

Gunnarr and the Snake Pit in Medieval Art and Legend

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While many readers of medieval literature are likely to be familiar with the narrative motif of the snake pit, and even associate it with the legend of Gunnarr Gjúkason, there are probably not many, apart from Old Norse specialists, who would know the rest of his story. According to the heroic poems of the *Edda*, and the derived *Völsunga saga*, Gunnarr is the brother-in-law of Sigurður Fáfnisbani and plays a large part in his saga, *Völsunga saga*. But as *Völsunga saga* is first and foremost the story of the Völsungs, including Sigurður, Gunnarr naturally plays something of a minor role there, being overshadowed by the magnificent and renowned slayer of the dragon Fáfnir. And so, while some people may know who Gunnarr is, they do not necessarily know much about him in his own right.

My aim here is to focus attention on Gunnarr and on the fact that he was not always a minor character. On the contrary, he played a major role, if not the leading role, in the legend of the fall of the ancient kingdom of Burgundy. This story—the “Burgundian legend”—is in turn one of the legends on which works such as *Piðreks saga af Bern*, *Völsunga saga*, and the older poems on the same subject, for example, *Atlakviða*, *Háttalykill inn forni*, and *Atlamál (Atlamál in grænlensku)*—and also the German *Nibelungenlied*—are based. In other words, this independent tradition developed into a part of a greater whole, a sort of episode (*þáttur*) dealing for the most part with the fates of the siblings Gunnarr, Högni, and Guðrún after the death of Sigurður Fáfnisbani. One of the best-known events in the Burgundian legend, which in a Norse context is more familiar as *Gjúkungaögnin*, is without doubt the death of Gunnarr. Let us recall the part played by Gunnarr in the Burgundian legend according to *Völsunga saga* and how he met his death:

After Sigurður has killed the dragon Fáfnir and taken its gold, he visits the valkyrie Brynhildr; they fall in love and swear certain oaths to each other. He then proceeds to the court of King Gjúki, where he befriends his two sons, Gunnarr and Högni. As Queen Grímhildr sees certain advantages in keeping this young man and his treasure in the royal house, she makes him a magic potion that causes him to forget Brynhildr and fall in love with Guðrún, the king's daughter, and he marries her. He then supports Gunnarr in wooing Brynhildr, and deceiving Brynhildr in the process. However, Grímhildr's schemes do not lead to happiness at all, but rather to a great deal of harm; Sigurður is eventually killed by Guðrún's brothers, who decide to keep his treasure and give Guðrún to Atli, King of the Huns.

Later on, Atli invites his brothers-in-law, Gunnarr and Högni, to a feast, his intention being to gain control of Fáfnir's treasure, the hoard of gold that Sigurður Fáfnisbani had won. When the brothers refuse to surrender the treasure or to say where it is, a fight breaks out, which ends with Gunnarr and Högni being put in chains. Atli then orders Högni's heart to be cut from his breast, while Gunnarr is thrown into a snake

pit. Guðrún has a harp sent to him, which he plays in order to lull the serpents, but is killed when a large and malignant serpent penetrates to his heart. This is the story of how Gunnarr came to his tragic end.

This short summary presents the main elements of the Burgundian legend, or at least in the form in which we now have it. It is generally regarded as containing a certain core of truth; in other words, the events are based on a historical foundation, according to the evidence of historical documents and texts going all the way back to the fifth century. Among other things these sources mention the famous conflict between the Burgundians, led by their king Gundaharius, and the Romans, led by their general Flavius Aetius, aided by the Huns. The cause of this strife lay in the Burgundian expansion, which was unacceptable to the Romans. Conflict began in 435, ending the following year (436/437) with the defeat of Gundaharius by Aetius. According to the early fifth-century chronicle of Prosper Tiro of Aquitaine (Prosper Tiro Aquitanianus), Aetius appears to have forced Gundaharius to sue for peace, which was, however, short-lived, since Hunnish troops attacked the Burgundians again, completely defeating their army.¹ Because of this, there has not been absolute agreement as to whether the Roman victory over the Burgundians should be attributed to Aetius or to the Huns.

Although it is generally said that Aetius's campaign resulted in the collapse of the Burgundian kingdom, and that this was therefore a major historical battle, there is in fact no extant description of the battle, and people have naturally wondered who commanded the Hunnish army that supported the Romans. Could it have been Attila the Hun (c.395–453), who at this time—together with his brother—had been made king of the Huns? Most historians believe it was not Attila, and that the Huns mentioned in these events were mercenaries who generally helped the Romans expel tribes that the empire considered had no right to live within its confines. Litorius, a commander who served under Aetius and is known to have commanded Hunnish troops, has been named in this connection. Officially, therefore, it was Aetius who defeated the Burgundians, as best evidenced by the fact that shortly after the victory, in 439, a bronze statue of him was put up on which he was called the destroyer of the Burgundians.²

The historical events, as presented here, developed into heroic songs and legends, where Gundaharius and Attila became Gunnarr and Atli in the Old Norse variants. However, while historians seem to be in agreement that Attila had no part in the strife with the Burgundians, there may be various reasons why, in the course of time, the victory was ascribed to him, as in the above-mentioned literary works.³ It is more difficult, on the other hand, to account for the origin of the tale

¹ Max Martin, "Hunnen vs. Burgunden: Rache oder Schicksal?," in *Attila und die Hunnen*, Historischen Museum der Pfalz Speyer (Stuttgart: Theiss, 2007), 313–21, at 313–15; J. Otto Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns: Studies in Their History and Culture*, ed. Max Knight (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 83.

² Martin, 314–15 and Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, 99. See also Ursula Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, vol. 1, *Heroic Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 31 and 35.

