

# Spae-Craft, Seiðr, and Shamanism

by Kveldúlfr Gundarsson

This article could not have been written without the help of Diana Paxson and Rauðhildr, who showed me the way, and my beloved Ságadís, who brought me back. Special thanks are due to Diana for contributing her thoughts on the possible semantic development of *seiðr* and for her work in bringing forth Germanic soul-crafts.

Í þenna tíma var hallæri mikit á Groelandi; höfðu menn fengit lítit fang, þeir er í veiðiferðir höfðu farit, en sumir ekki aptr komnir. Sú kona var (á Groelandi) í byggð, er Þorbjörg hét; hon var spákona ok var kölluð lítill-völva. Hon hafði átt sér níu systur, ok váru allar spákonur, en hon ein var þá á lífi. Þat var hátt Þorbjargar um vetrum, at hon fór at veizlum, ok buðu þeir menn henni mest heim, er forvitni var á at vita forlög sín eða árferð...

Býðr Þorkell spákonunni heim, ok er henni þar vel fagnat, sem siðr var til, þá er við þess háttar konum skyldi taka. Var henni búit háseti ok lagt undir hana hoegindi; þar skuldi í vera hoensa fiðri. En er hon kom um kveldit ok sá maðr, er móti henni var sendr, þá var hon svá búin, at hon hafði yfir sér tuglamöttul blán, ok var þar settr steinum alt í skaut ofan; hon hafði á hálsi sér glertölur, ok lamskinnkofra svartan á höfði ok við innan kattskinn hvít; ok hon hafði staf í hendi, ok var á knappr; hann var búinn með messingu ok settr steinum ofan um knappin; hon hafði um sik hnjóskulinda, ok var á skjóðupungur mikill, ok varðveitti hon þar í taufr sín, þau er hon þurfti til fróðleiks at hafa. Hon hafði á fótum kálfskinsskó bōna ok í þvengi langa, ok á tinknappar miklir á endinum. Hon hafði á höndum sér kattskinnsglófa, ok váru hvítir innan ok loðnir.

En er hon kom inn, þótti henni mönnum skylt at velja henni soemiligar kveðjur... Tok Þorkell bondi í hnd henni ok leiddi hana til þess sætis, sem henni var búit... Borð kómu fram um kveldit, ok er frá því at segja, hvat spákonunni var matbúit. Henni var górr grautr af kiðjamjólk, ok matbúin hjörtu ór öllum kykvendum, þeim er þar váru til. Hon hafði messingarspón ok kníf tannskeptan, tvíhólkaðan af eiri, ok var brotinn af oddrinn...

*(Þorkell then asks her if she is willing to speak, and she refuses until the next morning, when she has had a good night's rest).*

En um morgininn, at áliðnum degi, var henni vettr sá umbúingur, sem hon þurfti at hafa til at fremja seiðinn. Hon bað ok fá sér konur þær, er kynni foerði þat, sem til seiðsins þarf ok Varðlok(k)ur hétu. En þær konur fundisk eigi. Þá var leit at um binn, ef nökkur kynni. Þá segir Guðríðr: 'Hvarki em ek fjölkunnig né vísindakona, en þó kenndi Halldís, fóstur mín, mér á Íslandi þat kvæði, er hon kallaði Varðlokur'...

*(Guðríðr is at first reluctant to sing on account of being a christian, but is finally convinced).*

Slógu þá konur hring um hjallin, en Þorbjörg sat á uppi. Kvað Guðríðr þá kvæðit svá fagrt ok vel, at engi þóttisk heyrt hafa með fegri rödd kvæði kveðit, sá er var þar hjá. Spákonan þakkar henni kvæðit ok kvað margar þær náttúrunu nú til hafa sótt ok þykkja fagrt at heyra, er kvæðit var svá vel flutt... "En mér eru nú margir þeir hlutir auðsýnir, er áðr var ek dulið, ok margar aðrir."

*(In that time there was a very bad season in Greenland: those who went hunting got little game, and summer did not come afterwards. There was a woman named Þorbjörg dwelling there; she was a spae-wife and was called Little-völva. She had had*

*nine sisters, and all were spae-wives, but she alone still lived.*

*It was Þórbjörg's habit to go to feasts that winter, and most men who were curious to know their fates or harvest-expectations invited her home; and among those Þórkell was the greatest farmer, who wished to know what should come to him, how soon the bad harvest which oppressed him should end.*

*Þórkell invited the spae-wife home, and she was well received there, as was the custom when someone should take this woman up on her habit. A high-seat was prepared for her and a cushion laid under her; that had to be (stuffed with) hen-feathers.*

*But when she came in the evening with the man who had been sent to meet her, then she was so readied, that she had a blue mantle fastened with strings, and stones were set all in the flap above; on her neck she had glass beads, a black lambskin hood on her head with white catskin inside; and she had a staff in her hand with a knob on it; it was made with brass and stones were set above in the knob; she had a belt of touch-wood, and on it was a large skin purse, and there she kept safe her talismans which she needed to get knowledge. She had on her feet shaggy calfskin shoes with long thongs and large tin knobs on the ends of those. She had on her hands catskin gloves, and they were white inside and shaggy.*

*When she came in, it seemed to all people that seemly words should be chosen for her...Þórkell the farmer took her by the hand and led her to that seat which was prepared for her...*

*The tables were taken away in the evening, and it is to be said what was prepared for the spae-wife's meal. Porridge was made for her out of kids'-milk, and a dish prepared from the hearts of all living creatures which were available. She had a brass spoon and a knife made of tooth mounted with a double ring of copper, and the end was broken off...*

*But the next day, at sunset, she made the preparations which she needed to have to carry out seiðr. She also asked for those women who knew the wisdom (chant) which was necessary for seiðr and was called Varðlokur. But those women could not be found. Then the folk dwelling there were asked if anyone knew it.*

*Then Guðríður said, 'I am neither magically skilled nor a wise-woman, but Halldís, my foster-mother, taught me that chant in Iceland which she called Varðlokur'...The women made a ring around the seat, and Þórbjörg sat up on it. Then Guðríður recited the chant so fairly and well, that it seemed to no one that they had heard the chant spoken with a fairer voice than was here. The spae-wife thanked her for the recital and said (that) many of the powers were now satisfied and thought it fair to hear when the chant was recited so well... "And now many of those things are shown to me which I was denied before, and many others".)*

As the Troth grows, many of us have begun to reach towards the less well-known crafts of the Northern people - the crafts that deal with the workings of the soul, of changed awareness and trance, of faring to the realms of the god/esses and wights and calling them to speak in the Middle-Garth as well. Although these crafts have never been practised by all the folk, nor understood by all, the *völvur* and *þular* of elder days played a great role in the souls and worship of the Northern tribes; it is now time to think on what part they may play again.

The practice of these techniques will not be spoken of at much length in this article because, to the unaccompanied beginner, soul-crafts are even more dangerous than more limited forms of magic such as *galdr*-craft. All sorts of magic can twist one's *wyrd* or cause harm unmeant; but when practicing soul-craft, you are travelling out into a perilous, unknown world filled with wights who may well not be friendly. Some of the hazards of this sort of travel include getting troll-shot (also: *alf*-shot,

witch-shot, dwarf-shot), which can cause physical symptoms ranging from mild muscle spasms to bone cancer and nervous degeneration; having a part of your soul-complex stolen (in which case an experienced shaman has to be engaged to retrieve it) or eaten; being latched on to by an unpleasant wight which follows you about causing various sorts of trouble thereafter; and, worst of all, getting permanently lost, which, after some time, will cause your uninhabited body to rot and die - something which shows up quite often in, for instance, Finnish legends (see Pentikäinen, *Kalevala Mythology*, pp. 187-88). The most practical advice I can give is: always set up wards before you go; put another layer of warding around yourself as soon as you are out of your body; go fully armed; and be ready to snap back to yourself at the first sign of trouble. Most of all, if you can possibly manage to do so, have a sober (non-tranced or only lightly tranced) partner who can keep an eye on your bodily and psychic state, get you back, and ground you. Although I am not usually willing to recommend that folk given to the Teutonic god/esses go outside of our tradition for training, if you wish to take up soul-work seriously and cannot find a teacher in your area who works in a Germanic context, it will probably be worthwhile to seek guidance from someone working in an authentic shamanic tradition (though beware of New Agers who will use the word to mean anything and everything), as basic trance-techniques are fairly universal. Within our tradition, the best-known and, so far as I know, most highly developed group of spae-crafters/Germanicized shamans is Diana Paxson's [Hrafnar](#), which, given advance notice, welcomes visitors and also does frequent workshops in the San Francisco Bay area; Diana and some of her group, such as the notable priestess Rauðhildr, occasionally also travel and do workshops on trance and spae-craft elsewhere. To avoid confusion, it should be noted that the Hrafnar folk refer to their craft as *seiðr* on the strong suspicion that the word was unfairly blackened towards the end of the Viking Age and in the post-conversion period, but that they do not usually call spirits into the room to be placated and interrogated, nor do they perform acts of harmful spiritual/ psychological interference: their work has been primarily oracular in the past, and they are now beginning to branch out into healing and other weal-working skills as well. Hrafnar can be contacted by mail at P.O. Box 5521, Berkeley, CA 94705.

