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Lokrur, Lóðurr and Late Evidence

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In the previous issue of *RMN Newsletter*, Frog had some interesting things to say about *Prymskviða* and *rímur* poetry in late medieval Iceland. I think the idea of identifying common themes and stylistic features in *rímur* and eddic poems is a promising one and I look forward to reading more about Frog's research in this area.¹ The *rímur* cycles dealing with mythological themes are a natural first port of call.

A few years ago I wrote an article on Lokrur, the *rímur* cycle dealing with Thor's journey to Útgarda-Loki (Haukur Þorgeirsson 2008). I focused on the differences between the *rímur* narrative and the way that Snorri tells the same story in *Gylfaginning*. I attributed most of these differences to the artistic needs of the poet and his desire to present the story as a self-contained and logical whole. The details which Lokrur have but lack an exemplar in *Gylfaginning*, I explained as rhetorical amplification, devised to make the story more vivid and entertaining.

Only briefly did I discuss the possibility that the poet had access to sources other than *Gylfaginning*, possibly some that are no longer extant. Although I felt this was an intriguing possibility, I was cautious in approaching it because I feared being scolded for engaging in idle fantasy. To my surprise, my article was criticized from exactly the opposite direction – for an overly dogmatic

assumption that the *rímur* poet must have used *Gylfaginning*, rather than an oral tradition, as his source. Having since come upon the Retrospective Methods Network, it now seems to me that the stars are right for a serious discussion of the value of late Icelandic poetry as evidence to be compared with the classical material.

The Name Lóður in the *rímur*

There is one thing about Lokrur which I did not discuss at the time, but which I think could be an interesting case study in the value of retrospective evidence. Several times, Lokrur use the name Lóður as a synonym for Loki. The name Lóður also refers to Loki in *Þrymlur*, *Áns rímur* and *Griplur*, although in some other *rímur*, especially in younger and less mythologically oriented ones, it refers to Odin.

Outside of the *rímur*, the name Lóðurr² occurs in three Old Icelandic poems; *Háleygjatal*, *Íslendingadrápa* and *Völuspá*. In each case, it indicates a figure associated with Óðinn, but scholars have been divided on exactly whom the name refers to. The theory which is most frequently defended – and most frequently attacked – is that the name refers to Loki. Since the *rímur* are the only sources to explicitly identify Lóðurr, one would think that the evidence from them would feature prominently in scholarly discussion of this

mysterious figure. This is not, in fact, the case.

If we look up Lóðurr in handbooks or overview works on Norse mythology, we do not, as far as I can see, find any mention of the rímur evidence. There is nothing in Steinsland (2005), Lindow (2001), Orchard (1997), Simek (1993), Turville-Petre (1964) or the KLNM (1981). Nor have I been able to find anything in commentaries on the *Völuspá* verses in question. There is nothing in e.g. Josefsson (2001), Dronke (1997) or Steinsland (1983). Even works which deal extensively with the question of Lóðurr's identity routinely come up short. There is nothing in McTurk (1991: 37–39), Liberman (1990), Taylor (1987), Polomé (1969) or de Vries (1933: 49–55).

What is the reason for this? From de Vries' treatment of the question, one might assume that he was simply unfamiliar with the rímur. Indeed, his text contains remarks such as “[Lóðurr's] identity with Loki, about which the Icelandic tradition has not the slightest idea” (de Vries 1933: 53), which are inconsistent with the existence of the rímur evidence. But we can compare this with the way in which de Vries treated *Lokka táttur*, a Faroese ballad telling of Loki, Odin and Hœnir. The eminent scholar tells us that the material in *Lokka táttur* is “[o]f course not from any heathen myth unknown to us”, that the ballad has “nothing to do with heathen mythology” and that it is “absolutely worthless” for his purposes (de Vries 1933: 46). With this in mind, it seems possible to me that de Vries was familiar with the mentions of Lóðurr in the rímur but felt that these late works were so obviously worthless as sources that one could safely speak as though they did not exist.

Finnur Jónsson was certainly familiar with *Lokrur*, *Prymlur* and *Griplur*, having edited all three cycles two times (1896, 1905–1922) and published a dictionary of rímur (1926–1928). But his dictionary dismisses the use of Lóður for Loki with a shrug and his survey of

the mythology does not mention it at all (1913: 84–85).

A recent work by Rudolf Simek does mention *Lokrur* and *Prymlur* (not in the context of Lóðurr) but warns us that “we must not make the mistake of confusing this poetical reception of Germanic mythology with genuine sources for our knowledge of the pre-Christian religion” (Simek 2004: 99).

Nevertheless, while some of the scholars above may have known and (silently) dismissed the rímur evidence, it seems clear that many of them simply had little or no familiarity with it. In one curious case, we are told that “the old oral myths speak of the giants *Lokrur* and *Thrymlur*, fictive descendents of the giants of the Poetic Edda” (Taylor 1987: 610). It seems oddly fitting that the rímur themselves have here become mythical creatures – rarely seen but rumoured to be still striding the earth somewhere in the North.

Why Did the Poets Think Lóður Was Loki?