³ These reasons will not be analyzed in detail here; a fuller treatment is forthcoming in a work on the Icelandic *fornaldarsögur* on which I am working. It may be pointed out, however, that some

of how Gunnarr met his death, as there is no mention of the death of Gundaharius in ancient historical sources apart from his having been killed in fighting with the Huns. Nor is there any mention of Attila's snake pit, though in some sources Attila is associated in one way or another with malignant serpents. For example, in a Latin poem dating from about 800, it is said that the serpents of the underworld finally punished Attila for his evil deeds,⁴ and in *Oddrúnargrátr* (from the eleventh or twelfth century), Atli's mother is said to have been the serpent that killed Gunnarr.⁵ It is therefore difficult to say where and when tales in which Attila kept a snake pit originated; on the other hand, there is no doubt that such places of punishment did exist and that they are therefore not confined to the world of the imagination. At the end of the twelfth century, Philipp von Heinsburg, archbishop of Cologne, mentions a tower in Susat (the modern Soest), which he says was previously used for housing unclean animals and all sorts of reptiles; this same tower is mentioned in *Piðreks saga af Bern*, as I shall examine below. Alexander H. Krappe, on the other hand, argues that places of punishment of this type were especially associated with North Africa, the Middle East, and India.⁶

As mentioned in the summary above, Gunnarr—after being thrown into the snake pit—played the harp in order to lull the serpents, at least according to the version told in *Völsunga saga*. As regards the harp element, a parallel has been pointed out in the account by the historian Procopius of the death of the Vandal king Gelimer, who was captured and put to death in the year 533/534; he asked to be sent a harp so that he could chant a poem about his tribulations.⁷ Naturally,

confusion seems to have crept into the dating of these events, since Paulus Diaconus, writing in the eighth century, says in his works *Historia Romana* and *Gesta episcoporum Mettensium* that the victory over the Burgundians took place slightly later, in Attila's westward thrust that ended in famous battles with the Franks and other nationalities, including the Burgundians, on the Catalaunian fields in 451. See Walter Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D. 550–800)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 376; and Jón Helgason, *Tvær kviður fornar: Völundarkviða og Atlakviða* (Reykjavik: Heimskringla, 1962), 105. This shift of 15–16 years in the date has resulted in Attila being regarded as the archenemy of the Burgundians, which is also understandable, as he played a leading role wherever battles were fought in the Germanic world during this period.

⁴ Odd Nordland, "Ormegarden," *Viking: Tidsskrift for norrøn arkeologi* 13 (1949): 77–126, at 102–3.

⁵ *Konungsbók Eddukvæða*, ed. Guðvarður Már Gunnlaugsson, introd. by Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavik: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, 2001), 244–45. Finnur Jónsson regarded *Oddrúnargrátr* as having been composed c.1000–1025; Jan de Vries dated it to 1150–1200. See Bjarne Fidjestøl, *The Dating of Eddic Poetry*, ed. Odd Einar Haugen, Bibliotheca Arnarnagæana 41 (Copenhagen: Reitzel, 1999), 107 and 183.

⁶ Alexander H. Krappe, "The Snake Tower," *Scandinavian Studies and Notes* 16, no. 1 (1940): 22–33, at 23–25 and 29; Nordland, "Ormegarden," 82; Klaus von See et al., *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, vol. 6 (Heidelberg: Winter, 2009), 921.

⁷ Jón Helgason, *Tvær kviður fornar*, 96–97. Accounts of Gelimer's death were probably rather variable: the historian Isidore of Seville does not seem to know anything about his death, despite writing about his end, while the historian Jordanes says that Gelimer died of old age: Isidore of Seville, *Isidore of Seville's History of the Goths, Vandals, and Suevi*, ed. Guido Donini and Gordon B. Ford (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1970), 37–38; Jordanes, *The Origin and Deeds of the Goths*, trans. Charles C. Mierow ([Gloucester]: Dodo Press, 2007), 56. Gelimer reigned in a region that the Romans designated "Africa"; this probably corresponded to the present-day Tunisia.

attention has been drawn to the possibility that the tale of Gelimer's final hours influenced the story of Gundaharius (Gunnarr). This possibility should not be lightly discounted, despite the fact that Gelimer's death occurred slightly later than the earliest poem about the fall of the Burgundian kingdom is thought to have been composed. Even though the poem was probably composed on the basis of oral tradition going back about a century, it is not unlikely that, as frequently happens, it also included material contemporaneous with its composition and continued to absorb new motifs in later stages of its development.⁸ Of course, we cannot rule out the possibility that the account of the harp playing was already associated with Gundaharius's story before Gelimer's day, presumably with the setting in the snake pit, in which case the harp-playing motif must either have been overlooked by the historians who recorded the event, or else they discounted it as unreliable. We shall return to this problem later on.

In the following discussion, I will trace the motif of Gunnarr in the snake pit all the way from the earliest possible indications of its existence to late medieval textual references and also give attention to visual sources. The focus will be on examining the extant sources *in relation to each other* to see if any conclusion can be drawn from them regarding the development of the legend. Special attention will be given to Gunnarr's playing of the harp in order to answer the question of whether this motif might have been part of the narrative from the beginning or might have been added later on; and if it seems to have been added later, then to determine whether we can say where and when the addition could have been made. It must be borne in mind that in studies of this type, the sources are not preserved in a systematic corpus, and those that have survived are unlikely to give us as full a picture as we might wish. Nevertheless, they have their value, and their testimony may provide enough hints to enable us to propose a rough outline of how the legend spread and was passed on.

Besides focusing on Gunnarr's death in the snake pit and his harp playing, the survey demonstrates the importance of considering preserved sources in their contexts. In fact, no other method can give us the overall perspective necessary for discussing the development of legends, their dissemination, and the transformations they undergo in their various stages. For the most complete account of preservation, it is necessary to view the development of the motif from beginning to end, and also to have the story of Gundaharius and the fall of the Burgundian kingdom in mind when looking forward to the later stages. Let us begin the discussion by looking at the snake-pit motif in a larger context through a consideration of its popularity and dissemination, starting with a review of snake pits in Norse literature and moving on to an examination of the meaning of the word *ormagarðr*.

⁸ See Wolfgang Mohr, "Geschichtserlebnis im Altgermanischen Heldenliede," in *Zur Germanisch-Deutschen Heldensage*, ed. Karl Hauck (Darmstadt: Buchgesellschaft, 1965), 82–101, at 93–94. Andreas Heusler considered it possible that the earliest poem was composed after 460: see his book *Nibelungensage und Nibelungenlied* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1973), 29.