In analyzing what our forebears understood by the words *spá* and *seiðr*, and what is meant by the Siberian word *shaman*, it is needful to be very careful with our sources: all three of these words are often misused to mean 'any sort of native soul-craft', even by persons who are otherwise authorities in the field of Germanic magic and religion. Further, the sagas from which we get most of our information are written long after the Heathen period, and many, especially the ones with a great deal of magic in them such as *Örvar-Odds saga*, *Friðbjófs saga*, and even *Hrólfs saga kraka* in some places, are more fantastic than realistic in character. While sometimes retaining elements of early tradition and using native terminology, such sagas are often hardly more reliable than taking Tolkien's use of the name Gandalf (Magical Alf) for his wizard as an indicator of what our forebears understood gand-craft to be (one will not find Norse magicians throwing fireballs), or, for that matter, as a definition of the character of the *álfar*. In this article, it is my hope to clear up some of the common misconceptions about spae-craft, *seiðr*, and shamanism so that these crafts may be more fully and clearly studied, pursued, and woven into the workings of our lives as they were into the lives of our forebears and the folk with whom they often interacted.

## Spae-Craft

The fairest of the soul-crafts of old, and the one which had most to do with the worship of our forebears, is spae-craft (Old Norse *spá*) - the skill of seeing that which is unseen to others and of telling what should come to pass. Many of the goddesses are known as having this skill: in *Lokasenna* 21, Óðinn says that Gefjon knows all *ørlögs* as well as he himself, and in stave 29, Freyja says of Frigg that she knows all *ørlögs*, though she does not speak of them. Snorri tells us in the introduction to *Snorra Edda* that Þórr found a *spákona* in the northern half of the world, '*er Síbil hét, er vér kllum Sif* (who is named Sibyl, which we call Sif); though his derivation of 'Sif' from 'Sibyl' is, to say the least, dubious, it is possible, given the knowledge that Frigg and Gefjon are both notable and worthy of special respect for this skill, that the reference springs from a real tradition of Sif as a spae-wife. Among the Ases, we see Óðinn himself as dependent upon the spae-craft of women; both in *Völuspá* ('Spae of the *Völva*') and *Baldrs draumar*, he must ask a *völva* about what shall become. The word *völva* itself comes from a root meaning 'magical staff'; the same root appears, for instance, in the name (or title) of the second century Semnonian seeress Waluburg (Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, pp. 370-71). As *Eiríks saga* shows us, the staff does indeed appear to have been characteristic of the *völva* even towards the end of the Heathen period.

*Völva* is a looser word than *spákona* or *seiðkona*, being used indiscriminately for both: in practice, it appears to indicate a professional seeress or female magician, who may be a *seiðkona*, a *spákona*, or even a practitioner of galdr-magic (we may also compare the *valkyrja*-name *Göndull* and corresponding *Óðinsheiti Göndlir*, both meaning 'wand-bearer').

In the earlier days of our folk, the most honoured female leaders of the tribes were the spae-women who advised the war-chiefs concerning their battles with Rome. The most notable of these women was the Veleda, who fore-saw the victory of the Batavi and gave rede for the tribe to rise against the Romans in 69 C.E. Of her, Tacitus says, 'She was a maiden from the tribe of the Bructeri who possessed great powers, according to the old custom of the Germanic peoples to regard many women as seeresses, and in an extended superstition to consider them even to be goddesses' (*Histories* IV, 61). Just as Hermann the Cheruscan is often given worship today as the embodiment of early Teutonic manhood and warrior-might, the first of our great heroes, so the Veleda is given a like worship as the embodiment of early Teutonic womanhood and deep soul-wisdom, the first of our great heroines.

People with fore-sight, both women and men, appear often in the sagas. Here we see one of the few identifiable differences between spae-craft and *seiðr*: spae-folk are highly respected and considered valuable members of the community even by christian *sagamenn* long after the conversion, while *seið*-folk are more marginal figures. There was clearly, in the minds of our forebears, a meaningful difference between spae-craft and *seiðr*: the one was usually prophetic and usually weal-working, the other was usually a magical craft and often woe-working. Some of the Norse spae-folk who got much honour for their work include Þórhallr spámaðr, of whom it was said that he was '*maðr froðr ok miog framsynn*' (*Flateyjarbók* I, p. 419), and who was given the greatest respect by his friend and patron Hallr; the *völva* Heiðr who tells Ingimundr inn gamli what has happened to his silver pouch-idol of Freyr; and Þórbjörg livilvölva the Greenlandish spae-wife (of whom more is said below, as she also practiced *seiðr*). 'Spae' is also used as a descriptive for helpful wights: *spámaðr* is also used for a landwight in *Þórvalds þáttur víðförla*, and Sigmundr's spiritual protectresses are called *spádísir* in *Völsunga saga*.

Spae-craft is associated directly with the Norns in *Nornagests þáttur* (*Flateyjarbók* I, *láfs saga Tryggvasonar*). Nornagestr says that

‘fóru þá um land völr, er kallaðar vǫr spákonur, ok spáðu mönnum ørlög, því buðu margir menn þeim heim ok gerðu þeim veizlur ok gáfu þeim góða gripi at skilnaði’

(*völr*, which were called spákonur, fared about the land then and prophesied the ørlögs of men, wherefore many men invited them home and prepared feasts for them and gave them good treasures when they parted)

... and later refers to the three spae-women as 'norns'. Here they appear as not only speaking, but shaping Wyrð for the newborn child: when the youngest norn is treated disrespectfully, she gives Nornagestr a life no longer than it takes the candle to burn down, whereafter the oldest norn immediately puts the candle out and tells the baby's mother to take good care of it (Nornagestr lives three hundred years, and ends his life by burning the candle at Oláfr's court). These spae-wives very much resemble the lesser norns, mentioned by Snorri in the *Prose Edda*, who come to each child at birth to shape its ørlög. These lesser norns are clearly *dísir*; it is quite possible that there may have been a relationship between idises and spae-craft.

The practice of spae-craft varied in the old days. Sometimes it seemed to call for special trance-techniques, as in the case of Þorgeirr the Lawspeaker who went 'under the cloak' for two days before deeming Iceland's religious future (and made the decision which preserved the religious lore of the North until it could be written down; had christianity been enforced in Iceland rather than accepted quietly, we would almost certainly have lost all the tales and elder lays of our god/esses). Other times, as in *Þjórandi þáttur ok Þórhalls* (*Flateyjarbók* I, pp. 418-21), where the words *hyggja* (to intuit) and *bjóða* (to bode) are used by Þórhallr spámaðr to describe his premonition, spae-craft seems to have been a matter of psychic sensing with no special effort made. The matter was clearly a question of both personal character and the situation at hand: Þorgeirr had a specific problem which he needed to resolve, whereas Þórhallr sensed the doom hanging over the upcoming

Winternights festivities. Both types of spae-craft are highly useful. One can grow in the latter by careful attention to fore-bodings - by considering one's feelings, especially before large happenings and holy feasts, and writing them down, then waiting to see what comes of them. Close attention paid to personal feelings and outside omens, and their following consequences, at the three greatest feasts of the year (Yule, Ostara, and Winternights) and those on which divination is traditionally done in the North (Waluburg's Night and Midsummer) - can also help one recognise and develop one's own spae-craft, if one has the root talent.

Closely akin in function to the womanly word *völva*, but not used as loosely, is the manly word *thule* (Old Norse *þulr*). The word comes from the same root as *þula*, 'to speak'; it also appears as the Anglo-Saxon *þyle*, a title used for Unferth in *Beowulf* and glossed as 'orator, jester'. Unferth appears as Hrothgar's champion, though he battles with words instead of weapons; he is clearly a highly valued member of the court, for he has a place beside the king even though he killed his own brother. The word was current as a religious title for human speakers in Old Norse, as shown by the famous Snøldlev stone which honours 'Gunvald, son of Roald, thule on the Sal-howes' (Moltke, *Runes and their Origins*, pp. 165-166). The word *þulr* is also used for the etin Vafþrúðnir, who tells Óðinn of the end of the worlds (*Vafþrúðnismál* 9); the dwarf Reginn, foster-father of Sigurðr Völsung (*Fáfnismál* 34), and Óðinn himself, who goes by the name of Fimbul-Þulr (the Great Thul). In *Hávamál*, he says,

Mál er at þylia þular stóli á,  
 Urðar brunni at;  
 sá er ok þagðac, sá ec oc hugðac,  
 hlýdda ec á manna mál;  
 of rúnar heyrða ec dma, né um ráðom þgðo,  
 Háva hllo at, Háva hllo í,  
 heyrða ec segia svá

*(It is time to speak as a thule, on the thule's seat,  
 at the Well of Wyrð;  
 I saw and was silent, I saw and thought,  
 I listened to the speech of folk;  
 I heard deeming of runes, and they were not silent of redes,  
 at the halls of the High One, in the halls of the High One,  
 thus I heard tell).*

It is clear that the thule, like the spae-wife and *seiðkona*, has a special seat prepared for him from which he speaks inspired words - words that stem from the Well of Wyrð: when he sits upon his hallowed seat, he is in the stead where all the *þrlögs* of the worlds are deemed. We note that the two uses of *Fimbul-Þulr* for Óðinn are both in seemingly formulaic phrases speaking of the holy/magical uses of the runes:

