

EATEN HEARTS AND SUPERNATURAL KNOWLEDGE IN EIRÍKS SAGA RAUÐA

CUORI MANGIATI E CONOSCENZA SOVRANNATURALE NELLA *EIRÍKS SAGA RAUÐA*

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Abstract: Chapter 4 of *Eiríks saga rauða* has long drawn the attention of scholars due to its detailed description of a *seiðr*, a rare occurrence in *Íslendinga sögur* as well as in sagas of other genres. The protagonist of the scene, a Greenlandic *seiðkona* named Þorbjörg, is depicted as a social functionary who creates a relationship with the supernatural world and acquires a deeper knowledge and foreknowledge concerning the surrounding area, for the benefit of the local community. The performance takes place during a great famine at the beginning of the eleventh century, and the semi-public ritual had the purpose of predicting when the dearth would come to an end. It consisted – among other things - of a ritual meal: a porridge of kid's milk and of the cooked hearts of all the living creatures that inhabited the area. The present paper aims at casting light on this specific aspect of Þorbjörg's *seiðr*, and at contextualizing it within a wider literary and historical landscape. The intention is to integrate traditional interpretations with observations on the importance of sympathetic magic in ancient and medieval Europe, and particularly in medieval Scandinavia.

Keywords: *Eiríks saga rauða*; *seiðr*; magic; Medieval Scandinavia.

Riassunto: Il capitolo 4 della *Eiríks saga rauða* ha attratto l'attenzione degli studiosi già da lungo tempo per via di una dettagliata descrizione di una *seiðr*, caso abbastanza raro nelle *Íslendinga sögur* e in saghe di altro genere. La protagonista dell'episodio, una *seiðkona* della Groenlandia di nome Þorbjörg, viene dipinta come un "funzionario" con la capacità di stabilire un legame con il mondo soprannaturale e di acquisire una profonda conoscenza e prescienza riguardante

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l'area circostante, a vantaggio della comunità. Tale pratica semi-pubblica ha luogo durante una grave carestia all'inizio dell'undicesimo secolo, e ha lo scopo di predire quando essa finirà. Essa consiste – tra le altre cose – di un pasto rituale: un porridge di latte di capretto e dei cuori cotti di tutti gli animali che vivevano nell'area. Il presente contributo si prefigge di gettare luce su questo aspetto specifico della *seiðr* di Þorbjörg, e di contestualizzarla all'interno di un più ampio sfondo letterario e storico. L'intenzione è quella di integrare interpretazioni tradizionali tramite osservazioni riguardanti l'importanza della magia simpatetica nell'Europa antica e medievale, e in particolare nella Scandinavia nel medioevo.

Parole chiave: *Eiríks saga rauða*; *seiðr*; magia; Scandinavia nel medioevo.

“[The Germans] even believe that there is something holy and an element of the prophetic in women, hence they neither scorn their advice nor ignore their predictions.”
Tacitus, *Germania*, 8

1. PREMISE

Eiríks saga rauða is one of two sagas (along with *Grœnlendinga Saga*) which are catalogued as *Vínland sagas*, that are sagas narrating voyages of the Norsemen to the other side of the Atlantic Ocean around the year 1000. The two stories were written independently between 1220 and 1280 (Wahlgren, 1993), whereas the facts they narrate are set between 970 and 1030. The *Vínland sagas* are a sub-group of the *Íslendingasögur*, but they are not considered very reliable as historical sources, as suggested by their mutual discrepancies. As a matter of fact, although they are useful for the study of the formation and development of the first settlements in the Western hemisphere, not all the content they feature can be taken as credible.

Eiríks saga rauða survives in two Icelandic vellum manuscripts, *Hauksbók* (early fourteenth century), and *Skálholtsbók* (early fifteenth century), which in turn are based on older manuscripts dating up to the early thirteenth century. The text is particularly important for understanding the process of Christianization which was taking place right at the time in which the events are set. Leifr Eiríksson, the son of Eiríkr rauðr and leader of the first exploration of North American mainland, was sent by the Norwegian king Ólafr Tryggvason (995-1000) to convert the heathen Greenlanders, and elements of both pagan and Christian beliefs overlap and appear to be hardly distinguishable (and, in fact, they would continue to

be divided by a faint, thin line in the following decades in Iceland and in the rest of Scandinavia).

The scene on which this contribution will be focusing presents, in itself, a compromise between pagan and Christian practices, but first a brief contextualization is needed. In Chapter 2 of the saga, it is told that after a series of conflicts and murders, Eiríkr rauðr was outlawed from Iceland. He then decided to sail west to Greenland, a name which would help him convince other explorers to follow him later in his second expedition. In Chapter 3, the figure of Guðríðr Þorbjarnardóttir is introduced: she was born ca. 980 in Laugarbrekka (Snaefellsnes, Iceland), and was the daughter of Þorbjörn Vífilsson. Due to financial problems, the latter decided to sail west himself the following summer to join Eiríkr. Þorbjörn sold his lands and bought a ship, and along with thirty men he headed to Greenland. Half of the crew died due to fever, while the other half reached Herjolfsnes at the beginning of winter, where they were hosted by the most important farmer in the area, named Þorkell.