SNAKE PITS

Snake pits as places of punishment were not completely unknown in the Norse world, or at least not in Norse saga literature other than in the tradition about Gunnarr. A snake pit, or rather some sort of snake tower, is mentioned in *Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar*, in *Morkinskinna* (c.1220).⁹ In *Karlamagnús saga*, the Norse translation of which was made in the thirteenth century, Lady Ólíf is locked up in a stone building in which snakes, toads, and poisonous creatures are gathered.¹⁰ This same incident is described in *Landrés rímur*, which are believed to have been based on this part of the saga and composed in the early fifteenth century.¹¹ In other tales, two holy maidens are subjected to tortures among poisonous snakes. One of them, St. Christina, was put in a prison among snakes, according to her story in the *Legenda Aurea*, which dates from about 1260.¹² Originally composed in Latin, the *Legenda Aurea* was translated into all the major European vernaculars. The popularity of St. Christina in the Nordic countries is attested by a Danish mural painting from c.1480–1500 in Århus Cathedral showing scenes from her life, including a picture of her surrounded by snakes (Fig. 1).¹³ Odd Nordland, however, who in the mid-twentieth century published his study on the snake-pit motif, believes that this picture portrays St. Catharine, as in some versions of her life, she is thrown into a snake tower.¹⁴ Finally, a “snake pit” is mentioned in twelfth- and thirteenth-century accounts of King Ragnarr loðbrók. The famous and legendary hero Ragnarr meets his death in England

⁹ Nordland, “Ormegarden,” 85–86 and von See, *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, 6:921. A more thorough description is in *Hulda-Hrokkinskinna* (c.1300). There, the snake tower, located in Mikligarðr (Constantinople), is described as a dungeon with a door, inside which, on a slippery floor, lies a large venomous serpent. As the serpent is fed on people who fell into the king’s disfavor, a powerful stench of rotteness emanates from the dungeon, inside which there are decomposing bodies and human bones. See “Haralds hardrada saga,” *Formanna sögur*, vol. 6 (Copenhagen: [s.n.], 1831), 164–66. Saxo Grammaticus’s *Gesta Danorum* contains a comparable account, which runs in translation: “The king of the land ordered him to be thrown to the castle’s dragon to be torn apart; it was thought that there was no more effective means of disposing of offenders than through the dragon’s bite” (“A cuius rege homicidii crimine damnatus domestico draconi lacerandus obiectari præcipitur. Nihil enim eius morsu ad necandos reos ualentius ducebatur”). See Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum: Danmarkshistorien*, vol. 2, ed. Karsten Friis-Jensen, transl. Peter Zeeberg (Copenhagen: Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab & Gads Forlag, 2005), lib. 11.3. The account of Haraldr harðráði may possibly be traced to a verse by Illugi Bryndælaskáld, where his adventures are interwoven with the story of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani. See Elena Gurevich, “The Fantastic in Íslendinga þættir, with Special Emphasis on Þorsteins þátr forvitna,” *Gripla* 19 (2008): 77–92, at 83.

¹⁰ *Karlamagnús saga og kappá hans*, vol. 1, ed. Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (Reykjavik: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, [1950]), 127.

¹¹ *Rímnasafn*, ed. Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen: Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur, 1913–1922), 2:433.

¹² Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Reading on the Saints*, trans. William Granger Ryan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 1:xiii and 1:387.

¹³ Lena Liepe, *Den medeltida kroppen: Kroppens och könets ikonografi i nordisk medeltid* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2003), 173–76. A Greek parallel to St. Christina is St. Irene, who was also thrown into a snake pit: see Krappe, “The Snake Tower,” 27.

¹⁴ Nordland, “Ormegarden,” 84–86.



Fig. 1. St. Christina in Århus Cathedral. Photo: Author.

when King Ella has him thrown into a snake yard (*ormgarðr*) in which the snakes crawl all over him (“ollum meginn”).¹⁵

In contrast to these rather varied structures, snake pits of a more distinct type, dug deep into the ground, are described in three *riddarasögur*, one of them a translation, the other two indigenous Icelandic compositions. The oldest of them is the thirteenth-century *Bevens saga*, which is a translation of the Anglo-Norman poem *Boeve de Haumtone*. It relates that the hero, Bever, is placed, with his hands bound, in a thirty-ell-deep dungeon in which snakes, toads, and other venomous creatures are to rip him apart. After some effort, Bever succeeds, with God's help, in killing the poisonous snakes; but he remains in the dungeon for a full seven years.¹⁶ Similar events are described in the chivalric saga *Sigurðar saga þögla* (from the fourteenth century), in which Sigurðr and his companions are put in chains and then thrown into a dungeon that seems to be dug into a hill in a forest. In the dungeon (“uonnda dijke”) there are, as in *Bevens saga*, snakes, toads, and other reptiles.¹⁷ The account is similar to that in *Bevens saga*, except that Sigurðr and his companions spend only two weeks in the dungeon. The third *riddarasaga*, *Flóres saga konungs og sona hans*, from the fourteenth century, relates that Sekúndús is placed in a deep dungeon full of snakes and toads. The poisonous snakes attack him and hang on to him; he eventually overcomes them, but spends more than a month in the dungeon.¹⁸ Apart from these sources, some scholars believe that Wayland the Smith (Völundr) was actually imprisoned in a snake pit.¹⁹

Notwithstanding the testimony of the above-mentioned texts dating from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries, it can hardly be said that the motif of a snake yard, snake pit, or snake tower is a common one in Norse literature. Even though models and parallels to Gunnarr's death have been sought far and wide, much is unclear about the origin and development of this motif and also how it could have become associated with accounts of the death of Gundaharius. There may therefore be something to be gained by examining the motif in an even broader context and by considering the meaning of the word *ormagarðr* and the different ways it has been interpreted.

¹⁵ *Völsunga saga ok Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, ed. Magnus Olsen (Copenhagen: Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur, 1906–8), 158. Ragnarr's death is described in *Krákumál* (twelfth century), the *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus (c.1200), *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* (thirteenth century), and *Ragnars sona þáttr* (thirteenth century).

¹⁶ *Bevens saga*, ed. Christopher Sanders (Reykjavik: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, 2001), 99–113.

¹⁷ *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, vol. 2, ed. Agnete Loth, Editiones Arnarnaganae, series B, vol. 21 (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1963), 187–88.

¹⁸ *Drei lygisögur*, ed. Áke Lagerholm (Halle [Saale]: Niemeyer, 1927), 161.