þeim er gorðo ginnregin  
 ok fáði fimbulþulr  
 er fáði fimbulþulr  
 ok gorðo ginnregin  
 ok reist hroptr rgna

*(which the Ginn-Regin made  
 and Fimbulthulr coloured);  
 (which Fimbulthulr coloured,  
 and the Ginn-Regin made,  
 and Hroptr of gods risted).*

A special characteristic to the thule's seat, which he shares with the holy kings of our elder tradition, is that it may often have been set upon a burial mound: in his commentary on the Snøldlev stone, Moltke notes that 'Tulshøj, "thul's mound", is quite a common place-name' (*Runes and their Origins*, p. 166). In 'At sidde på Høj', Olrik specifically compares the kingly practice of sitting on a mound to the use of a platform or high-seat and interprets it as a sign of the holy character of Norse kingship. There are a tremendous number of references to kings doing precisely this (vg. Grundy, 'The Cult of Óðinn', II, 2.2); the royal dead in the mound seem to be the source of a king's spiritual authority, so that he speaks his greatest degrees from the howe: in fact, many Migration Age howes were flattened on top and may have been crowned by stones for just this purpose (Lindqvist,

'Ynglingaättens Gravskick', p. 93; H.R. Ellis, *Road to Hel*, pp. 110-11). That this was not merely practical - much more than a means of getting the king or thule up where he could be seen and his voice heard, or a mere reminder of the authority of royal descent - is shown by, among other references, *Völsunga saga* ch. 1, where Rerir sits on a mound to pray for a child and is given an apple there by Óðinn's adopted daughter, and *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, where Helgi is given his name and the drive to do heroic deeds by the *dís Sváva* as he sits upon a howe. The Penzlin bracteate from Mecklenburg (Hauck, *Goldbrakteaten, Tafeln I*, pp. 179-80) also probably shows a king or thule upon a mound: the size of the supine figure as contrasted to the sitter suggests his greater power - the might and wisdom of the hallowed dead who speak through the living - and the bird behind the sitter also suggests a possible relationship with Wodan.

The craft of the thule can be practiced either directly, if one lives where one can sit upon a gravemound dwelt in by a wight with whom one is on good terms, or indirectly, through the addition of shamanic soul-faring techniques to bring one to the mound. The latter was obviously not practiced by our forebears, because they had no need for it: one can hardly walk in Northern Europe without tripping over a howe. However, America is another matter. If necessary, such a soul-faring can be undertaken either by first making the faring to Hel and looking about for a howe in the realm of the dead (you are likely to find one of your forebears in this manner), or by faring directly to the homeland and looking for an earthly howe upon which you may sit in spirit.

## Seiðr

The chief problem in discussing *seiðr* is defining precisely what *seiðr* is. This word, more than any other native term, has been often misused as a blanket term for spae-craft, 'witchcraft', any of the activities which can appear as parts of the shamanic complex (for instance, faring forth from the body, especially in animal-form; performing magical healing by removal of intrusions or retrieval of soul-parts), genuine Finno-Ugric and/or Siberian shamanism, and even work involving the direct speech of the god/esses through human beings.

In the Old Norse sources, *seiðr* is nearly always portrayed as malicious; the few exceptions to this occur when it is being used for foretelling, as with Þórbjörg lítilvölva and the seeresses in *Örvar-Odds saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka*. The terminology used to describe the actions of Þórbjörg, if anything about the account can be trusted (which is by no means certain), is especially interesting in regards to the attitudes towards *spá* and *seiðr* among the Norse. Þórbjörg herself is never called a *seiðkona*: she is always a *spákona*, and treated with the highest respect. The word *seiðr* is used only to describe her action in a specific instance: she requests that a particular chant be chanted 'at fremja seiðinni', to carry out *seiðr* (*Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. IV, *Íslensk fornrit IV*, p. 207), with the specific purpose, according to the saga, of satisfying outside powers who were gathered about and who spoke to Þórbjörg as part of her *seiðr*. This is something clearly different from the work of spae-folk, whose fore-tellings seem to stem from inner knowledge and fore-sight. It is also quite distinct from the work done by thules and kings, which appears to rely on an inborn ability to bring forth the might and wisdom of the dead; at least, there is no indication that these men performed ceremonies anything like that of the *Eiríks saga völva*. The prophetic aspect of *seiðr*, if the terminology of *Eiríks saga* can be trusted at all, appears to be a form of mediumship more similar to spiritualism: the beings are called into the stead and entertained by the recital of a specific chant before they will reveal their knowledge of what shall come to pass to the *völva*. Further, the emphasis on the description of Þórbjörg as a *spákona* rather than a *seiðkona* may suggest that her chief function was as a prophetess, and that her use of *seiðr*/mediumship was a last resort rather than a normal activity - as also suggested by her difficulty finding someone who knows the particular song which is necessary for *seiðr* and the reference to her having been shown many things that she had been denied before. It is only the more fantastic sagas such as *Örvar-Odds saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka* that describe the seeresses as *seiðkonur*, suggesting that in the hundred years of literary development and loss of Heathen memory between the early-mid thirteenth and mid-late fourteenth centuries, the distinctions made between native soul-crafts by the earlier *sögumenn* - especially the stigma attached to *seiðr* - had been, at least in a literary context, blurred; it is particularly likely that the scene in *Örvar-Odds saga* was directly influenced by (if elaborated considerably from) the scene in *Eiríks saga*. The use of the verses in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, on the other hand, suggest that the tradition of a seeress being used to root out the disguised princes was quite old; however, the prose which calls the seeress a *seiðkona* and gives her the name of Heiðr probably dates to no earlier

than the late fourteenth century - by the time these sagas were written, the prophetic *seiðkona* named Heiðr (who may have found her origins in *Völuspá*) had become a stock character of Norse fiction.

Beyond prophecy (overlapping with spae-craft), *seiðr* includes many other skills: here it is worth noting that, though the words *spá* and *seiðr* have both survived to this day in modern Icelandic, *spá* is the only one used for prophecy: the word *seiðr* means 'sorcery', the verb means 'to enchant, bewitch, or put a spell on'. As described by Snorri in *Ynglinga saga* ch. VII,

Óðinn kunnir þá íþrótt...er seiðr heitir, en af því mátti hann vita ørlög manna ok óorðna hluti, svá ok at gera mönnum bana eða óhamingju eða vanheilendi, svá ok at taka frá man vit eða afl ok gefa öðrum

*(Óðinn knew that accomplishment...which is called seiðr, and from that he could know the ørlög of men and things that had not happened, and also thus cause the deaths or loss of hamingjur or loss of luck of men, and also thus take from one man wit or life-force and give it to others.*  
-Íslenzk fornrit XXVI, p. 19).

The active component of *seiðr* thus seems to chiefly be interfering with the soul-parts and/or consciousness of another. Snorri, of course - writing from a christian perspective more than two hundred years after the conversion of Iceland - is not necessarily a reliable source in regards to specific details of magic. It could be argued that his dark portrayal of *seiðr* was influenced by christian hostility towards native magic in general and towards that which might include the use of sexual energy in specific. However, both the character of *seiðr* as described by Snorri and the disapproval attached to it is borne out by the description of Heiðr in *Völuspá* 22:

Heiði hana héto, hvars til húsa kom,  
völo velspá (vélsþá), vitti hon ganda,  
seið hon, hvars hon kunnir, seið hon hug leikinn,  
æ var hon angan illrar brúðar.

*(She was called Heiðr when she came to houses, a völva prophesying well/deceitfully [the accent marks which would tell us which word was meant do not exist in the manuscripts, though given the generally critical tone of the verse, vél-, deceitful, seems somewhat likelier than vel-, well], she knew gand-craft, she practiced seiðr where she could, practiced seiðr, playing with hugr, she was ever dear to evil women).*

Here, it is uncertain whether *hugr* is meant to denote intuition, emotion, thought, soul, or the soul-complex in general; it is certain that Heiðr's activity involved some sort of magical interference with awareness, and that the *Völuspá* poet did not think well of it. Since this poem is generally dated to about 1000 C.E., and since the author deals favourably with Heathenism in general, it is not unsafe to conclude that his discussion of *seiðr* is based on a general knowledge of the practices and their place in society. A similar use of *seiðr* is described in Kormákr gmundarson's *Sigurðardrápa* (ca. 960 C.E.): together with other bits of gnostic god-lore (such as 'Urðr comes out of the well'; 'Þórr sits in the wagon', and 'Hropr fared with Gungnir'), we are informed that '*seið Yggr til Rindar*' - Yggr performed *seiðr* at Rindr. Since we know that Óðinn managed to father Baldr on Rindr by using magic to drive her temporarily insane, we must conclude that this was a common use - perhaps the most common, and certainly the most authoritatively-documented - use of *seiðr*. This is more notable since *Sigurðardrápa* and *Völuspá* are the only sources of clear Heathen origin that describe the art, which argues against the theory that *seiðr* was considered a worthy art in the Heathen period and blackened later by christians.