In Chapter 4, then, we find the passage that constitutes the object of this analysis. A harsh *hallæri* (“dearth”, “famine”) was hitting Greenland at that time. Even if it is not hard to imagine how complicated procuring food supplies could be in such a marginal area, the saga author specifies that “*høfðu menn fengit lítit fang, þeir er í veiðiferðir høfðu farit*” (“Those who had gone out fishing had caught little”), if they had returned at all. But, being the world of the Norsemen around the year 1000 a “world of magic”² – that is, one in which people believed in the supernatural, and would often resort to higher powers to cope with critical situations – a *seiðkona* named Þorbjörg was invited to Þorkell’s house to perform *seiðr*, through which she would predict the future and, thus, unveil when the famine would come to an end (Mitchell, 2011, p. 94).

2. DIVINATION IN A “WORLD OF MAGIC”

The word *seiðr* did not simply signify a divinatory practice, but actually a number of different ones. On the basis of what we learn from the sagas, it is also quite difficult to assess if practices like those that were defined as *seiðr* ever took place at all, if they had pagan features, and to what extent (Raudvere, 2002, p. 110-130; Heide, 2006). The notion of *seiðr* was often

² More on this definition in the following section.

associated with negatively-connoted rituals (Tolley, 2009, p. 423), and was largely relegated to obviously underhanded acts such as “killing, inducing sickness, inflicting misfortune, depriving people of their wits or strength” (Price, 2002, p. 94). At the same time, another specific category of *seiðr* was the divination of future, and was deemed extremely helpful for the community. In this case, the word referred to a shamanistic divinatory ritual which may have implied the loss of one’s control of self. Needless to say, this was no peculiarity of the medieval North. Divination had always been a widely practiced art in the past, medieval Europe included: omens were read from entrails, blood, throes of victims, or from “the flight and song of birds” (Filotas, 2005, p. 34), whereas prophetic dreams could be made while sleeping on certain graves or “after eating the flesh of certain sacred animals” (ibidem).

The reason why divination played a fundamental role in past societies and in the medieval North is tightly connected with the aforementioned idea of “world of magic” (de Martino, 2007 and 2012; Farnetti and Stewart, 2012; Saunders, 1995; for the function of magic in medieval literature and society, see Hastrup, 1985; Gurevich, 1988, p.80 ff.; Orning, 2010, p. 8). This definition was coined in 1948 by Italian anthropologist Ernesto de Martino (1908-1965), by means of which he wanted to describe an essential characteristic of past societies. Before the rise of more “rational” categorizations of reality, indeed, such societies tried to face the ordinary and extraordinary threats of life on Earth with magic and ritual. These allowed mankind to fight the anxiety of feeling powerless and at the mercy of nature, an almost existential sentiment that needed to undergo a “rebalancing operation” (de Martino, 2007, p. 82). In the case of unexpected events such as the aforementioned famine in *Eiríks saga*, the means by which such an operation was to be carried out was the summoning of a specific figure: a *seiðkona* (Lévy-Bruhl, 1910, p. 35ff., 70-73; 1931, p. 13ff.; Maraschi 2018).

This is why the world portrayed in *Eiríks saga rauða* – and in a number of other sagas, for that matter – can be described as a “world of magic”: the characters believe in *seiðr*, believe in the existence of special individuals who have been taught such an art, and believe that this art will prove fundamental to confront the major threats for their survival. De Martino’s rationale was in part based on Heidegger’s notion of ‘thrownness’, and started from the premise that our ancestors were familiar with the anxiety of being lost in the world, unable to exert control on nature and on many aspects of everyday life. The natural response to this anxiety was, among most civilizations, to call for the help of shamans, sorcerers, priests and the likes (de Martino, 2007, p. xxiii).

3. ÞORBJÖRG AND THE HEARTS

Much has been said about various folkloristic and religious aspects of *seiðr* in the medieval North (e.g. Buchholz, 1971; Dubois, 1999, esp. Ch. 6; Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, 2001; Host, 2001; Price, 2002; Blain, 2002; Heide, 2006; Gardela, 2008; Mitchell, 2011), but the connection between these beliefs and ideas of food shortage and anxiety has been generally overlooked. One main problem is that literary depictions of *seiðr* in the sagas, and in particular that featured in Ch. 4 of *Eiríks saga rauða*, are considered far-removed depictions of practices which belonged to the past, which echoed an older reality, and did not represent actual and factual performances. Their untrustworthiness arguably lies in the nature of the sagas themselves, and on their rhetorical purposes. Yet, as Torfi Tulinius observed, “As historical documents, the sagas are of great value insofar as they teach us about people’s fears, anxieties, longings and dreams, all the intangibles that for various reasons are hard to discern in other texts” (2002, p. 186).