¹⁹ See Sigmund Oehrl, “Wieland der Schmied auf dem Kistenstein von Alskog kyrka und dem Runenstein Ardre kyrka III,” in *Analecta Septentrionalia: Beiträge zur nordgermanischen Kultur- und Literaturgeschichte*, ed. Wilhelm Heizmann et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), 540–66, at 553. The legend of Wayland is known from various Germanic sources, e.g., the Old Norse Eddaic poem *Völundarkviða*: see Robert Nedoma, *Die bildlichen und schriftlichen Denkmäler der Wielandsage*, Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik 490 (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1988); Robert Nedoma, “The Legend of Wayland in *Deor*,” *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 38 (1990): 129–45 and works cited there.

THE MEANING OF THE ORMAGARÐR²⁰

In his study of snake towers, Krappe drew a distinction between *ormagryfjur*, ‘snake pits’, and *ormaturnar*, ‘snake towers’. The origin of the idea of snake pits, he argued, was simply the fact that snakes and other reptiles would occasionally have been found in medieval dungeons. In snake towers, on the other hand, the snakes would have been placed there specially to torment those who were confined there.²¹ While this distinction may be logical, it does not mean that storytellers in the Middle Ages would all have been aware of it, as can be seen from some of the Norse sagas mentioned above, where the snakes do not seem to have been in the dungeons purely by coincidence.

Gunnarr’s death among the serpents has been interpreted in various ways. Gísli Sigurðsson, for example, says in his notes to *Atlakviða* that it is fitting that someone who wants to keep the gold—that is, the treasure of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani—to himself should end his life in the company of snakes (“að sá sem vill sitja einn að gullinu endi líf sitt í félagi orma”);²² in other words, that the snake pit could be seen as an appropriate punishment for greed.

The most detailed treatment of the possible sources behind this story is that by Nordland. It is not my intention to trace his reasoning here, but he seems to have been convinced that no real snake pits had ever existed as models, and consequently he saw Atli’s snake pit as a possible symbol for hell, the idea of a snake pit as a place of punishment being derived from the unpleasant reflection that after death, one’s body is buried in the ground, where it will be eaten by worms. Nordland sees this motif as a reflection of ideas about what happens after death and burial. These associations are ancient. In Scandinavian folklore, for example, “worms” (*likormar/lik-ormar*) have been associated with thoughts of death since time immemorial. Comparable associations are found in Christian descriptions of hell, for example in vision literature, where snakes generally play a prominent role. Thus, these ideas may suggest either Norse conceptions of the underworld realm of *Hel*, or Christian conceptions of hell that go back to the early centuries of Christianity, both conceptions ultimately having sprung from the same root.²³ Various other writers have favored this type of interpretation, seeing Atli’s

²⁰ As is the case with the English word *worm*, the Icelandic *ormr* had a broader meaning in the past, and in literary texts it generally means ‘snake’ or ‘serpent’ rather than its common modern meaning. *Garðr*, cognate with English ‘yard’, has the same basic meaning of ‘an enclosed area’. ‘Snake pit’ suggests itself as the most appropriate translation of the compound *ormagarðr*, both because it is in common use in English and also because a pit seems the simplest way of confining snakes; some writers have used the more literal rendering ‘snake yard’. Some Norse texts have the more specific *ormagryfja*, meaning ‘snake pit’.

²¹ Krappe, “The Snake Tower,” 25–27.

²² Gísli Sigurðsson, ed., *Eddukvæði* (Reykjavik: Mál og menning, 1998), 324.

²³ Nordland, “Ormegarden,” 92–103 and 113–19; Krappe, “The Snake Tower,” 29–31; Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, 66. More interesting material on dragons and snakes and their role in Icelandic medieval literature can be found in an article by Ásdís Egilsdóttir, “Drekar, slöngur og heilög Margrét,” in *Heiðin minni: Greinar um fornar bókmennir*, ed. Haraldur Bessason and Baldur Hafstað (Reykjavik: Háskólaforlag Mál og menningar, 1999), 241–56, where particular attention is given to the symbolic value of these creatures in a Christian context.

snake pit as symbolic of Gunnarr's death and what awaits him in the next world. It has also been pointed out that *ormagarðr* may simply be a kenning for a grave.²⁴

Despite the fact that snake pits did exist, as is stated above, the physical nature of the *ormagarðr* seems to have been unclear even to those who accepted their existence as a fact, and the word seems to have been interpreted in a far broader sense than might have been expected. A German poem from the thirteenth century, for example, mentions the "wurmgarten" into which Daniel was thrown; in the biblical account in the Book of Daniel, he is placed in a lions' den. It could be that the appearance of a snake pit in the German poem represents a corruption or emendation of the story of Daniel, but some have argued that the connotation of the snake pit was broad enough to include a circus, or any similar place, where prisoners were thrown to wild animals; in this respect, Gunnarr's death and Daniel's ordeal are equivalent.²⁵ The same conclusion could be drawn from the aforementioned episode in *Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar*, as in a variant from William of Malmesbury's *De gestis regum Anglorum* from 1125, Haraldr was thrown to a lion.²⁶

The different interpretations of the concept of *ormagarðr* may be helpful in seeing the legend of Gunnarr Gjúkason and the account of his death in a broader context. However, as is plain from the above discussion of its origin, no clear elucidation of the details has yet been given. In what follows below, I shall attempt to trace stages in the preservation of the legend, particularly in the Norse region, focusing on the harp playing and on legendary models involving harps or lyres. In order to shed light on the development of the motif, I shall give an account of the sources in question, first of the written records and then of some visual sources.

WRITTEN SOURCES

The first account of Gunnarr's death among serpents is in a written work from the twelfth century, though poems based on the legend are believed to be much older—for example, *Atlakviða*, which is generally dated to the ninth or tenth century.²⁷ While *Atlakviða* has long been regarded as one of the oldest of the heroic poems in the *Edda*, it has recently been argued that it was composed after the

²⁴ See, for example, the discussion in von See, *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, vol. 6.

²⁵ See, e.g., Nordland, "Ormegarden," 94; von See, *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, 6:916.

²⁶ Gurevich, "The Fantastic," 87.