Where did the rímur poets get the information that Lóður is a name for Loki? Since I have been unable to find any pre-existing answers, I will have to try to feel my own way. I can imagine several possibilities:

1. The poets could have had access to some now lost written source where Lóður was listed as a name for Loki – the source might have been something similar to *Litla skálda*. This is not impossible, but I do not think it is likely. The rímur in question date to the 15th century or, at the earliest, to the end of the 14th century. At that time, Icelandic orthography made no consistent distinction between the common grammatical ending -r and the rarer -ur. That distinction, however, was still upheld in poetry (Stefán Karlsson 1964). The rímur poets clearly had the correct form of the name since they do not use it as a monosyllable (to rhyme with, say, *óðr* or *hróðr*) but as a disyllable. In *Áns rímur* the name rhymes with *bróður* and *móður* (Ólafur Halldórsson 1973: 169),

demonstrating both the disyllabic form and the long root vowel.

The orthography very rarely distinguishes between /o/ and /ó/ but the metrical structure of the rímur confirms that the poets always had a long vowel in the name. If the rímur poets had learned the name from a written source one would have expected *Lóðr or *Loðr or even *Løðr. The fact that the poets knew the name belonged to the rare class of masculine nouns with an -ur ending indicates that they knew the name from oral tradition.

2. The poets could have known Völuspá, Íslendingadrápa and the other material from which (some) scholars have surmised that Lóðurr is Loki. The rímur poets then reached this conclusion for themselves around the year 1400 and proceeded to use Lóður as a synonym for Loki in their works. This seems rather unlikely to me, but if we are to believe that the rímur poets were so scholarly minded and had access to so many sources, then surely their works have some value as retrospective evidence.

3) The poets could have known that Lóður is a name for Loki directly from oral tradition. The existence of this oral tradition would be most economically explained by it being old and continuous, or, we might say, 'correct'. This seems to me to be the most likely possibility.

Retrospective Evidence

In my view, the rímur present moderate-to-strong evidence that the Lóðurr mentioned several times in Old Norse poetry was understood as Loki. I am, of course, not suggesting that all other evidence should be set aside in favour of this one piece of the puzzle. On the contrary, all aspects of the question call for a detailed examination, a challenge beyond the scope of this article.

I do, however, feel that scholars seeking some identification for Lóðurr other than Loki need to explicitly account for the rímur

attestations in some way. If Lóðurr is proposed to have been an independent figure in an earlier historical period, then a discussion of when and why this figure would become identified with Loki is appropriate. In any case, there is no sound methodological basis for a priori rejection of 14th and 15th century Icelandic evidence.

Notes:

1. Like Frog, I would caution against the assumption that eddic poetry was "largely or wholly extinct as an oral tradition by the end of the 13th century" (Frog 2010: 35). In 17th century Iceland, there was still an oral popular tradition of narrative fornryðislag poetry and some of the poems then recorded show clear signs of medieval origins (Haukur Þorgeirsson 2010 and this volume).
2. By the time of the rímur, polysyllabic words previously ending in -rr ended in -r, thus e.g. Gunnarr > Gunnar; Lóðurr > Lóður.

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Hildebrandslied 65b: Suggestions for a New Reading and Interpretation

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The Hildebrandslied dates from the late 8th or early 9th century, with the most likely date of origin lying sometime in the first half of the 9th century. It is generally considered to be Old High German, though there are a number of Low German features observable in the text, and it is included among the Old Saxon texts consulted for Tiefenbach (2010). The exact time and place of the composition of the Hildebrandslied cannot be determined with any certainty. What we do know is that the poem was copied at the monastery at Fulda in the mid 9th century by three separate scribes. The manuscript is now housed in Kassel, and it should be mentioned that the condition of the manuscript has deteriorated a great deal in the last 125 years.

The surviving text is comprised of 68 lines of alliterative verse (Stabreim), a genre that may be reconstructed for Proto-Germanic (cf. Dewey 2006). This was already an anachronism at the time of composition, since at the time that the Hildebrandslied was committed to writing, rhymed verse based on Latin had already superseded alliterative verse (Murdoch 2004: 236). Germanic alliterative verse is made up of long lines with a clear caesura dividing each long line into two half-lines. Each half-line generally corresponds with a syntactic unit of some sort, in the Hildebrandslied, this is most often a clause. There are four primary stressed syllables per line (two in each half-line), and as many

secondary stressed and unstressed syllables as needed for grammatical correctness. The first primary stress (or lift) of the second half-line is called the Hauptstab and determines the alliteration for the line; one or both of the lifts in the first half-line must alliterate with the first lift of the second half-line. In the strictest interpretations of alliterative verse, the final lift may not alliterate in its own line (though this requirement is relaxed in later alliterative verse, most notably in the Old Saxon Heliand, and is occasionally violated in the Hildebrandslied).

The plot of the poem may be summarized as follows. Dietrich (variously spelled Dietrich and Deotrich in the poem), is expelled from his kingdom by Odoacer (Otachres in the poem). Among the retainers who accompany him into exile is Hildebrand (Hiltibrant in the poem), who leaves behind his wife and his infant son Hadubrant. Thirty years later, Dietrich comes back. Instead of sending their entire armies against each other, Dietrich and Odoacer agree to decide the battle by single combat, and Hildebrand and Hadubrant are chosen as champions for this purpose. In the course of their conversation before beginning to fight, Hildebrand realizes that Hadubrant is his son. Hildebrand tells Hadubrant that he is his father, which the younger warrior refuses to believe, having been told that his father was dead. The manuscript ends just as they are beginning to