orð* "word" is repeated in the first and last lines of *Gg* 16[9], which emphasizes just how valuable words – and therefore knowledge – are in this context; the importance of fate, which plays a major role in Svipdagr's story, is stressed by a series of three explicit mentions of the Norns[10], beginning in the fourth stanza of *Svipdagsmál* (*Gg* 4.6, *skeikar þá Skuld at skǫpom* "then Skuld's decree shall take its course") and ending in the fourth to last stanza (*Fi* 47.4-5, *Urðar orði viðr engi maðr* "no man can resist Urðr's verdict").

It is clear that the poet is especially concerned with refining and balancing the details of his poem's architecture. Once again, it seems reasonable to conjecture that he would have devoted just as much care to designing a part of his sophisticated creation as significant as the *fréttatal*.

6. Conclusions

Proposing amendments to the order of the stanzas of an eddic poem calls for great caution. The presumption that medieval works are likely to be defective and need to be manipulated to accommodate modern criteria and aesthetic sense belongs to the past centuries. Also, the style of eddic lays is often dramatic – i.e. dialogic – elliptical, and not always in line with what a modern mind might consider coherent. In the case of *Svipdagsmál*, however, its complex manuscript tradition cannot be overlooked when investigating the text. The oldest and most reliable *Fi* manuscripts that have survived to this day are still no less than four centuries younger than their medieval archetype, and they are the result of at least two stages of copying (ROBINSON 1991: 33-34). Moreover, the large number of manuscripts that preserve the story of Svipdagr's quest bear witness to its popularity, and a popular story is likely to have circulated, thus increasing its exposure to potential alterations.

Considering all these complex circumstances, the hypothesis that an alteration of the order of the stanzas may have found its way into the poem's line of transmission can be taken into consideration. In fact, most editors agree that one such alteration has indeed affected *Fi* somewhere else, i.e. in stanzas 1 and 2. The sequence attested in all *Fi* manuscripts causes some perplexities[11]; Möbius (1860) was the first to emend the order of the lines in *Fi* 1 and 2[12], and most editors after him adopted his alternative sequence[13], while

---

[9] *Móður orð* "Your mother's words" (*Gg* 16.1); *meðan þú mín orð of mant* "as long as you remember my words" (*Gg* 16.6).

[10] According to Norse mythology, the Norns are female creatures who decide the fates of men. Their names are Urðr, Verðandi and Skuld (*Gylfaginning* 14), and they are possibly the personifications of past, present and future, respectively (Simek 2007: 357).

[11] The oddities of the MS order of sts *Fi* 1 and 2 are best outlined by Robinson (1991: 101).

[12] The order followed by Möbius in his edition of *Fi* is 1.1-3, 2.1-3, 2.4-6, 1.4-6.

Gering and Sijmons (1888) and Detter and Heinzel (1903) propose their own emendations[14]. There is, therefore, a widespread consensus among those who have studied *Fiǫlsvinnzmál* that the poem's very structure, as the manuscripts have it, may well be defective.

The purpose of this essay, however, is not to prove that the order of the *fréttatal* stanzas attested in the manuscripts is in fact the result of corruption, which may or may not be the case[15]. Whether or not an alteration has affected the sequence, it is my hope that by advancing Möller's clever intuition and proposing a different approach to the *fréttatal* this study might contribute to a better understanding of the many themes that animate Svipdagr's questioning[16].

Primary sources

ARNAMAGNAEAN *Edda* (1787), *Edda Saemundar hinns fróda: Edda rhythmica seu antiquior, vulgo Saemundina dicta, Pars I*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal.

ARNAMAGNAEAN *Edda* (1818), *Edda Saemundar hinns fróda: Edda rhythmica seu antiquior, vulgo Saemundina dicta, Pars II*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal.

BERGMANN, Friedrich Wilhelm (ed.) (1874), *Vielgewandts Sprüche und Groa's Zaubersang (Fiölsvinnsmal-Grougaldr), zwei norränische Gedichte der Sæmunds-Edda*. Strasburg: Trübner.

BOER, Richard Constant (ed.) (1922), *Die Edda: mit historisch-kritischem Commentar*, Einleitung und Text. Haarlem: Tjeenk Willink.

BRAY, Olive (ed. and transl.) (1908), *The Elder or Poetic Edda, commonly known as Sæmund's Edda,* Part I. *The Mythological Poems*. London: Viking Club.

BUGGE, Sophus (ed.) (1867), *Norræn fornkvæði. Islandsk samling af folkelige oldtidsdigte om nordens guder og heroer, almindelig kaldet Saemundar Edda hins fróda*. Oslo: Malling.

CLEASBY, Richard and GUDBRAND Vigfusson (1874), *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

DETTER, Ferdinand and Richard HEINZEL (eds) (1903), *Saemundar Edda: mit einem anhang,* I: *Text*. Leipzig: Wigand.