²⁷ Finnur Jónsson regarded *Atlakviða* as having been composed in the late tenth century: see Fidjestøl, *The Dating of Eddic Poetry*, 107. Felix Genzmer put forward the suggestion that it was composed in the ninth century by Þorbjörn hornklofi: see Felix Genzmer, "Der Dichter der Atlakviða," *Arkiv för Nordisk filologi* 42 (1926): 97–134, particularly at 134; this suggestion has subsequently been criticized, e.g., by Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, 42–45, who believes that the argument does not hold, while acknowledging the fact that the poem might be of this age, as scaldic poetry flourished in Norway at least from the ninth century. There are various theories concerning the age of the Eddaic poems, and they are difficult to date with any certainty. Generally, the time frame is believed to be from c.900 to c.1200; some scholars see a division into two phases within this framework, with "older" and "more recent" poems. Others have argued that dating is a more complex question, with layers of different ages being present in one and the same poem in some cases. Still others sidestep the question, preferring to concentrate on the subject matter of the poems and arguing that dating is out of the question. For the purposes of this paper, the dating proposed by Finnur Jónsson, and later by Jan

Viking Age, that is, after the middle of the eleventh century.²⁸ However, this does not change the assertion that the legend would have been passed down, to a greater or lesser degree, in oral tradition into the twelfth century, and perhaps more specifically into the thirteenth, which is when major works such as the Codex Regius of the *Edda*, *Piðreks saga af Bern*, and *Völsunga saga* were written down. Gunnarr's death in the snake pit is mentioned in the following written sources.

1. 9th–11th centuries: In *Atlakviða*, Guðrún receives her brothers, Gunnarr and Högni, in Atli's place, with the comment that a snake pit is intended for them (stanza 18). The poem later describes how Gunnarr is placed in the snake pit, where he plays the harp angrily with his hands (stanza 34).²⁹ *Atlakviða* is preserved in Gks. 2365 4to (the Codex Regius of the *Edda*), in The Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies, Reykjavik, which is believed to be a copy of an exemplar from the first half of the 13th century; the poem is generally dated to the 9th or 10th centuries, the most recent dating placing it in the 11th century.
2. 11th or 12th century (or possibly earlier): In *Guðrúnarhvöt*, where Guðrún recounts her sufferings, she says that the harshest of these was when Gunnarr died among slithering serpents (stanza 18).³⁰ *Guðrúnarhvöt* is preserved in the Codex Regius of the *Edda*; the poem itself is dated to the 11th or 12th century.
3. 11th or 12th century: In *Oddrúnargrátr*, Gunnarr plays the harp in order to call for help from his beloved, Oddrún. The serpent that kills him is said to be Atli's mother (stanzas 27–29).³¹ *Oddrúnargrátr* is preserved in the Codex Regius of the *Edda*; the poem itself is generally dated to the 11th or 12th century.
4. 12th century: *Háttalykill inn forni*, by Rögnvaldr jarl and Hallr Þórarinnsson, includes a short account of the incident in which Atli has Gunnarr seized and thrown into the snake pit; the authors declare that this really happened. The poem is dated to about 1145.³²
5. 12th century: The *Leiðarvísan*, by Abbot Nikulás, a description of the pilgrims' route from Iceland to Jerusalem, mentions Lunusandar, which some call “the snake pit in which Gunnarr was placed” (“ormgarð er Gunnarr var í settur”).³³ *Leiðarvísan* was written in the period c.1145–59. This mention of Lunusandar is interesting from the point of view of the interpretation of the *ormagarðr*: if the account of Gunnarr's death was intended to be construed symbolically, then it is

de Vries, is used (see Fijestøl, *The Dating of Eddic Poetry*, 106–7 and 183–84); other more recent theories are taken into consideration if appropriate.

²⁸ Alois Wolf, “Mythisch-heroisch Überlieferungen und die literarischen Bestrebungen im alten Island: Überlegungen zur *Edda*,” *Literaturwissenschaftliches Jahrbuch* 40 (1999): 9–72, at 56–62.

²⁹ *Konungsbók Eddukvæða*, ed. Gunnlaugsson, 250–51. Stanzas of the heroic poems of the *Edda* are numbered as in *The Poetic Edda*, ed. Lee M. Hollander (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962).

³⁰ *Konungsbók Eddukvæða*, ed. Gunnlaugsson, 266–67.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 244–45.

³² Most of the stanzas dealing with Sigurðr Fáfnisbani and the Gjúkungar are poorly preserved, but the outlines can be construed, including the following: Atli's men cut Högni's heart from his breast (stanza 3b); Gunnarr guards the gold, and then throws it into the Rhine (stanza 4a); Atli has Gunnarr captured and thrown into the snake pit (“í linnum byggðan garð,” stanza 4b): *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, Kommissionen for det Arnemagnæanske legat (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske boghandel, 1912–15), part B, vol. 1, *Rettet Tekst*, 489; see also part A, vol. 1, *Tekst efter Håndskrifterne*, 513–14.

³³ *Sturlunga saga: Skýringar og fræði*, ed. Örnólfur Thorsson (Reykjavik: Svart á hvítu, 1988), 56.

unlikely that a person of Abbot Nikulás's education would have pointed out a specific physical location as the possible scene of the event.

6. 12th century: In *Atlamál*, Gunnarr's wife Glaumvör dreams that he will be hanged on a gallows, and will then be devoured by *ormar* (stanza 21). Her dream proves prophetic when Atli orders Gunnarr to be hanged on a gallows among snakes. Gunnarr seizes a harp and plays it with his toes, his hands being bound; at this, people weep and rafters break (stanzas 54 and 61).³⁴ *Atlamál* is preserved in the Codex Regius of the *Edda*; the poem itself is generally dated to about the mid-twelfth century or later, with a latest possible date of about 1220.
7. 12th century: In *Sigurðarkviða in skamma*, Brynhildr prophesies that Atli will place Gunnarr in a narrow snake pit (stanza 58).³⁵ *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* is preserved in the Codex Regius of the *Edda*; the poem itself is generally dated to about the mid-twelfth century or later, with a latest possible date of about 1220.
8. 13th century (or possibly earlier): *Dráp Niflunga* states that Gunnarr plays the harp to lull the snakes; nonetheless, a serpent bites him in the liver.³⁶ *Dráp Niflunga* is preserved in the Codex Regius of the *Edda*, where it is placed before *Guðrúnarkviða II* as a sort of introduction to the later group of heroic poems.
9. 13th century: In *Piðreks saga af Bern*, Gunnarr dies in a snake pit or snake tower (*ormagarðr/ormaturn*), which is said to be in Atli's town of Susat. Germans from Susat (the present-day Soest in Westphalia) are said to have seen the tower where Gunnarr was killed³⁷ and, as has been mentioned above, the archbishop of Cologne also referred to it. The saga is dated to the period 1200–1250.
10. 13th century: Skáldskaparmál in *Snorra-Edda* relates that a harp is smuggled to Gunnarr and he plays it with his toes, his hands being bound. The music lulls the snakes, but one of them bites him and clings to his liver until he dies.³⁸ *Snorra-Edda* is dated to about 1220.
11. 13th century: According to *Völsunga saga*, Gunnarr's hands are bound and he is put into a snake pit. Here it is his sister Guðrún who gives him the harp, which he plays with his toes. He plays with such exceptional skill that the snakes go to sleep; nonetheless he is killed when a large serpent bites into his heart.³⁹ *Völsunga saga* is thought to have been written in about 1250.