In *Laxdæla saga* ch. XXXVI, *seiðr* is used as a sort of 'hand of glory': Kotkell and Gríma put Hrútr's whole family to sleep with it, except for Hrútr's twelve-year-old son Kári against whom the magic is directed: the boy gets up to see the working and falls dead a little way outside the door. The craft of nightmare-riding is also a part of *seiðr*, according to Snorri: in ch. XIII of *Ynglinga saga*, when Vanlandi has deserted a woman named Drífa, she goes to Hulð *seiðkona* and hires her to either bring him back or kill him. Vanlandi tries to go back, but his men realize that he is enchanted and

keep him from doing so. A little later he awakes from his sleep and calls out, saying he is being trodden by a mare. His men try to help him, but when they go to his head, Hulð treads his legs until they are nearly broken, and when they go to his feet, she treads his head until he dies (*Íslensk fornrit* XXVI, p. 29). Such a magically induced restlessness, though of a more subtle sort, also appears in *Gísli saga Súrssonar* ch. XVIII: the *seiðmaðr* Þórgrímr nef is hired to bring it about that Gísli be able to find no safe haven after he has slain Þórgrímr Þórsteinsson, although folk may wish to help him. Similarly, in *Egils saga* ch LIX, queen Gunnhildr uses *seiðr* 'at Egill Skalla-Grímsson skyldi aldri ró bíða á slandi, fyrr en hon sæi hann' (that Egill Skalla-Grímsson should never bide peacefully in Iceland before she saw him), wishing to bring him into her clutches so she could get revenge upon him. This *seiðr* appears to magically instill in Egill a restlessness and depression which eventually bring him to England and into the hands of Gunnhildr and Eiríkr Blood-Axe - and nearly to his death, from which he is saved only by Óðinn's gift of poetry (by composing *Höfudlausn*, 'Head-Ransom', in praise of Eiríkr).

A more positive use of the same *seiðr* technique appears in *Gunnars saga keldugnúpsfífls*: after the slaying of her brother, Þórdís 'tók að efla seið mikinn að Gunnari' (took to strengthening a great *seiðr* against Gunnarr) so that he could not sit comfortably at home or in any other stead, finally bringing him to a state of desperation in which he is willing to pay her the due weregild (ch. 11, *Íslensk fornrit* 14, p. 377). Here, though *seiðr* is still a woe-working art, it is directed with an appropriate purpose: specifically, it is used by a woman who, lacking sons or a husband who are willing to fight or take a case to law for her, has no other means of compelling a misdoer to act justly.

In all of these instances, *seiðr* is an art that works on the mind and soul: it can cause psychological disturbances and even death, but it cannot, for instance, change the weather, still fires, raise or put down the walking dead, protect a warrior, or any of the other powers attributed to galdr-magic in, for instance, *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál*. Only in *Laxdæla saga* ch XXXV does *seiðr* seem to appear as a magic capable of causing direct changes in the outside world: Kotkell and his family perform magic to cause Þórðr Ingunnarson and his crew to be drowned. Here, however, the description of the process is rather ambiguous: after the *seið*-seat has been readied and the workers sat upon it, 'Þau kváðu þar harðsnúin fróji, þat váru galdrar' (They spoke there hard-wound chants, which were *galdrar*). Since in all other accounts except for the latest and most fantastic in which native magical terms are clumped together without discrimination or understanding, *galdr* and *seiðr* are strictly kept apart and sharply distinguished; since the word *seiðr* is used only to describe the *seiðhjallr*, not the action that takes place on it; and since the creating of weather and conditions at sea is characteristic for galdr-magic (see *Hávamál* 154 and *Sigrdrífumál* 10), it seems likely that if this account preserves anything more than a romantic description of old-time magicians at work, it shows us people who normally work *seiðr* and possibly are using *seiðr*-based techniques of raising and aiming power, but are functioning in this instance as *galdr*-crafters for the sake of performing an effect which is outside the normal range of *seiðr*.

Finally, there is the reference to Þuríðr sundafyllir in *Landnámabók* (H ch. 116, S ch. 145). Here we do see the practice of *seiðr* as a positive, active magic: Þuríðr was called 'sound-filler' because when there was a famine in her home Hálogaland, she performed *seiðr* so that every sound was full of fish. Strömbäck comments, however, that Hálogaland is in northern Norway, bordering on the Saami area, and that the *Historia Norvegiæ* describes the Saami art of magically drawing fish away from the Christians and towards themselves, as does Adam of Bremen. There are several other references to fishing-magic which cause Strömbäck to conclude that although the art appears in other places than Hálogaland, it is not connected with *seiðr* (*Sejd*, pp. 77-78). While Strömbäck's analysis here does not help us to understand what more wholesome aspects Norse *seiðr* might have had (or not had, for that matter) in the old days, it does provide a strong argument for those who would like to start using the native word for all forms of soul-craft rather than adopting the foreign word 'shamanism' to describe crafts learned from other ethnic groups: if calling Saami magic *seiðr* was good enough for the author of *Landnámabók*, perhaps we need not be unduly squeamish about a similar usage for modern borrowings from Finno-Ugrics, Siberians, Native Americans, and so forth - though if we do so, it is, of course, necessary to be scrupulously careful about not claiming that the *seiðr* of our forebears normally included, for instance, most of the elements typical of shamanism. Alternatively, one may choose to ignore Strömbäck and take the *Landnámabók* description of Þuríðr's magic as *seiðr* at face-value, and as evidence for otherwise forgotten or suppressed woe-working aspects of the art, as discussed below.

Aside from Þuríðr sundafyllir's possibly Saami magic, the only positive use of the word *seiðr* outside of a prophetic context occurs on the Korpbron stone (probably late tenth-century), with its inscription '*sipa þur*' - 'Þórr, perform seiðr!' This strongly suggests that the skills of *seiðr* could be used as warding techniques to good effect - especially if one is, as the Korpbron carver was, a Heathen living in a christian area (the inscription was put in coded runes inside a cross). Considering Þórr's usual means of dealing with threats, it does not necessarily suggest that his *seiðr* had good results for the person towards whom it was directed. It does, however, suggest that *seiðr* was not always seen as a craft of ill; that at worst, like any sort of aggressive activity, the morality of *seiðr* depended on the circumstances under which it was deployed. We can see that the Korpbron carver was clearly worried about being persecuted for his troth, and also wished to protect the memorial runestone he had carved with a serious curse (not uncommon on runestones).

The connection of *seiðr* with Þórr is particularly interesting in regards to the association of *seiðr* with *ergi*, given that one of Þórr's more notable adventures (*Þrymskviða*) involved dressing as Freyja to get his Hammer back, which makes him concerned that the Æsir will consider him *argr* (the adjectival form - verse 17) - and suggesting, as has been discussed in *Our Troth*, among other places, that there is considerably more to Þórr's mysteries than meets the popular eye. Interestingly, common curses on earlier runestones also invoke both *seiðr* and *ergi* in the most negative senses: on the Jutlandic Skern stone, any man who commits the horrible crime of breaking the stone will be a *sipi* - 'seiðmaðr' (Moltke, *Runes and their Origins*, p. 141), while the Danish Stentofte stone states that, as Moltke interprets it, 'whoever damages or destroys the monument will somehow become *argr*', and the Saleby stone curses whoever marks it with a christian cross or damages it to become a wizard (*ræti*) and an *arg* woman, perhaps implying, as Moltke suggests, 'that the worst the Saleby rune-master could wish on anybody was to become a witch-woman' (*Runes and their Origins*, p. 140).

Diana Paxson also suggests that *seiðr* could have originally been a more weal-working craft whose woe-working side was emphasized more towards the end of the Viking Age and after the conversion. Here we have only comparative evidence to go on: for instance, Westerners coming into contact with shamanic cultures between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries often interpreted all shamanism as evil; there was also, as in any culture, the fear (at least as common among ordinary Heathens as among christians) that someone who could work weal with magic could bring woe as well. Here we are hampered by the character of our evidence, as the literary sources and one runestone are all we have in regards to *seiðr*: it is equally bad practice to invent an entire system whose lack of documentation we can conveniently excuse as 'ideology-oriented suppression' (especially given that we do not by any means understand all the ideologies even of the late Heathen period) and to ignore the fact that we have lost a tremendous amount and that *seiðr*, malign or otherwise, is most definitely in the category of magico-religious crafts which lend themselves best to being marginalized and/or deleted from the record. Perhaps it can only be suggested that if *seiðr* can be used to cause psychological and psycho-physical damage, it could at least potentially be used to cure it, even though there is not even a hint that this was ever the case in early days. It is not appropriate to whitewash *seiðr* too brightly, since the scanty Heathen sources, including the runestones cited above, seem to agree with the most probably reliable of the later writings; but perhaps we can give it the benefit of the doubt at least in regards to its possible usefulness today, especially since it seems to have been fit for Þórr (whose character and motives no one ever seems to doubt) as well as for Óðinn and Freyja.