This is, in fact, the main point of the present contribution. The *seiðr* performance described in *Eiríks saga* might not have represented a factual ritual in all respects, but has many stories to tell, nonetheless. One, as previously suggested, concerns its social function, and responds to an actual contextual situation: according to archaeologists, there is little doubt that life in Greenland – to an even greater extent than in Iceland, for instance – could be well characterized by hardships (Walker et al., 2004), especially after the settlement. From a strictly literal point of view, then, the situation depicted at the beginning of Ch. 4 – the famine – is anything but untrustworthy. It may be debatable, however, whether the description of the ritual was a mere literary invention, or if instead referred to actual practices to some extent. The saga author actually informs us that the divinatory ritual performed by the *lítill-vǫlva* was a yearly practice that took place every winter for the welfare of the local community (“Þat var háttr Þorbjargar um vetrum...”), and that prophecy was an ancient and long-forgotten knowledge that was possessed by the entire female-branch of Þorbjörg’s family – namely, by her nine sisters, all *spákonur*, none of whom was still alive. The term *vǫlva* (lit. “wand carrier”) usually referred to a highly-respected woman who was able to perform various forms of magic such as *seiðr*, *galdr* or *spá*, and who could be summoned in particularly critical situations (whence their prestige, as will be shown later).

Originally, according to mythological tradition, *seiðr* was an archaic magic art known exclusively to the Vanir (the gods of fertility) and to the goddess Freyja specifically, who later handed it down to the Æsir. In fact, Óðinn is generally considered the master of this knowledge (Dillmann, 1993; Du Bois, 1999; Price, 2002; Meylan, 2014, p. 39), but curiously the first association between Vanir and *seiðr* emerges when the term was used to signify “prophecy”, for in that case it would generally refer to prosperity and abundance for what concerned crops and livestock.

In other words, the link between the female gender and *seiðr* is a hard one to identify: who prevails between Feyja and Óðinn? Which tradition represents *seiðr* more accurately with regards to gender-related matters? Unfortunately, the sources are not of great help, and as Catharina Raudvere has pointed out, the attitude of Old Norse literary texts is rather ambiguous in this sense (Raudvere, 2002, p. 118). In *Ynglinga saga* and in *Lokasenna*, Óðinn’s practice of *seiðr* is seen as a shameful one for men and is associated with *ergi*, “unmanliness” in the sense of “passive homosexuality”. The matter, however, is not as plain as it may seem, since *seiðr* is never accompanied by any sexual practice or reference in literature. Back in the early 1990s, Helga Kress held that a major reason behind said tension lied in the transition between pre-Christian and Christian times, a process which would heavily and negatively impact the hemisphere of women and women’s art (Helga Kress, 1990 and 1993). In the same period, though, Carol Clover concluded that our system of gender categories is not suitable for a correct understanding of the problem, and that we should not ignore the literary purposes of the sources: being the intention of saga authors and of Eddic poems to entertain their audience, sharp associations such as that between the father of the gods and unmanliness must have seemed rather effective, from a rhetorical viewpoint (Clover, 1993). More recent studies, however, have emphasized the marginality of *seiðr* performers from a wider perspective than one merely focused on gender (Raudvere, 2002, p. 120). On the other hand, even though François-Xavier Dillmann has shown that magical arts were almost equally spread among men and women, it is hardly deniable that *seiðr* seems to have been mainly practiced by women (Jochens, 1991, p. 307-308).

Back to the text, the author seems to highlight the tight connection between divination and femininity in *Eiríks saga*. The saga author tells that Þorbjörg was warmly welcomed by Porkell and the others, and it is rather clear that a woman of *þess háttar*, that is, a *spákona*, was held in high esteem among the community. Her social prestige, indeed, was also materially

symbolized by the *hásæti* (“high seat”) (Olrik, 1909) that was prepared for her, from where she would have sat higher than anybody else in the hall (a common feature of *seiðr* performances). Elegantly and richly dressed, Þorbjörg was taken by the hand by Þorkell himself, and accompanied to her seat.

The focal point of the scene, at least from our perspective, took then place during the evening, when the hall was set ready for dinner, and the *spákona* was served food:

“Henni var górr grautr af kiðjamjólk, ok matbúin hjörtu ór öllum kykvendum, þeim er þar váru til. (There was prepared a porridge of kid’s milk and the hearts of all the animals found there were cooked for her.)”

Equipped with her own precious cutlery – a brazen spoon and a knife with a handle of walrus-tusk – Þorbjörg consumed her special meal, and told Þorkell that she would answer all his questions only after that night. The following day, in order to perform the divinatory ritual, she required the help of women who “er kynni fræði þat, sem til seiðsins þarf ok Varðlokur hétu” (“knew the lore needed for the performance of *seiðr* and that was called ‘warding songs’”; Mitchell, 2001, p. 65-70). Nobody in the hall was acquainted with them, though, except for Guðríðr, a Christian Icelandic explorer born around 980 at Laugarbrekka (Snæfellsnes), daughter of the chieftain Þorbjörn. Her reaction, however, was not immediately constructive: “Hvárki em ek fjólkunnig né vísindakona”, “I am not skilled in *fjólkynngi* nor have I the gift of prophecy”, she said, but then added that she actually had been taught such shamanic songs by her foster-mother. Nonetheless, she remarked she was Christian, and did not want to take part in any practice of that kind.³ Yet, she was asked to join the other women and lead the chant. “Svá mætti verða, at þú yrðir mönnum at liði hér um, en þú værir þá kona ekki verri en áðr”, “It could be that you could help the men here by doing so, and yet be no worse a woman for that”, Þorbjörg told her. Then, urged by their host Þorkell – who, most notably, is never labelled as “pagan” – Guðríðr joined the warding ring of women around the platform