In addition to the works listed above, mention should be made of *Norna-Gests þáttr* in *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar*, which is preserved in manuscripts from the fourteenth century. *Norna-Gests þáttr* relates that Gestr played a harp in the court of King Ólafr Tryggvason, making the greatest impression on king and his courtiers when he played the Lay of Gunnarr (*Gunnarsslagr*). Whether or not there ever was a musical work of this name, it seems safe to assume that this title is intended as reference to Gunnarr's harp playing in the snake pit, and indicates that the legend of Gunnarr's death was still current in oral tradition in the

³⁴ *Konungsbók Eddukvæða*, ed. Gunnlaugsson, 254–59.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 232–33.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 236–37.

³⁷ *Piðreks saga af Bern*, vol. 2, ed. Henrik Bertelsen (Copenhagen: [s.n.], 1908–11), 314 and 327–28.

³⁸ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, ed. Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen: Kommissionen for det Arnamagnæanske legat, 1931), 131–32.

³⁹ *Völsunga saga ok Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, ed. Olsen, 101.

fourteenth century in Iceland. Finally, it should be mentioned that just before the middle of the eighteenth century an Icelandic poet, Gunnar Pálsson, wrote a poem in the Eddaic metre, a dramatic monologue recited by Gunnarr in the snake pit and called *Gunnarsslagur*. Although most of the substance of the poem is evidently put together from poems in the *Edda*,⁴⁰ the poet's fresh handling gives a certain new insight into the old story. After Gunnarr has managed to lull all the snakes except one to sleep, he lists them by name: "Sofinn er nú Grábakr / Ok Grafvitnir / Góinn ok Móinn / Ok Graf-völlvþr / Ofnir ok Svafnir / Eitvr-fánir / Naþr ok Niþ-havgr / Ok nöþror allar. / Hríng, Höggvarþr / Fyri havrv-slætti."⁴¹ ("Grábakr is sleeping / and Grafvitnir / Góinn and Móinn / and Grafvölluðr / Ofnir and Svafnir / Eitrfánir / Naðr and Niðhögr / and all the serpents. / Hringr, Höggvarðr / because of the harping.") Gunnar Pálsson obviously did not see the snake pit as symbolic of death's kingdom, since Gunnar, as he dies in this poem, says he is on the way to Valhalla, and therefore he seems to be alive in the snake pit, from where he goes to death's kingdom when he dies.

VISUAL SOURCES

Besides written sources, the main evidence for the existence of legends in past ages is found in the kennings of ancient poetry, on the one hand, and in images (iconographic sources) on the other. As will be discussed below, various iconographic sources have been preserved—particularly in the Nordic countries—that refer to the story of Gunnarr, some from as early as the ninth century. Before that date (that is, for the period from the fifth to the eight centuries), the material evidence is rather less clear, and there is none that can be considered reliable. Nonetheless a few intriguing objects from this time may be mentioned as parallels:⁴² bracteates and a memorial stone.

A bracteate that may date from the late fifth century, and which was found in Nebenstedt in Lower Saxony, in Northern Germany (IK 308), shows a man on his knees, with three snakes twined around him (Fig. 2). Two other bracteates of a similar kind, showing two snakes each, were found in Sievern in Lower Saxony (IK 333) and Sjöbaden in South Sweden (IK 337), both dated to the same period as IK 308. Even if the dating of the bracteates is not very accurate, they could have been made after Gundaharius' death.

The memorial stone (Bonn, LVR-LandesMuseum, inv. 14189), which is dated to the seventh century, was found in Niederdollendorf, on the Rhine, and is generally considered Christian. It bears an image of a man who is believed to be holding a Frankish sword; like the figure on the bracteate, he is surrounded by

⁴⁰ Von See, *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, 6:926.

⁴¹ *Edda Sæmundar hinns fróða*, vol. 2, ed. Rasmus Christian Rask (Holmiae: [s.n.], 1818), 1008. Most of the snakes' names are taken from *Snorra-Edda*.

⁴² Bracteates from the collection *Die Goldbrakteaten der Völkerwanderungszeit: Iconographischer Katalog*, ed. Karl Hanck et al. (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1986) are cited as IK followed by the item number. See vol. 2.1, 141–42, 174–75 and 180–81 and vol. 2.2, 95–96, 115–16 and 121–22. Cf. Alexandra Pesch, *Die Goldbrakteaten der Völkerwanderungszeit—Thema und Variation* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007), 108–11 and 330–31.



Fig. 2. IK 308 from Nebenstedt in Lower Saxony. *Die Goldbrakteaten der Völkerwanderungszeit: Ikonographischer Katalog*, vol. 2.1, 95.



Fig. 4. The stone from Västerlång (Sö 40). Photo by Thorgunn Snædal.



Fig. 5. The baptismal font from Norum (Bo NIYR 3), now in Stockholm, Historiska museet. Photo by the author.