According to Snorri again, *seiðr* was originally a Vanic craft which Freyja brought among the Æsir; and again, his statement is borne out (or perhaps even extrapolated from) the *Völuspá* staves regarding Gullveig, Heiðr, and the war of the Vanir and Æsir. It is nowhere specifically stated that she taught *seiðr* to Óðinn; this is the logical result of the general statement that she brought the craft to the Æsir. It is clear, in any case, that he did learn the craft, as shown by the reference in *Sigurðardrápa* and Loki's accusation that '*þic síða kóðo Sámseyo í / ok draptu á vétt sem völor*' (you practiced *seiðr* on Samsey, and you beat on a *vétt* as *völv*as do). However, although at least Freyja, Óðinn, and Þórr practiced *seiðr*, it appears (unlike *spae*-craft) that *seiðr* had no place in the actual religious usages of the North - at least none which can be documented. If one were to exercise speculation, it is at least possible that *seiðr* might have been an element of the Vanic cult which fell so far outside the experience of most Norse folk that it made no impression whatsoever on the Icelanders (who seem to have avoided many of the cultic practices of continental Scandinavia) and was either unknown to outsiders or suppressed due to the 'indecencies' associated with it. This

latter is made at least possible by Saxo's reference to the unmanly gestures of the Uppsala priests which so horrified the prudish Óðinn-hero (!) Starkaðr and by the apparently ecstatic character of the cult which Saxo describes in outline (cf. William Karpen's *Idunna* article 'Freyr: an Ecstatic God'). To suggest it as more than a possibility for the worship carried out in the past is to wish on our forebears something they did not leave us. However, it is certainly not contrary to the surviving bits of tradition we have; should folk feel that it is fitting for some aspects of worship today, and should their efforts then be blessed by the god/esses towards whom the worship is directed, then clearly it is a good thing and ought to be followed further by any true folk who find it suitable.

The practice of *seiðr* was particularly marked by three distinctive characteristics: the use of a platform or high-seat upon which the worker sat while performing his/her magic; the recitation of chants to bring the worker into a state of trance and/or to enlist the aid of outside wights; and activities which were considered to be *ergi* (sexually shameful), which, unfortunately for us, either were too disgusting for prudish *sgumenn* to describe (rather unlikely, as early Icelandic literature is seldom notable for restraint in such matters) or had been forgotten in the two to three hundred years between the activities written of and the writing of the sagas about them. It is these three characteristics which have caused *seiðr* sometimes to be closely compared to shamanism, and even interpreted as 'Nordic shamanism'. This is an incorrect and potentially damaging assumption, as it encourages the assumption of all elements of the shamanic complex into *seiðr* and makes the genuine reconstruction of the craft difficult, if not impossible. Although some of the elements of the shamanic complex are present in Norse literature, most notably faring forth in beast-form to gain information or do battle, they are specifically *not* associated with *seiðr*. Even Snorri separates Óðinn's arts of this sort from his specifically defined *seiðr*-skills, just as the *Egils saga* author accuses Gunnhildr of being a *hamhleypra* (hide-leaper) when she comes in swallow-shape to distract Egill from his poetry (ch. LIX), but *not* of practicing *seiðr*, as he had previously. In fact, the word *seiðr* is never used in conjunction with any sort of shape-shifting or travelling out of the body (the latter being usually the province of Saami, as with the 'Finnish' wizards Ingimundr sent after his Freyr-image in *Vatnsdœla saga* ch. XII), let alone for journeying to the Underworld or Overworld. Further, *seiðr* is never used for healing, soul-retrieval or guiding of the dead to their homes; nor is there any evidence that seið-folk underwent the sort of traumatic initiation which is typical of shamanism, unless one were to speculate that the threefold burning of Gullveig which transformed her into Heiðr could have been such an initiation. Likewise, practitioners of *seiðr* do not demonstrate the amazing physical capabilities common to shamans - the ability not to be harmed by heat or cold or cut by knives while entranced (as in Kildal's 1730 description of Saami shamans, cited by Strömbäck, *Sejd*, p. 122), or to perform amazing feats of strength, endurance, and physical control (Eliade, *Shamanism*, pp. 29-30). Therefore, although the technique of *seiðr* can resemble shamanic techniques - and may even have been learned in part from the shamanic cultures with whom the Germanic peoples interacted so often - despite the best efforts of modern reconstructionists more familiar with galdr-magic than either *seiðr* or shamanism (such as the author of this article in his previous writings), it cannot be identified as shamanism in and of itself.

The precise purpose of the high-seat is never detailed in the sources, but an analogy may perhaps be drawn to the *þular stóll*: it is the hallowed seat on which the sitter takes on all the might of his/her abilities, suspended between the earth and the heavens, the Middle-Garth and the Otherworlds, at the Well of Wyrd. If the reference in *Eiríks saga* is not anomalous, sitting on this high-seat may also have made it easier for the seið-worker to perceive the beings from whom s/he got lore and perform the function of a medium. Such a seat also makes it psychologically easier for the worker to detach his/her consciousness from the ordinary world and the folk around (if there are any), and enter into the state of trance required to work either *seiðr* or spae-craft.

The use of chants to bring the seið-worker into a state of trance are well-documented: aside from the saga references, skaldic kennings comparing the noises of battle to seið-chants are not uncommon (Meissner, *Die Kenningar der Skalden*, pp. 196-97). However, these chants are notably different from galdr-songs. Whereas galdr-songs are described with verbs such as *gala* and *syngja* (to sing magically, to sing) and with the noun *ljóð* (song), the words used in the context of *seiðr* are inevitably *kveða* (to speak, to recite); the thing recited is called *kvæði* (chant) and *fróði* (wisdom, presumably in the sense of wisdom-chant). While the galdr-song is itself the means of working the magic, and is sung by the chief worker, the seið-chant is only spoken by the chief worker if s/he cannot avoid it. A lone *seiðmaðr* hardly ever appears in the sagas: troops of up to eighty (as with Rögnvaldr réttillbeini in *Haralðs saga ins hárfagra* ch. XXXIV) are mentioned, while poorer folk, such

as Kotkell and Gríma, had to make do with family members. Further, the chant was something a christian woman was able to perform, so that it clearly relied on no special magical skill, or even spiritual enlightenment. We know little about Viking Age music, so we are not certain what distinguished 'singing' (magical or otherwise) from 'reciting', especially since the beauty of Guðríð's voice was an important factor in the success of the working. However, we may guess that the *kvæði* probably had a very limited range (perhaps two to four notes), and we may even speculate that it could well have been repetitive and lulling in character (especially since Guðríð learned it from a foster-mother but apparently not in a context of learning magic in general; one might imagine that it could have done double-duty as a children's song or cradle-song, as such things are ideal for inducing trance).

One of the most often-asked question about *seiðr* is why, exactly, practicing it was considered to involve sexual shame for men. That it apparently did is attested to by a fairly wide spread of references: not only *Ynglinga saga*, but also *Gísla saga*, where Þórgrímr nef carries out his *seiðr* 'með allri ergi ok skelmiskap' (with all *ergi* and devil-working) and the above-cited quote from *Lokasenna*, where Loki matches Óðinn's accusation that Loki has lived as a woman and borne children with the apparently equally serious counter-accusation that Óðinn has practiced *seiðr*. It has variously been hypothesized that the practice of *seiðr* could have involved some form of passive sexual reception, either actual or symbolic, of the wights from which the *seið*-worker got lore and perhaps power; that the act of entering into deep trance implied a loss of self-control which the Norse considered unmanly; that the practice of *seiðr* may have included some form of cross-dressing or cross-gender activity to stimulate the worker's psychic capabilities (cf. the Greek Tiresias, or the Native American *berdache* tradition); or that the use of *seiðr* instead of weapons to deal with foes was considered unmanly (which is certainly how it appears in *Laxdæla saga* and *Gísla saga*). All of these theories are reasonable and believable both within the context of Norse culture and the general workings of trance-magics, and none is necessarily better-supported than the others. In the attempt to recreate an historically accurate *seiðr*, this aspect must therefore be left up to the intuition and personal experience of whoever is brave enough to try it. In any event, whatever the offending aspect was, it undoubtedly contributed, as seen not only in the frontier society of Iceland but on the Continent, with inscriptions such as the Stern stone, to the presentation of *seiðr* as something done by marginal and probably ill-willing folk.

## Shamanism

The word 'shaman' is Siberian in origin, but has unfortunately been picked up as a sort of catch-all for spiritual development by New Agers and even by quite a few scholars and magicians who ought to know better. Properly used, 'shamanism' describes a complex of magico-spiritual techniques first identified among the Siberian peoples, which is also characteristic of the Central Asian tribes, the Finno-Ugric folk, the Inuit and Native Americans, and the Australian aborigines, among others. Eliade comments that a shamanic culture is one in which the people in general 'accord considerable importance to the trances of their shamans...it is the shamans who, by their trances, cure them, accompany their dead to the "Realm of Shades", and serve as mediators between them and their gods, celestial and infernal, greater and lesser. This small mystical elite not only directs the community's religious life but, as it were, guards its "soul" (*Shamanism*, p. 3). The most notable characteristics of shamanism are the induction of trance, often by repetitive chants and/or drumming; the curing of illness by soul-retrieval or removal of a spiritual intrusion; the use of spirit-allies, especially totem spirits; mastery over fire and/or cold; remarkable physical capabilities and control; the shaman's ability to travel out of his/her body, often changing into a beast-shape in the process; the guiding of the dead, the shaman's ascent to the Overworld and/or descent to the Underworld; protection of self and/or community by battle with otherworldly beings; and traumatic initiation. It should be noted that most of these characteristics appear individually in the magico-religious practice of all cultures (even Luther got to battle with otherworldly beings: he threw an ink-pot at his Devil), and that the occasional presence of 'shamanic' elements is not proof of genuine shamanism: the christian poet Dante experienced a spiritual journey through both Underworld and Overworld, for instance, but no one would call him a shaman; Aleister Crowley was able to astrally project in the form of a golden eagle, as he describes in *Magick Without Tears*, but he can hardly be classified as a shaman either.