³ As will be noted, the scene beautifully represents a frame of the ongoing passage from pre-Christian to Christian times. The Church would stress its hostile position against the practice of *seiðr* around the time of the Norwegian Archbishop of Niðaróss Eysteinn Erlendsson (1158-1188), stating that practitioners of this form of magic (whether men or women) should be brought out to sea and drowned: “ef þat verdr kent korllvm eda konvm at þaw seide eda magne troll vpp at rida monnum eda be. og verdur þat satt giortt [...] þa skal flytia utt æ sio og sockua til gruna. ok æ kongur og biskup hvern penning fiar þeirra.” (*Diplomatarium Islandicum*, 1893, p. 223).

where Þorbjörg was ready for *seiðr*, and led the chant (Tolley, 2009, I, p. 470-473). Her memory did not betray her, and her performance pleased the *náttúru* (“spirits”) that – we presume – had been responsible for the dearth, so the *seiðkona* could now predict that the famine would end during spring.

Evidently, here, the “religious” compromise is the best solution for everyone, since the cause of this collective crisis required immediate and effective solutions: individual beliefs were a secondary element which should not prevail over the community’s good. This being said, it is not clear to what extent this depiction of *seiðr* may correspond to an actual practice and, simultaneously, how useful a narrative strategy the scene may have served (Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, 2013, p. 48). Plausibly, as scholars have noted, the contrast between the figures of Þorbjörg and Guðríðr and the role played by the latter seems to suggest that the writer’s aim was to emphasize the Christian identity of the narrative (Strömbäck, 1935, p. 56 ff.; Raudvere, 2002, p. 126). Be that as it may, the religious tension dominates the scene. Most importantly, the author soon remarks that Þorbjörg’s prophecies would prove right: the weather would improve during spring, and many other predictions Þorbjörg made would come true as well.

This scene has been often compared with two similar ones featured, respectively, in *Vatnsdæla saga* (Ch. 10) and in *Orvar-Odds saga* (Ch. 2). In the former, a Lapp enchantress is invited by the local community to a feast in order to predict the future of the individual inhabitants and of the community itself, but no mention of food-related issues (famine), nor of food-based magic performances (eating a distinctive meal) emerges. In the latter, the *völva* Heiðr is said to ritually predict the future and forecast the weather for the locals during feasts, accompanied by her retinue of fifteen girls and fifteen boys, but even if *seiðr* is performed after the meal, nothing is said about a “special” one served to the prophetess. The focus of this contribution is, indeed, the meal offered to the *lítill-völva* Þorbjörg, a passage that, from a literary-anthropological viewpoint, is dense with parallels and gains more significance when contextualized within a wider landscape.

One main interpretation has been traditionally considered, namely that connected with the motif of warning animals. Around the half of the last century, Alexander H. Krappe suggested that animals – birds, in particular – had long been attributed the ability to forewarn future events and dangers among many European peoples (Krappe, 1948; Divjak, 2013), as Stith Thompson’s *Motif Index* also shows (B300). Besides, it has already been noted how the

flight and singing of birds were often believed to be useful for divination-related purposes in medieval Europe (Filotas, 2005, p. 34). According to Ferdinand Detter and Richard Heinzel, on the other hand, the belief that one could understand the language of birds after eating the heart of ravens or stone-falcons was still actual in Iceland in their times (Detter and Heinzel, 1903, II, p. 418, st. 32, 9.10), and the same belief is actually mentioned in Jón Árnason's collection of folktales (Jón Árnason, 1852, I, p. 611).

On top of this, almost a century ago Uno Holmberg pointed out that in Finno-Ugric tradition, the heart was considered one of the organs where the soul resided, alongside the liver, and the blood (Holmberg, 1927, p. 4).⁴ According to the same tradition, heart was also attributed sympathetic powers, that is – going back to Frazer's definition (1922, p. 11-48) – the power of transferring certain qualities to the eater once it was consumed: in that specific case, for instance, the heart of an enemy would give extraordinary strength (Maraschi, 2017, p. 210-211). An important precedent of this belief is the old Jewish tale of the "fox's heart", already featured in the *Alphabet of Ben Sira* (ca. 700-1000 A.D.), in which it is told that the leviathan became envious of the fox's proverbial cunning and wisdom, and wanted to eat its heart (Yassif, 1984, p. 251; Abrahams, 1889): the heart was indeed believed to be the "place" where such attributes were located, evidently.