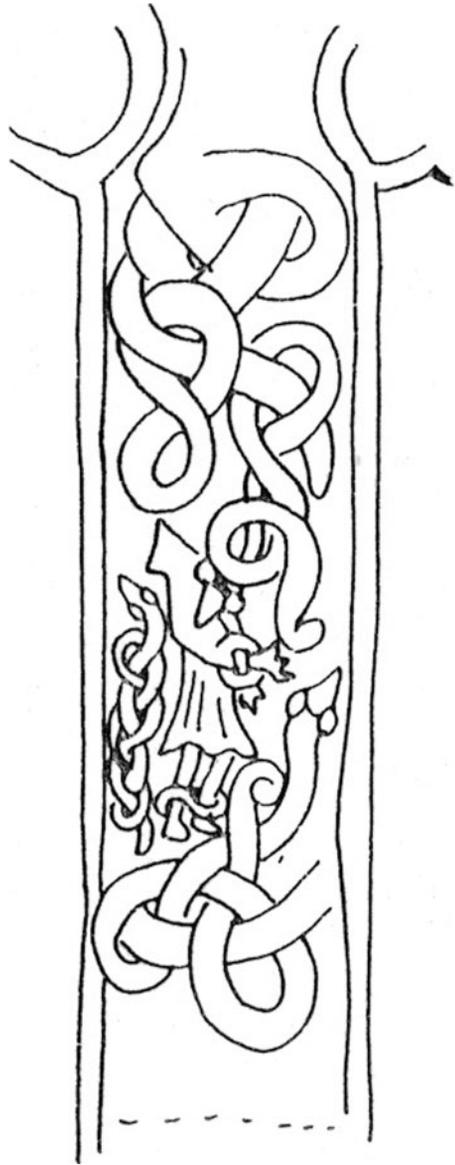


Fig. 3. A detail of the cross fragment from Kirk Andreas. Illustration from Martin Blindheim, *Sigurds saga i middelalderens billedkunst* (Oslo: Universitetets Oldsaksamling, 1972–1973), 28.

three serpents. By his side is a circular object that is reminiscent of a bracteate and could perhaps be interpreted as a symbol for gold or riches. According to information from the museum, its meaning is unclear;⁴³ Nordland, whose theory has been mentioned above, interpreted the image simply as a reference to the underworld, where worms devour men's bodies after death.⁴⁴ Naturally it is not improbable that ancient depictions of *ormagarðar* such as these involve connotations of precisely this type, and may not be intended as depictions of a particular legendary hero. But in the light of where these objects were found—particularly in the case of the stone found near the banks of the Rhine, very much in the setting of the Burgundian legend—might it not be worth considering whether they are really only evidence of general ideas about death, or whether they may reflect narratives about snake pits, and even the legend of Gunnarr's death? Even if the two finds from Lower Saxony are geographically further removed from the traditional setting of the legend than is the memorial stone, their find-spots are not far from that legendary setting, and the possibility that they depict Gunnarr's death might at least be considered.

Before turning to Scandinavian visual sources as evidence of the story of Gunnarr's death in that part of the world, we must consider briefly an image from the Isle of Man. This is a stone cross fragment from Kirk Andreas (No 121),⁴⁵ which shows a man bound in a snake pit (Fig. 3). The image, dating from the tenth century, shows one of the three snakes biting the man's heart, just as Gunnarr's death is described in *Völsunga saga*:⁴⁶ "... one large, vicious adder that slid up to him and dug in its snout until it struck into his heart, and he died there with great courage"⁴⁷ ("... nadra mikil ok illiligh skreid til hans ok grof inn sinum rana, þar til er hun hio hans hiarta, ok þar leth hann sitt lif med mikille hreyste").⁴⁸ That this is a depiction of Gunnarr is indicated by the fact that on the same fragment, and on three other fragments from the same area and of similar date, there are images that refer to the story of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, Gunnarr's

⁴³ See "Grabstele von Niederdollendorf," <http://www.rlmv.lvr.de/hereinspaziert/meisterwerke/d71c6b47-819f-4a5b-9142-c22943710ce7.htm> (accessed on June 20, 2012). One side of the stone is shown on this web page. This side of the stone carries a picture of a man with a spear, and he seems to be standing on a dragon: see Peter Paulsen, *Drachenkämpfer, Löwenritter und die Heinrichsage* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1966), table L, abb. 82b. Although this image has nearly always been interpreted as a symbol of Christ, it is an undeniably interesting coincidence that the stone carries an image that corresponds to the story of Gunnarr on one side while the other carries an image that could just as easily be of a dragon slayer, e.g., Sigurðr Fáfnisbani. See Walter Seitter, "Siegfrieds Abstieg und Kriemhilds Aufstieg im 13. Jahrhundert," in *Siegfried Schmied und Drachentöter*, ed. Volker Gallé (Worms: Nibelungenedition, 2005), 88–109, at 99.

⁴⁴ Nordland, "Ormegarden," 109 and 113.

⁴⁵ The stone is preserved at Manx Museum, Douglas, Isle of Man.

⁴⁶ Martin Blindheim, *Sigurds saga i middelalderens billedkunst* (Oslo: Universitetets Oldsaksamling, 1972–73), 28–29; Sue Margeson, "On the Iconography of the Manx Crosses," in *The Viking Age in the Isle of Man*, ed. Christine Fell et al. (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1983), 95–106, at 100–2. A snake biting a man's heart is recognizable in most drawings/photos of the image, including the one below, which is taken from Blindheim's study.

⁴⁷ *The Saga of the Volsungs*, trans. R.G. Finch (London: Nelson, 1965), 71.

⁴⁸ *Völsunga saga ok Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, ed. Olsen, 101.

brother-in-law, according to legend. As has been pointed out, there are certain similarities between the carving on the Kirk Andreas cross and a later depiction of Gunnarr on the stave-church portal from Austad, described below.⁴⁹

Despite the obvious similarities between the image of the bound figure and the legend of Gunnarr, the figure has alternatively been identified as Loki, who was also bound and tortured by snakes, as related in *Gylfaginning*, in *Snorra-Edda*.⁵⁰ Loki was, however, neither bitten in the heart/side, according to the myth, nor was he actually put into a snake pit, but was rather bound to three stones, with a snake hanging over him. The images from the Isle of Man are believed to have been made by Norsemen who had either settled on the island or spent some time there,⁵¹ and in light of this fact, there is admittedly no reason to assume that the tale of Sigurðr and his brother-in-law Gunnarr was known in the British Isles; it is likely that there was a relatively circumscribed community of Norsemen there who knew the story from their home regions.