Some form of shamanism was very probably practiced by the earliest inhabitants of Northern

Europe, who were hunters and gatherers and, for a time, reindeer herders. It should thus be noted that, whether or not the Germanic people practiced genuine shamanism in the historical period, these crafts are ultimately part of the Northern heritage and, as the elder Troth takes in all of Wyrð's depths, from the Stone Age to the present day, the reconstruction of shamanism within the Troth is wholly fitting. Further, we know that the Germanic folk had a great deal of intercourse (in all senses) with the Finno-Ugric peoples, and, as discussed above, it would be difficult to believe that at least a few had not picked up some of the highly effective magical techniques of these folk: some surely did, as is probable in the case of Þuríðr sundafyllir and clearly stated in the case of Queen Gunnhildr, who, according to *Haralds saga ins hárfagra* ch. XXXII, was found living with two 'Finns' and probably learned her magic from them. Even Óðinn himself was not above disguising himself as a magically skilled Saami for the purpose of testing and temporarily abducting the young Haraldr inn hárfagri (*Flateyjarbók* I, pp. 563-64).

However, it should be noted that it is difficult to see the historical Germanic world as oriented towards shamanism, and even more difficult to see shamanism as a major factor in Germanic religion. It can be taken, fairly safely, that the agrarian and urban influences which were already present towards the end of the Stone Age in Scandinavia led to a considerable alteration in our forebears' social and cultural structure. The cultures in which shamanism develops most highly and remains strongest (vg. Inuit, Central Asian, and Siberian) are nomadic, often relatively isolated, and usually (though not always, as we observe with the Mongols) small-tribal in structure with a relatively low level of social differentiation. The Germanic peoples, on the contrary, became agricultural in the Stone Age, were oriented towards permanent settlements, and maintained a relatively high level of social differentiation from an early period (as shown in the variations among grave-goods).

Elements of the shamanic complex also appear in the historical Germanic world, though in scattered form. The ability not to be harmed by fire and iron and to show other amazing physical capacities appears as part of *berserkergang*, but here the trance-state is directed wholly towards battle. Magical healing is common, but usually associated with galdr-magic, as in *Hávamál*, *Sigrdrífumál*, and the famous scene from *Egils saga* where Egill carves the runes rightly and speaks a verse to heal a girl who had been made sick by ill-carved runes. Even healing by the removal of a spiritual intrusion, which (together with soul-retrieval) is usually typical of shamanism, is done by *galdr*, not *seiðr*: in the *Haustlöng* description of the removal of the whetstone-fragment from Þórr's head, the verb used is *gala*; Snorri also describes the *völva* Gróa's use of *galdrar* for this purpose. The Anglo-Saxon charm *Wið Færstice*, which deals with something causing sudden pain, '*Gif hit wære esa gescot, oððe hit wære ylfa gescot, / oððe hit wære hægtessan gescot*' (if it be the shot of Ases, or it be the shot of alfs, or it be the shot of hags) is more suggestive of shamanism: the magician describes the wights who have shot the patient, declares his own power against them, threatens to send an arrow back against them, mentions his armament by various smiths, and orders the shot to melt and/or fly away to a mountain. Before we fasten on this as proof of a full-blown Anglo-Saxon shamanism, however, it is worth considering that equally good arguments have been put forward for the charm as simply following the basic laws of magic, where the magician declares his knowledge of his foes and his own powers, including his magically-forged knife and spears, and finally orders the shot to be gone and the patient to be whole (Storms, *Anglo-Saxon Magic*, pp. 140-51); and for it as preserving memories of the cult of Woden with the fierce, spear-casting women riding over the grave-mound, the war-spears, and the order to fly to a mountain (Chickering, 'The Literary Magic of *Wið Færstice*', pp. 98-99).

As mentioned above, the practice of faring out of the body in the form of a beast - done by both humans and, via the use of bird-hides of various sorts, god/esses and etins - is the most obvious and frequent 'shamanic' technique of the Norse. However, it needs to be noted that most of the human folk who fare forth in this manner are not otherwise spiritual technicians of any sort (and it can apparently happen involuntarily, as with Egill's grandfather Kveld-lfr, who was thought to be obliged by his nature to roam out as a wolf as soon as the sun set every night), nor do they use the skill for anything other than battling with other shape-shifters: they do not seek lore among the worlds, retrieve souls, guide the dead, or even attempt to menace ordinary folk. Only in the *Chronicon Norwegiae* do we see shape-shifting shamans acting to restore a soul in proper shamanic fashion, and here they are not Norsemen, but Saami - members of a genuine shamanic culture. As H.R. Ellis comments, 'In spite of close resemblances...the essential function of the spirit 'sent out' by the shaman, to get into contact with the souls of the dead and possibly to recall them to life, is missing in the saga evidence' (*Road to Hel*, p. 126). The one attempt made to retrieve a dead

person from the Underworld is Hermóðr's ride to retrieve Baldr, which, unfortunately, appears to be one of the latest and most literary elements of Norse myth (Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, pp. 144-45) - and even here, we may not speak of healing by soul-retrieval, since, according to both Snorri and the Heathen-period poem *Húsdrápa* (from which Snorri probably drew his lore here, given that he quotes it), Baldr's corpse was sent off in a burning ship: he was not to be healed by bringing back a missing soul-part, but returned as a whole body-soul complex.

The shamanic underworld-descent in search of lore appears to be something practiced almost exclusively by etins: both the *jötunn*-woman (or at least fosterling of *jötnar*) who prophesies in *Völuspá* and *Vafþrúðnir* speak of their experience in the nine worlds *below the earth* (*Völuspá*) or *below Hel* (*Vafþrúðnismál*) as source or proof of their wisdom. The limitation of this underworld-descent to etins may imply that the Norse were aware of the many-staged shamanic underworld-descent, but perceived it as something outside their own culture - a part of the magical world of the 'Finns', or Saami, who were well-known as sorcerers (the word 'Finn' in the sagas normally refers to a Saami - see R.I. Page, 'Lapland Sorcerers') and often identified with other supernatural beings (as in the case of *Völundr*, who is called 'prince of alfs' in *Völundarkviða* and described in the prose as the son of a king in 'Finland'). Alternatively, Folke Ström suggests that this implies the special connection between etins and the dead, that the realm from which wisdom springs is the under-earth world of the dead and etins, and that etins' wisdom, in particular, comes from descending to the farthest depths of that world ('Den döendes Makt och Odin i Trädet', pp. 65-66). Óðinn's descent in *Baldrs draumar* cannot be taken in the same manner: he rides down to the gates of Hel, but does not enter; he must call the dead *völva* to ask her about matters which are beyond his knowledge, just as he cleverly interrogates both *Vafþrúðnir* and the *Völuspá* seeress about the lore which they have learned and he wants. His magical action here is one of necromancy, not proper shamanism.

Of all the god/esses, Óðinn is the most often identified as a shaman, and not without reason: as death-god, personification of the frenzy (*wod*) stemming from the world of the dead, and chief god of magic, he appears on first glance to encompass more of the scattered aspects of the shamanic complex than any other Germanic deity. Whether he can genuinely be classed as a shaman is another problem altogether. Although he collects the dead, he is not a *psychopomps* in the shamanic sense: he is not the human guide who shows them the way from one world to the next, but the god of death who claims his booty (and often sacrifices). The berserk-frenzy with which he inspires his chosen ones is a battle-madness; it is probably related to the cultic madness of the Wod-Host or Wild Hunt, in which young men temporarily embody the horde of furious ghosts, but even that is in no way like the controlled and goal-directed ecstasy of the shaman. His winning of the mead of poetry, particularly his taking of the forms of snake and eagle in the process, is often spoken of works dealing with the possibility of Germanic shamanism, most notably by Nora Chadwick and Stephen Glousecki. This, however, is made problematical by the clear Indo-European origins of the tale (which also appears in both Vedic and Greek religious literature) and by, among other difficulties, the universality of the eagle as a shape taken by powerful male beings (such as Indra and Zeus, as well as Óðinn, various *jötnar*, and the Finnish shaman Lemminkäinen). While his ordeal in *Grímnismál*, again, resembles shamanic activity (torture by fire leading to the recital of lore), it has never yet been explained why Óðinn should have to undergo a nine-day ordeal in order to be able to describe his own home and that of his relatives: given the prose frame, it seems more likely that his endurance demonstrates a lingering loyalty to his fosterling and/or stubbornness about admitting to Frigg that he has lost their contest.

However, the most significant account in regards to a possible Óðinnic shamanism, and certainly the most often named in this context, is the *Hávamál* account of Óðinn's winning of the runes.

Veit ec, at ec hecc vindgameiði á,  
nætr allar nío,  
geiri undaðr ok gefinn Óðni,  
siálfr siálfom m ér,  
á þeim meiði, er mangi veit,  
hvers hann of rótum renn.

Við hleifi mic sældo né við hornigi,  
nýsta ec niðr

nam ec upp rúnar, pandi nam,  
fell ec aptr þaðan.