The success of this "motif" may have lied in the very ancient origins of its related magical belief. Actually, this dates back many centuries if one believes Pliny (Ogden, 2013, p. 139), according to whom magicians held that eating the *recens palpitansque cor* ("fresh and still palpitating heart") of a mole would empower the eater with the gift of divination and foreknowledge (Mayhoff, 1906, xxx, 5). At the same time, Pliny addressed the aforementioned tradition according to which the language of birds was associated with precognition, and birds were in turn associated with dragons. In line with Apollodorus and Hesiod, in fact, he also told that the Greek grammarian Melampus had his ears licked by dragons, and after that he became able to understand the language of birds and thus enjoyed the gift of prophecy (ibid., x, 69; the language of birds was thought to be "predictive"; Ogden, 2013, p. 140). Furthermore, the Greek philosopher Democritus held that by mixing the blood of certain birds a snake was produced (ibidem), whose meat – when eaten – bestowed upon the eater the same ability (ibid., xxix, 23). Sara Kuehn has recently observed that the understanding of the language of

⁴ The same idea is present in Indian fairy tales as well.

birds – and of animals, in general – was associated with the story of Paradise, and is present in both Judaism and Islamic scriptural tradition; moreover, the connection between serpents and the language of birds is extremely widespread in Asian and Near Eastern folktales (Kuehn, 2011, p. 127-128). Given our purposes, though, Pliny's contribution is extremely important, for 1) he seems to endorse the traditional notion that the gift of prophecy was tightly connected with the language of birds, and consequently with animals which were supposed to have some sort of relationship with birds (dragons, serpents); but 2) he also holds that the same precognitive powers could be absorbed off the hearts of moles. This is a key point, for it connects foreknowledge with the heart and with the principles of sympathetic magic, which were undoubtedly known in medieval Iceland (actually, they are hinted at several times in legendary sagas).

The specific idea that the heart housed essential qualities of the individual seems to have found a rather fertile soil in northern Europe (Iceland included), perhaps via foreign influence. This is clear, for instance, in *Drauma-Jóns saga* (1957, p. 47), a chivalric saga probably composed at the beginning of the fourteenth century and that was based on the very same principle: sympathetic absorption of powers (more specifically, sympathetic cannibalism). The story seemingly originated in the East as an extremely popular folktale and was later reshaped into an *exemplum* by an Icelandic writer (Boyer, 1993), and is centred around the figures of Jón, a widely recognized dream interpreter and diviner, and of Earl Heinrekr of Saxland, who himself was able to interpret dreams. Heinrekr was so envious of Jón that he decided to seize the source of his gift - his heart -, and even though he did not manage to fulfil his plan, his idea is revelatory of the aforementioned belief. In folktale traditions from all over Europe, in fact, heart consistently appears to be the "core" (a word which, in turn, may derive from Latin *cor*, "heart") of one's distinctive qualities: this seems to explain the motif of unborn children's hearts that made the eater invisible, for instance (D1361.8 in Stith Thompson's *Index*).

The impression is that, in the case of Ch. 4 *Eiríks saga rauða*, the first interpretation (the warning animals) and the second (sympathetic absorption of powers from the heart) should be connected. This may allow a wider contextualization and comprehension of Þorbjörg's scene: one according to which the prophetess's *hjortu* allowed her to foresee the future because the hearts of animals living in a given area housed the knowledge about the area itself, and said knowledge could be acquired by eating such organs.

Judging by the text and by the peculiar recipe, it seems that the food served to Þorbjörg was reserved for her and clearly distinctive, and it is thus fair to assume that it was considered an integral part of the performance: consequently, it is fair to assume that it was thought to be connected with a supernatural dimension (that to which the *náttúrur* belonged). On the other hand, within the corpus of Old Norse literature, the magical properties of the heart are no exclusive of *Eiríks saga* (Maraschi, 2018). If in *Atlakviða* the hearts of Atli's sons – which Gúðrun cooks along with their brains to take her revenge – have mere symbolic (not magical) significance (Montanari, 2015, p. 78), the *Poetic Edda* features at least two key episodes where the organ is associated with magical properties. The first one is in *Fáfnismál*, where it is told that Sigurðr becomes able to understand the speech of birds after tasting the roasted heart of the dragon Fáfnir (*Fáfnismál*, 2014, p. 238, ss. 31-32): it is a key narrative solution, for it allows the hero to overhear the birds speak about Reginn's plan to kill him. Almost a century ago, Elliot G. Smith defined the heart "organ of the mind", and observed that the power of making the eater understand the language of birds lied in the fact that, according to tradition, birds did in fact contribute "to the making of a dragon" alongside other creatures (Smith, 1919, p. 82; see also Scott 1930). Smith then dismissed the possibility that dragons were a symbolic expression of extinct animals, and he instead insisted that they were "the menagerie of diverse creatures which at one time or another have contributed their quota" to the formation of such mythical winged beasts. In Smith's idea, then, the connection between the tasting of Fáfnir's heart and the understanding of the birds' language was a sympathetic one, in line with classical tradition (Pliny, Apollodorus and Hesiod, Democritus): the dragon is associated to birds by nature, and consequently attributes of the latter can be absorbed by means of eating the former's heart (Maraschi, 2018).

Besides, the scene in *Fáfnismál* is expanded in the later *Völsunga saga*, where Sigurðr's wife Guðrún also tastes Fáfnir's heart: this makes her grimmer and wiser ("miklu grimmari en áðr ok vitrari"; 1943, Ch. 26). This implies that, around the half of the thirteenth century, the idea that the heart housed knowledge and other qualities, and that these could be absorbed by eating it, was still either considered: 1) a useful rhetorical device, or, 2) a plausible belief dating to ancient times. The latter option would totally make sense, on the other hand, since the belief in sympathetic magic was widely spread in the past among many a civilization (Stapelberg, 2014, p. 3), and several example can be traced in the medieval North as well, up until the fourteenth/fifteenth century in Nordic leechbooks and handbooks of magic (Maraschi, 2018).