FINNUR Jónsson (ed.) (1932), *De Gamle Eddadigte*. Copenhagen: Gad.

GERING, Hugo and Barend SIJMONS (eds) (1888), *Die Lieder der Edda*, Band 1. *Text*. Halle: Buchhandlung des Waisenhauses.

GERING, Hugo and Barend SIJMONS (1927), *Die Lieder der Edda*, Band 3. *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, Erste Hälfte: *Götterlieder*. Halle: Buchhandlung des Waisenhauses.

GRUNDTVIG, Svend (ed.) (1856), *Danmarks Gamle Folkeviser*. Vol. II. Copenhagen: Samfundet til den danske literaturs fremme.

GRUNDTVIG, Svend (ed.) (1874) [1868], *Sæmundar Edda hins fróða. Den ældre Edda*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal.

---

[13] Bugge (1867); Grundtvig (1874); Bergmann (1874); Gudbrand Vigfusson and Powell (1883); Hildebrand (1904); Bray (1908); Boer (1922); Finnur Jónsson (1932); Robinson (1991).

[14] Gering and Sijmons emend the MS order to 2.1-3, 1.1-3, 2.4-6, 1.4-6; Detter and Heinzel emend it to 1.1-3, 2.4-6, 2.1-3, 1.4-6.

[15] The very idea that the MS order is at times suspiciously odd is not unanimous. Robinson, for example, accepts the MS order, and writes extensively in an attempt to make sense of it (1991: 414-420).

[16] I should like to express my sincere gratitude to Veronka Szőke and Maria Elena Ruggerini for the valuable advice they offered me during the drafting of this essay.

GUDBRAND, Vigfusson and F. York POWELL (eds and transls) (1883), *Corpus Poeticum Boreale: The Poetry of the Old Northern Tongue from the Earliest Times to the Thirteenth Century*. Vol. I, *Eddic Poetry*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

HILDEBRAND, Karl (ed.) (1904), *Die Lieder der älteren Edda*, zweite Auflage umgearbeitet von Hugo Gering. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh.

JÓNAS, Kristjánsson and VÉSTEINN Ólason (eds) (2014), *Eddukvæði II. Hetjukvæði*. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag.

LÜNING, Hermann (ed.) (1859), *Die Edda: eine sammlung altnordischer götter- und heldenlieder*. Zürich: Meyer & Zeller.

MÖBIUS, Theodor (ed.) (1860), *Edda Sæmundar hins fróða: mit einem Anhang zum Theil bisher ungedruckter gedichte*. Leipzig: Hinrichs.

MUNCH, Peter Andreas (ed.) (1847), *Den Ældre Edda: Samling af norrøne oldkvad, indeholdende Nordens ældste gude- og helte-sagn*. Oslo: Malling.

NECKEL, Gustav (ed.) (1927) [1914], *Edda. Die Lieder der Codex Regius nebst verwandter Denkmälern I: Text*. Heidelberg: Winter.

ÓLAFUR, Briem (ed.) (1968), *Eddukvæði*. Reykjavík: Skálholt.

RASK, Rasmus Kristian (ed.) (1818), *Edda Saemundar hinns fróda. Collectio carminum veterum scaldorum saemundiana dicta*, curavit Arvid August Afzelius. Stockholm: Elmén.

ROBINSON, Peter Max Wilton (1991), *An Edition of* Svipdagsmál. Oxford: Oxford University (PhD dissertation).

SIMEK, Rudolf (2007), *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, translated by Angela Hall. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer (first published in 1984 as *Lexikon der germanischen Mythologie*. Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner).

Secondary sources

BUGGE, Sophus (1861), "Forbindelsen mellem Grógaldr og Fjölsvinnsmál oplyst ved Sammenligning med den dansk-svenske Folkevise om Sveidal", in *Forhandlinger i Videnskabs-Selskabet i Christiania*, 1960, 123-140.

EINAR Ól., Sveinsson (1975), "Svipdag's Long Journey. Some Observations on *Grógaldr* and *Fjölsvinnsmál*", in Bo ALMQVIST, Brendán MACAODHA and Gearóid MAC EOIN (eds), *Hereditas: Essays and Studies presented to Professor Séamus Ó Duilearga*, Dublin: Folklore of Ireland Society, 298-319 (first published in «Béaloideas» 39-41, 298-319).

HARRIS, Joseph (2014), "*Svipdagsmál*: Gender, Genre, and Reconstruction", in Heike SAHM and Victor MILLET (eds), *Narration and Hero: Recounting the Deeds of Heroes in Literature and Art of the Early Medieval Period*, Berlin-Boston: de Gruyter, 403-445.

MÖLLER, Hermann (1875), "Zum Fiölsvinsmál", in «Germania» 8 (neue Reihe), 356-360.

Giorgio Basciu
University of Cagliari (Italy)
giorgiobasciu@gmail.com