*(I know that I hung on the windy tree (or gallows),  
all nine nights,  
wounded by spear and given to Óðinn,  
self to me myself -  
on that tree of which no one knows  
from what roots it springs.*

*They comforted me not with loaf,  
nor with a horn;  
I pried below me, I took up the runes, screaming I took them,  
I fell back from there afterwards)*

The theory that Óðinn's ordeal on the tree might be related to shamanistic practices was first brought up by Rolf Pipping in his article 'Oden i galgen' (1928), where he compared it to the shaman's ascent of the birch representing the World-Tree. A.G. van Hamel ('Óðinn Hanging on the Tree') argued that Óðinn used the tortures of exposure, hunger, and thirst to bring forth his *ásmegin* (Ase-main) and thus force the runes to submit to him. However, to make his point, van Hamel must insist that the phrase '*gefinn Óðni*' means something different here than it does where-ever else it appears: that it cannot mean an outright sacrifice or, as in the case of Eyvindr kinnrifi (slain by Óláfr Tryggvason for his refusal to abandon the gods of his clan), a life-dedication to the god - but rather that the whole line must mean '*left to my own magical power (ásmegin)*' (p. 284). A slightly better argument for Óðinn undergoing a shamanic initiation bringing him to the point of death is offered by Ström in 'Den Döendes Makt och Odin i Trädet'. Ström theorizes that, since the Norse materials are rich in examples of the dying demonstrating a sudden burst of exceptional wisdom, Óðinn himself must have reached just this state of the prescient moment before death (but, as a surviving shaman, not quite died). The difficulty with this is that the examples Ström cites, both from folk materials and Norse literature (pp. 23-28), are generally limited to prophecy of the future, and that usually is a matter of promising (and perhaps enforcing by the speech combined with a mighty gaze) a nasty future for the slayer. The one exception to this is Fáfñir, and it is by no means clear that Fáfñir's knowledge of the cosmos and its workings are due to the fact that he is dying rather than to the fact that he is a supernatural being, a man become a dragon, whom Reginn also describes as *inn aldna jtunn* (the old etin - *Fáfñismál* 29). Since dying humans do not show this range of vision, the latter is more likely than the former.

Turville-Petre's opinion, that 'The myth of Óðinn seems to represent a real rather than a symbolic death' (*Myth and Religion*, p. 50) accords better with the *Hávamál* account than the idea put forward by van Hamel and Ström, that Óðinn was merely tormented or brought to the point of death. Even Óðinn's complaint of not being succoured with food or drink (by unidentified plural personages), which *could* show ritual fasting, does not *necessarily* mean that the god is alive during his ordeal: for instance, the Anglo-Saxon poem 'The Fortunes of Men' describes the tortures suffered after hanging by a man who is very dead indeed:

Sum sceal on geapum galgan ridan  
seomian æt swylte, oþþæt sawlhord,  
bancofa blodig, abrocen weorþeð.  
Þær him hrefn nimeþ heafodsyne,  
sliteð salwigpad sawelleasne;  
noþer he þy facne mæg folmum biwergan,  
laþum lyftsceaþan...

*(Another shall ride on the wide gallows,  
hanging at death, until his soul-case,  
bloody bone-coffer, has fallen apart.  
There the raven takes his eyes,  
the black-feathered one tears the soul-less;  
nor can he ward himself from his foe,*

*the loathly air-scathe, with his hands...).*

The dead who come to Valhöll, as is made clear in *Eiríksmál*, *Hákonarmál*, and *Grímnismál*, are most certainly comforted with a horn or several; as *Baldur's draumar* tells us, this is also the case in Hel. In 'The Drink of Death', Geoffrey Russom also makes a strong case for the early Germanic presentation of a cup of strong drink to those about to be slain (whether suicides, sacrifices, or condemned criminals), which probably served 'the humane or practical purpose of anesthetizing the victim' (*Germania*, p. 180). This would certainly fit more nicely with the use of the word *sæla*, 'comfort', especially in the third person plural which suggests that the god had expected it from someone else, than does the theory that Óðinn's fast was self-imposed.

Another great difficulty with reading Óðinn's self-sacrifice as shamanic is the large and wide-reaching body of evidence for the combination of hanging and stabbing as a means of human sacrifice. With the best will in the world, it is impossible to take the sacrifice scene on the Hammars I picture-stone (Lindqvist, *Gotlands Bildsteine* I, fig. 81) as shamanic - or the slaying of Víkarr in *Gautreks saga*, or the sacrifices at Uppsala described by Adam of Bremen, or any of the historical examples cited by H.M. Chadwick in *The Cult of Othin* (pp. 31-36), such as Procopius' account of the people of 'Thule' offering the first man captured in battle by means of hanging and other torments and the mass hanging-suicide of the defeated Cimbri; likewise, when Bjarni Kolbeinsson says that he never got 'Yggs feng und hanga' (Yggr's booty (poetry) under a hanged man - *Jómsvíkingadrápa* 2), that corpse may be the vehicle through which Óðinn gives his lore, and may even know it himself, but he is not a shaman. In 'Odin am Baume', de Vries comments particularly that the hanging on the World-Tree and the piercing with a spear are clearly connected with the sacrificial cult bound up with the worship of Óðinn, and goes on to speak of the parallels to the hanging-sacrifice in Classical, as well as Germanic, sources, presenting an argument for the tree as the dwelling of the dead and the tree-sacrifice as specifically that reserved for the god of death.

The language of *Hávamál* strongly supports the belief that the composer saw Óðinn's ordeal as falling into the same ritual-religious sphere as that of ordinary sacrifices to him. The god undergoes precisely the same death as do those sacrificed to him in the usual way, none of whom are expected to survive or become shamans. As Chadwick comments, 'The bearing of the story related in *Gautreks* s. 7 (p. 3 f.) on Háv. 138 is obvious. The nature of the connection between the two passages ought to be equally clear, namely that we have in both cases a picture of the ordinary ritual of sacrifice to Othin' (*The Cult of Othin*, p. 81). The various sorts of 'initatory' interpretations, culminating in Fleck's absurd and circular argument that Óðinn had to have been hung upside down because, as an initiatory hanging, his hanging in *Hávamál* must have been of a non-fatal sort ('Odinn's Self-Sacrifice - A New Interpretation'), are not well supported either in the material itself or in the cultural context which the combination of hanging, spear-wounding, and giving to Óðinn calls up. Even if shamanic influence had been present in the original concept of lore gained through ordeal, it is clear that the Germanic redactors would have had to significantly alter the shamanic process, setting it within the context of an explicitly non-shamanic type of fatal ritual sacrifice and transforming it into the method by which a god augments his godliness.

It is not through this process that Óðinn becomes a god: *Hávamál* makes it clear that he is already the god who receives his own sacrifice. Indeed, since death (and all that springs from the world of the dead) is the very root of Óðinn's being, it could be argued that it would be strange if the god himself were not perceived as being among the ranks of the dead - as indeed appears to be the case in the folklore of the Wod-Host/Wild Hunt. As Turville-Petre has pointed out, Óðinn, swinging on the tree of the world, was in the company of the dead, sharing the wisdom which only they possess...If wisdom could be won from a dead delinquent swinging on the gallows, how much more could be gained from Óðinn after he had passed through the world of death...' (*Myth and Religion*, pp. 49-50). While this concept is similar to the one on which shamanic initiation is based, the difference is that in Norse sources, it is only the corpses of hanged men who are identified as the source of wisdom (*Jómsvíkingadrápa* 2; *Hávamál* 157; *Ynglinga saga* ch. VII). It is safe to say that those dead men are not shamans; there is no way to tell whether the hanged from whom lore comes were originally Óðinnic sacrifices, or whether any dangling corpse would do. However, since we have a strong and specific native context for the link between the hanged dead and knowledge, it makes better sense to see Óðinn's hanging as related to this than to reach outside Germanic culture and bring in a practice otherwise unattested among the Germanic peoples to explain it. In any case, *Hávamál* does not seem to show us Óðinn as primarily a shaman; if anything, its reinterpretation of

any shamanic elements of wisdom-through-ordeal which might have influenced it at any point argues quite strongly against a shamanistic view of the god.

It is, thus, fairly clear that the Norse (and probably, as far as we can tell) the other Germanic peoples did not have their own shamanism. However, it is also clear that they sporadically incorporated shamanic elements into their magical practice (and a few of these elements may even have survived from earliest times). Therefore, in the modern day, the question is less whether it is fitting for us to add these techniques now, but how we should do this. An example of the newly made Germanic shamanism is given in Stephen Glouseck's book *Shamanism and Old English Poetry*. Despite its presentation, this is not a scholarly or academic (in the sense of demonstrating critical judgement and careful analysis of texts and theories) work: it is the product of an imaginative, learned, and spiritually inspired man who wanted very badly to create something resembling in the most generalized sense a shamanic culture out of Germanic materials, and did a very good job of it, suitable as a set of guidelines for a Teutonicized neo-shaman, though by no means for citing in a work of historical research. Shamanic techniques have also been successfully incorporated into a Germanic context by groups such as Hrafnar. For the traditionally concerned, Saami and Finnish techniques are probably the closest to those magics which individuals among our Norse forebears could have, and in some cases did, learn for themselves from those same folks. Stores with a wide selection of New Age music occasionally stock tapes of Saami chanting/drumming, which can be very useful for this sort of work (though the usual cautions apply, *especially* having a friend beside you to make sure the tape is not going to suddenly run out while you are still halfway to the land of the dead).