A similar association between heart and knowledge is featured in a second poem from *Eddukvæði*, namely in few surviving stanzas of *Völuspá hin skamma* that are included in *Hyndluljóð*. “Loki af hjarta // lindi brenndu, // fann hann halfsviðinn // hugstein komu, // varð Loftur kviðugur // af konu illri, // þaðan er á foldu // flagð hvert komið”, the poem goes (*Hyndluljóð*, 2014, p. 403, st. 40; “A heart ate Loki // which lays in the embers, // and he found half-cooked // the woman’s heart, // pregnant of the evil woman // Loft soon was, // and thence among men // all the monsters came”). Here, the woman’s heart is described as *hugsteinn*, “soul-stone” or “thought-stone”, a puzzling definition which has been variously interpreted in previous years, with attention spanning from gender-related references (Clover, 1993; Clunies Ross, 1994, p. 184) to symbolic-culinary ones (Borovsky, 2002, p. 12, fn. 5). Actually, the latter interpretation is based on the premise that eating the heart would give the eater specific attributes, depending on the organ’s degree of cooking: if Borovsky mentions the fact that the half-roasted heart (“halfsviðinn”) eaten by Loki made him “soft and cool” and gave him the ability to give birth to monsters, the fully roasted heart of *Fáfnismál* (“steikja”) made Sigurðr *óblauðast[r]*, “least soft”, other than able to understand the language of birds. Interestingly, the hearts offered to the *spákona* Þorbjörg are more generally described as “búin” (“prepared”, “cooked”), and seem to have not affected her personal qualities, other than giving her knowledge about the future of the nearby environment.

As a matter of fact, the *hugsteinn* gives Loki a specific ability, one which – we would think – is strictly feminine. What is then the difference between the two words used for “heart” (*hugr* and *hjarta*) in *Völuspá hin skamma*? And what does their respective contextual meaning have to say (if anything) about the powers they host? Actually, in *Skáldskaparmál* Snorri seems to suggest that *hjarta* is located inside the breast (that it is, in other words, the physical organ), whereas *hugr* is located within *hjarta* (*Skáldskaparmál*, 1998, p. 108). Their interpretation is highly problematic, however, and it has been suggested that it may have been heavily influenced by Christianity (von See, 1981, p. 81). Yet, the passage from *Völuspá hin skamma* – if read literally – entails that *hjarta* is the chest inside of which *hugr* is contained, or even that it is a stone made out of *hugr*. This might have implied that by eating the heart of a being, the eater would swallow something more than the mere organ: (s)he would swallow its precious content, as well.

The motif of eaten hearts and sympathetic absorption of certain attributes could also be associated (alongside blood) with qualities related to physical strength. In the legendary *Hrólfs*

saga kraka, probably dating from the fourteenth century, Bǫðvarr bjarki and Hǫttr fight against a dragon (*Hrólfs saga kraka*, 1891, Ch. 35), but the latter is described as particularly anxious and scared. He screams and fears that the beast will swallow them both. Fortunately for him, though, Bǫðvarr bravely faces the dragon and pierces his sword through its heart, killing it. Then he picks up Hǫttr and takes him where the beast is lying dead. Hǫttr is shivering shamefully, but his companion knows exactly what to do to help him: he gives him two large mouthfuls of the beast's blood and "nokkut af dýrshjartanu" ("a bit of the animal's heart") as well. That makes Hǫttr far stronger and braver. Similarly, in Snorri's *Ynglinga saga* the heart seems to be the organ where specific qualities of the person are housed: here Ingjaldr, the six-year old son of the Swedish King Önundur, realizes he is weaker than his peer Álfr, son of Önundur's vassal Yngvarr, but his foster-father Svipdagr "taka hjarta ór vargi ok steikja á teini" ("took the heart of a wolf and roasted it on a stick"; *Ynglinga saga*, 1941, p. 64)⁵ and gives it to him. After eating it, Ingjaldr becomes incredibly fierce and untamable (in line with typical characteristics of wolves in Old Norse tradition).

This idea, of course, was not exclusively related to the heart. The motif of eaten hearts did become extremely popular in medieval literature, but its underlying system of belief was actually much older and concerned the whole body (Maraschi, 2018). To remain within the corpus of *fornaldarsögur*, it will suffice to remember that in *Völsunga saga* Guttormr becomes fiery, brutish and impetuous after eating a stew of snake and wolf flesh (1943, Ch. 22), attributes that were associated with the two animals, evidently. As long as it may be concluded that such beliefs were mere literary motifs, then, it is fair to assume that they played a critical narrative function in identifying elite people as "believers", for kings, heroes and other important figures all show no hesitation when it comes to resort to the powers sympathetic magic which could be acquired by eating/drinking animal/human organs and blood. Such remedies are consistently depicted as working, and saga characters are likewise described as confident of their effectiveness. This is true for different typologies of sagas as well, even though motifs of this kind tend to be featured in fictional or semi-fictional stories: for instance, in the late chivalric saga entitled *Vilhjálm's saga sjóðs* (end of the fourteenth- or beginning of the fifteenth century), the protagonist Vilhjámur gives Sjóðr "five large mouthfuls" of a lion's heart and, after eating them, the latter becomes "brave and ferocious" (Loth, 1964, p. 119-120).