## Possession

No discussion of the soul-craft of the Germanic folk would be whole without some words on possession by god/esses and/or ghosts. This is the least-known of the Germanic soul-crafts today, for several reasons. It calls for trained people, both to offer themselves and to watch the person who is doing so; because possession is often only partial (to greater or lesser degrees, depending on the person, the deity, and the circumstances), the possibility for trickery or other forms of abuse - or simple, unwilling distortion of the deity's messages and action in the process of filtering through the subconscious of the bearer - is always present and much more serious than it is with, for instance, simple spae-speech; the person who offers him/herself must be genuinely capable of giving up control, which calls for complete trust in the deity and the people around, and must also be quite stable and of moderately good health to avoid being harmed, psychically or physically, by the strength of the might working through her/him; and so forth. Of all the forms of soul-work, this is potentially the most dangerous to both oneself and to others, and therefore must be approached with the most care. If abused in the slightest, either deliberately or unconsciously - or if allowed to replace good sense and tradition as guidelines for practice of our religion - it is also the most likely to convince folk that the people practicing it are 'cultists' and nutters. Finally, there is in the minds of some folk a certain ominous stigma attached to the practice, as it is in some ways very similar, if not identical, to the possessionary work of voodoo.

Nevertheless, there is a reasonable amount of evidence that possession did take place among our forebears, and could even have been of high ritual importance at times. Not surprisingly, the most telling instances occur with Óðinn. A perfect example appears in *Heiðreks saga*: Heiðrekr has challenged a man called Gestumblindi to a riddle-game, with Gestumblindi's life apparently at stake. Gestumblindi prays to Óðinn, who duly appears and goes to Heiðrekr in his place - and no one recognises that it is not Gestumblindi until he suddenly proves wiser than anyone had suspected him to be. This is one of the later and more fantastic sagas, as subsequent events show (Óðinn asks Heiðrekr The Question about Baldr; Heiðrekr, who has obviously heard *Vafþrúðnismál* already, tells him to sod off and takes a swipe at him with a sword; Óðinn curses him and flies out the window in falcon-shape); but this event may well hold a core of truth. Similarly, in *Gautreks saga*, Óðinn appears to Starkaðr for the first time in the shape of Starkaðr's foster-father. The structure of *Hávamál*, with its three clearly divided sections (marked off by enlarged initial letters in the manuscript) may also suggest something similar, as the god slowly manifesting through a human. In the first section, the speaker comes in, cold, wet, and weary. The second, and perhaps most telling in this regard, begins with him taking a place on the *pular stóll*. He is at the Well of Wyrð, in Óðinn's halls - but he is not the lord there, nor the one of greatest wisdom: rather, he watches and remains

silent so as to recount to his audience what he heard tell. The third begins with the total unification of the speaker and Óðinn in Óðinn's highest moment: "I know that I hung on the windswept tree...", and it is in this section, appropriately, that we get the deepest magico-religious lore.

The much-cited story of Gunnarr helming (from *Gunnars þáttr helmings*, *Flateyjarbók*) also suggests the possibility of Freyr showing himself through a human being: after wrestling with the animated god-image, Gunnarr takes his place and is much welcomed, especially after he shows what is taken as godly might and general blessings by getting Freyr's *gyðja* pregnant. This may show us something about our forebears' beliefs in the power of god-images (especially given that the carved Freyr was strong enough on his own to wrestle with Gunnarr); it may also hint that a human being could have carried the might of the god through some of the Vanic processions. In this context, we must also consider the many clans fathered by gods (Woden, Ingvi-Freyr, Rígr, and Saxnot, specifically). It is wholly possible, if demonstrable only by speculation, that some or all of these clans could have stemmed from men possessed by the deity in question at a crucial - perhaps even a ritual - moment.

This is by no means meant to suggest that all appearances of the god/esses in Middle-Garth require, now or in the past, a human bearer: it is my belief that they are perfectly capable of showing themselves when and as they please. However, there is a reasonable amount of evidence, if by no means absolute proof, that they may well have occasionally used possession as a means of temporarily expressing themselves in the past (particularly in things like ritual performances and saving their worshippers from hairy situations). This suggests that such activity is also fitting nowadays in the contexts of ritual/performance for the folk as a whole and requesting information within private groups - **when carried out by properly trained people in a state of good psychological stability, with much care and rigorously asserted controls, including such things as making it perfectly clear at the beginning what is and what is not acceptable behaviour for the possessing deity, and afterwards exerting rational consideration of any messages, requests, or orders received.** We are not, after all, the slaves of our deities, nor do they expect us to submit tamely to ill-treatment from anyone, including them; and, as mentioned before, when a potentially perilous activity such as invited possession begins to outstrip good sense in the practice of our religion, it is time for those with good sense to bail out of the group in question. However, when properly handled, deity-possession can be mighty, inspiring, and a great source of lore and blessing.

Possession by ghosts is even better attested in the folklore of the Wod-Host/Wild Hunt; the procession of the Wod-Host appears both as a train of ghosts and as a procession of humans who temporarily embody the dead, and may even have worn masks made after the likenesses of the newly dead, as argued convincingly by Prof. Otto Höfler. This identity between the band of the dead and the living men's bands is consistent from Norway (where both hosts are called the *oskoreia*, or *Ásgarðsreið*) to Switzerland; Höfler cites J.V. von Zingerle's *Sitten, Bräuche, und Meinung des Tiroler Volkes* (written in 1857; pp. 88 ff., in *Verwandlungskulte*, pp. 58-59), in which it is described how the men dress up as 'Perchten' and all is joyful, 'if the wild Perchte does not come among them herself...When this spirit mingles among them, so the game becomes dangerous. One recognises the presence of wild Perchte when the Perchten rage altogether wild and furious'.

Such identity/possession was carried out by several means. Masking was clearly important: Leander Petzoldt comments that 'Through, or more, in the mask that has come out of the cult of death, the mask-bearer identifies himself with the dead one...The mask is the dead one' ('Der Tote Als Gast', p. 71). In Old English, the word *grima* can indicate a mask, a helm, or a ghost (de Vries, *Wörterbuch*, p. 188). Höfler discusses the black- and green-faced men of the Fastnacht train, whose colours are typical of the pathology of decay, as probably representing the dead (*Kultische Geheimbünde*, p. 44), and the use of animal masks, particularly dogs or wolves, which he thinks suggest the demonized/deified dead (pp. 55-58, p. 67); he also cites the prohibitions of Hincmarus von Rheims (852 C.E.) against the ritual memorial drinking after death, which included the wearing of *larvas dæmonum*, which the common folk called 'talamascas'. Höfler suggests (p. 142) that such masks were not only used as representatives of the dead, or demons of death in general, but that masks were made to resemble specific, recently dead people. This would nicely explain the Straßburger Chronicle (1516) description of how a woman, seeing among the Wod-Host her husband whose head had been split open in battle, ran to him and bandaged him, receiving a golden treasure for her trouble (in Meisen, *Die Sagen vom wütenden Heer und Wilden Jäger*, p. 98). Christine Eike,

discussing the human *oskoreia*, comments particularly on the mask as a psychological transformer of the wearer which also affects the folk around him ('Oskoreia og Ekstaseriter', pp. 233-34).

As well as masking, the facilitation of the possession of the human Wod-Host was also carried out by riding wildly (the Norwegian *oskoreia* is particularly known for stealing horses and riding them nearly to death) or running about madly, making a great deal of noise, and considerable intoxication. The *oskoreia* was especially known for breaking into cellars and drinking them dry if drink was not set out for them; this was also the case with the 'Yule werewolves' of the Baltic countries described in Olaus Magnus' *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* in 1555 (book 14, ch. 45). Discussing the importance of ritual intoxication in the cult of the dead, Renate Doht concludes from these examples and others that intoxication is an integral part of the presentation of the human revelers as the temporary earthly representatives of the host of the dead, an interpretation also made by Eike in 'Oskoreia og ekstaseriter' (p. 275). It is, in short, through 'masking, movement-magic or dance, the sound of bells or similar noisemakers, means of intoxication such as alcohol or narcotic stuff, swift driving or riding' (Eike, p. 274) that the change in consciousness of the human bearers of the Wod-Host occurs - either giving rise to a general *wods* (frenzy) stemming from the world of the dead or actually permitting possession by the dead and/or deities such as Wodan and the 'wild Perchte'. The Wod-Host is a very meaningful part of Germanic Yule-rites, as its wildness brings the blessings of the dead, and should probably be encouraged within reasonable bounds (such as not letting the young men who take part in it get near breakables or drive home afterwards, and making sure that waving sharp objects about is discouraged).

Thus we can see that, in spite of all the dangers and pitfalls involved, soul-crafts of various sorts - spae-craft, *seiðr*, occasional elements of shamanism, and deity-possession - made up a large part of the worlds our forebears knew. In bringing the troth of our ancestors back to life, we cannot ignore them. Rather, it is needful that we look as honestly and well as we can at what they were, and then that those with the bravery and skill to do so turn their hands to making them what they can be: a help to all those who follow the elder Troth.

## Book-Hoard

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