⁵ Ibidem (translation mine).

At this point, one further aspect about the *seiðkona* Þorbjörg is worth being investigated, mainly because this – unlike the matter concerning the hearts – can be supported by archaeological evidence.

4. ÞORBJÖRG'S APPAREL

An important component of Þorbjörg's description in Chapter 4 is her clothing. As previously noted, the entire scene stands out thanks to the amount of details it offers to the reader, and the complexity of the *seiðkona's* apparel is worth being discussed for it might be connected with her divinatory ritual. Þorbjörg – who takes a seat on a cushion made out of *hænsafiðri*, “poultry-feathers” – wears a blue mantle adorned with precious stones right down to the hem. On her neck, a string of glass beads, and on her head a hood of black lambskin, lined with white catskin. Around her, a linked belt of touchwood (*hnjóskulinda*) (de Vries, 2000, p. 136), that is wood or bark which is used as tinder, and that as a consequence can easily catch fire. On the belt, a great pouch inside of which she keeps the talismans she needs for her divination spells. She also wears white catskin gloves and calfskin boots, all lined with fur. Lastly, she bears a staff adorned with brass with certain stones on top. What we also know is that she is given a brass spoon (*messingarspón*) for eating the porridge, and a knife with an ivory tusk handle (*hníf tannskeftan*), perhaps of walrus.

Is Þorbjörg's clothing a mere literary device, or does it refer to actual customs among prophetesses around the year 1000? And, whatever the answer, is it possible to find any correlation with the clothes and the *seiðr* performance?

Archaeological finds such as Fyrkat grave IV (Roesdahl, 1977, p. 188-193), which is roughly contemporary to Þorbjörg's time (*ca.* 980 A.D.), turn out to be rather helpful. In this semi-Christian burial, which is located in a cemetery near a Danish circular fortress in Jylland and associated with the figure of the Christian king Haraldr *blátönn*, archaeologists unearthed a woman surrounded by lavish jewelry alongside unusual objects of various kinds, suggesting that she may have been rather wealthy and socially respected. Among her grave goods was a wagon burial, in itself a sign of the deceased's high status (Jesch, 1991, p. 35): it contained what it might have been a *seiðr*-staff similar to that owned by Þorbjörg, along with possibly magic-related gear such as oxen drinking horns, amulets, ointments, pig bones, and henbane seeds (Price, 2002, p. 155). This would also suggest that Þorbjörg herself was probably wealthy

and highly respected (Gardela, 2009, p. 197). On top of this, the Fyrkat woman was found with a long-sleeved blue dress, a highly decorated tunic, amulets and beads.

The similarities with Þorbjörg are quite striking, and the details which are peculiar to the saga (for instance, the white catskin mittens) are instead very coherent within the context of Greenlandic settlements (Østergård, 2004, p. 120). From this perspective, Þorbjörg's depiction appears credible, at the very least, and seems to be in line with the actual reality of the year 1000 or – more broadly – of the Viking age.⁶ On the one hand, material evidence seems to indicate that Þorbjörg's clothing had a logical explanation, halfway between environmental (she needed warm clothes, for the scene is set in winter time) and social-status reasons (*seiðkonur* were highly regarded in northern Europe at that time). Most elements of her apparel – catskin gloves, glass beads, staff, refined mantle, calfskin boots, etc. – fit in this context, and are coherent with archaeofaunal evidence (see, for instance, McGovern and Albina Palsdóttir, 2006; for animal symbology in pre-Christian northern religions, see Jennbert, 2003 and 2011; Pluskowski 2011). The *hnjóskulinda*, in turn, might have represented a special symbolic accessory, for it has been observed that when fungi such as *Polyporus squamosus* are applied to touchwood, this becomes self-luminous and can burn for many hours (Mitchell, 2011, p. 250, fn. 150).

This suggests that Þorbjörg's clothing was no alien to the environment where she was living, nor was her apparel contradictory when compared to the supposed social status of a tenth-century *völva* and to the customary gear associated with such a religious figure. This being said, though, a question remains unresolved: was her special meal (thus, the animals' hearts) connected in some way with the animal skins she was wearing?

Yes and no. The hearts were taken from *qllum kykvendum* ("all the animals")⁷ found in the area, not only fur animals or others that may have been symbolically associated with religious rituals. This specific detail was probably of great importance, and seems to suggest that the key to understanding the essence of the special meal may indeed be related to legends concerning dragons and birds, but that it could well reach far beyond them.

⁶ See also Price, 2002, p. 175, and Gardela, 2009, p. 190ff., for a summary of another fundamental archaeological find of roughly the same age: the Oseberg ship, from Vestfold (Norway), ca. 834 A.D. In the ship burial were found two women dressed in clothes which suggest their high status and wealth. On the basis of their respective grave goods, scholars have observed that at least one of them may have been a religious figure, perhaps a *völva*, for a wood staff was found near her body.

⁷ Italics mine.

5. HEARTS AND KNOWLEDGE: ANY LINK WITH DRAGONS AND BIRDS?

On the basis of this comparative analysis, it may be assumed that when Þorbjörg ate the hearts of all the animals living nearby, she engaged in a tight relationship with the surrounding nature through them. As the popular motif of the warning animals suggests, fauna was plausibly believed (as is indeed the case) to have sharper and more developed senses than humans', and its awareness of nature's rhythms and behaviours was probably thought to reside in animals' hearts. A branch of this tradition would metaphorically associate said (fore)knowledge with the language of birds, but – in line with Pliny's example of the moles' hearts – this does not seem to be the case in Þorbjörg's scene. Animal hearts were possibly believed to contain knowledge of the neighbouring environment and of its governing forces, and it is at this point that the cultural notion of "warning animals" joins that concerning sympathetic magic: indeed, it was assumed that by partaking of the hearts of nature's inhabitants, the eater (here the *lítil-vǫlva*) could absorb such knowledge and foresee future events impacting that same environment.

The role of kid's milk in Þorbjörg's meal is highly obscure, in turn, but it is not to be excluded a connection with magic properties attributed to, respectively, the beverage or the animal in Norse tradition or elsewhere. It is fair to assume, though, that here milk may have played a mere gastronomic purpose, considering that the recipe consisted of *grautr*, "porridge". There are surely other notable references to magic milk and magic porridges in the Old Norse literary corpus, such as in chapter 24 of *Fóstbræðra saga*, where a healer offers milk to the hero Þormóðr because – according to her – it would give him strength, and she prepares a porridge with various herbs and leek which helps her make a diagnosis of the seriousness of the wound (Waggoner, 2001, p. xxxii). In any case, I will leave more in-depth observation about this aspect to future research.

At the same time, one parallel and important aspect arguably emerges in Ch. 4 of *Eiríks saga* as well as in the example of Fyrkat's cemetery findings: one which concerns religious tension. The richly buried pagan *vǫlva* in Fyrkat, a semi-Christian site, may well indicate that the conversion to the new faith was slow, and it may have entailed that traditional key figures among the community (such as seeresses) continued to be considered necessary as the society was being christianized (Karg et al., 2009, p. 218-219). In this sense, the figure of

Guðríðr Þorbjarnardóttir shows that the transition could cause individual discomfort but, more importantly, that the benefit of the community was supposed to come first. The same attitude emerges when the author points out that Þorbjörn Vífilsson, Guðríðr's father, did not hide his aversion for such a *hindrvitni* ("heathenism", "superstitious practice"; i.e., the *seiðr*).

As suggested by Ernesto de Martino and others, magic had been practiced for centuries before the arrival of Christianity, but both pre-Christian practices and Christian religion were supposed to address the very same issues: they helped mankind face ordinary and extraordinary difficulties and threats. In an *in divenire* context like that of the Christianization of northern Europe around the year 1000 A.D., the two systems of beliefs were competing for victory, and the figures of Þorbjörg and Guðríðr represent key cornerstones in the process. Sympathetic magic would still be a fundamental aspect of Nordic leechbooks and handbooks of magic in the fifteenth century, and would often combine pagan and Christian elements (Maraschi, 2018); therefore, it is not surprising to find it at the core of a highly-respected ritual practice at the beginning of the eleventh century. Actually, the author of *Eiríks saga* himself was quick to specify that many settlers went to consult the *seiðkona*, and – most importantly – that her prophecies proved true ("Gekk þat ok lítt í tauma, er hon sagði").

In conclusion, chapter 4 of *Eiríks saga rauða* seems to offer more than what scholars have recognized when they highlighted its connection with related accounts of *seiðr* in *Vatnsdæla saga* and *Órvar-Odds saga*, and when they emphasized its peculiarities compared with them. If elements of the performance of *seiðr* such as the *Varðlokur* or the semi-public structure of the ritual have been accurately addressed (Meylan, 2014, p. 41), insufficient attention has been paid on what seems to be the key to Þorbjörg's acquisition of knowledge about nature, which – as our wider perspective has aimed to show – finds its critical moment in the eating of the animals' hearts.

Actually, it seems fair to assume that there could be more than meets the eye about Þorbjörg's meal. The traditionally recognized link between dragon hearts/birds/warning animals does not seem to fully explain the nature and the meaning of the special porridge in *Eiríks saga*. On the other hand, there are neither dragons nor birds involved in the scene, and if hearts of birds may have well been cooked among those of other animals, the fact that this detail was not specified (in spite of the very descriptive vein of the author) is rather telling. The point is that the hearts of *all the animals* living in the surroundings were cooked, most likely because it was believed that *they all* knew something about nature that people did not

know. The belief that such knowledge was housed in their hearts was no literary invention, on the other hand, but rather a well-documented and widespread notion which had ancient origins and which belonged to the likewise popular system of beliefs catalogued as sympathetic magic.

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