Now we turn to the Nordic countries. Images—carved in stone or wood, or woven in tapestries—constitute some of the main evidence for the currency of the legend in Scandinavia. It is generally accepted as a crucial criterion for identifying an image as that of Gunnarr in the snake pit that a lyre or harp must be depicted; with one or two exceptions this is positioned beneath his feet. The following images, all of which come from medieval locations in Norway or Sweden, meet this requirement.⁵²

1. 11th century: A picture stone from Västerlång, Södermanland, Sweden (Sö 40)⁵³ (Fig. 4). This shows a man sitting in a chair, with one leg shackled and his arms stretched out as if he is holding something; the object he is holding is not clearly represented, but as he is surrounded by serpents it must be considered as a possibility

⁴⁹ Sigmund Oehrl, *Vierbeinerdarstellungen auf schwedischen Runensteinen: Studien zur nordgermanischer Tier- und Fesselungsikonografie* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), 22.

⁵⁰ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, 69–70. C.B. Caples pointed out that Loki—unlike Gunnarr—plays a part in the story of Sigurðr's youth, and believes that because of the myth in *Gylfaginning*, he would usually have been depicted as “the bound one,” which is why he could have been shown among snakes on the fragment from Kirk Andreas. Caples argues that it would have been appropriate to depict Loki in connection with other images on the same cross, showing Sigurðr after the killing of Fáfnir. Like some other scholars, Caples believes that there are no indications that the legends of Sigurðr and Gunnarr were combined at this early stage. See C.B. Caples, “The Man in the Snakepit and the Iconography of the Sigurd Legend,” *The Rice University Studies* 62, no. 2 (1976): 1–16, at 7 and 11–14. They are, however, already brothers-in-law in *Hamdismál*, one of the oldest of the Eddaic poems.

⁵¹ See Margeson, “On the Iconography of the Manx Crosses,” 104–5.

⁵² Most sources are found in Blindheim, *Sigurds saga i middelalderens billedkunst*, and Sue Margeson, “The Volsung Legend in Medieval Art,” in *Medieval Iconography and Narrative: A Symposium*, eds. Flemming G. Andersen et al. (Odense: Odense University Press, 1980), 183–211, at 196–207. Images from Norway are also discussed in Gunnar Nordanskog's *Föreställd hedendom: Tidigmedeltida skandinaviska kyrkportar i forskning och historia*, Vågar till Midgård (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2006), but did not come to my notice until this article was almost complete. My examination of the death of Gunnarr is part of a larger treatment of the *fornaldarsögur* on which I have been engaged since 2005.

⁵³ The stone is located by the Västerlång-Church, Hölebo, Södermanland.

that a harp is intended;⁵⁴ the fact alone that the figure seems to be holding something makes Gunnarr a more likely candidate than, for example, Loki, who was firmly bound across three stones and then tormented by a snake, as has already been touched upon.⁵⁵ This image is compatible with legends that were definitely known at this date of men in comparable circumstances—in other words, with the tale of Gunnarr's death, and perhaps also with the oral tales about Ragnarr loðbrók in the snake pit. The man in the image is being bitten by one of the serpents, as were both those saga heroes—not in the side, though, as might be expected, but in the thigh.⁵⁶ Finally, it should also be mentioned that the Ramsund carving, the best-known carving of images from the story of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, is from this same region, Södermanland, and is also dated to the eleventh century. This fact alone would seem to increase the likelihood that Gunnarr was a familiar saga hero in the same area.

2. 12th century: A stone baptismal font from Norum, Bohuslän, Sweden (Bo NIYR 3/SHM 1700), an area that formerly belonged to Norway (Fig. 5). The font is decorated with an image of a man in a snake pit with a harp lying at his feet.⁵⁷
3. C.1200: Portal of the stave church at Hylestad in East Agder, Norway (Fig. 6). The Hylestad carvings are considered the oldest of the preserved wooden carvings in or from Norwegian stave churches that show scenes from the story of the Völsungs. The carvings include an image where Gunnarr lies/sits among the serpents with his hand(s) bound, playing the lyre with his feet.⁵⁸
4. C.1200 or slightly later: Portal from the stave church at Austad in East Agder, Norway (Fig. 7). This shows two scenes from the story of the Völsungs involving Gunnarr and his brother Högni.⁵⁹ The first of these shows Gunnarr, lying shackled among snakes and playing the harp with his feet, as described in *Atlamálar*. The largest snake can clearly be seen biting him in the heart, and one of King Atli's men is standing over him holding a heart, that of Hjalli the coward or Högni, son of Gjúki, as related in stanza 24 of *Atlakviða*. The other picture shows a man cutting Högni's—or perhaps Hjalli's—heart out of him, with another man standing over him, ready with a container to receive the heart. A third man, possibly Atli, is waiting eagerly for the heart with outstretched hands.
5. 1200 or slightly later: A wooden baptismal font from the church at Näs in Jamtland, Sweden, an area that was under Norwegian rule in the Middle Ages (Fig. 8).⁶⁰ It is

⁵⁴ Sven B.F. Jansson, *Runinskrifter i Sverige* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1976), 150–51.

⁵⁵ It has been suggested that the image could possibly depict the myth of the binding of Loki: see Oehrl, *Vierbeinerdarstellungen auf schwedischen Runensteinen*, 101–2 and 143–44.

⁵⁶ An alternative interpretation invites the identification of the figure as Gunnarr in the snake pit as well. Here, the man would have his bound hands stretched out, while playing a vaguely depicted instrument (a harp) with one leg; in this case, there is only one serpent identifiable, biting him in the thigh, as the other “snakes” are now seen as an instrument.

⁵⁷ Blindheim, *Sigurds saga i middelalderens billedkunst*, 35–37; Margeson, “The Völsung Legend in Medieval Art,” 207.

⁵⁸ Blindheim, *Sigurds saga i middelalderens billedkunst*, 21–23; Erla Bergendahl Hohler, *Norwegian Stave Church Sculpture*, 2 vols. (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1999), 1:255 and 2:102–3.

⁵⁹ Blindheim, *Sigurds saga i middelalderens billedkunst*, 35–38; Hohler, *Norwegian Stave Church Sculpture*, 1:112–13 and catalogue, s.v. Austad, 2:135–36.

⁶⁰ The baptismal font was later moved to the church of Lockne. See Blindheim, *Sigurds saga i middelalderens billedkunst*, 36–38. Cf. dl. Nordanskog, *Förställd hedendom*, 254–55.



Fig. 6. A detail from the portal of Hylestad church, now in Oslo, Kulturhistorisk museum (C4321). Illustration from Henrik Schück, *Illustrerad Svensk Litteraturhistoria*, vol. 1 (Stockholm: H. Geber, 1911), 108.

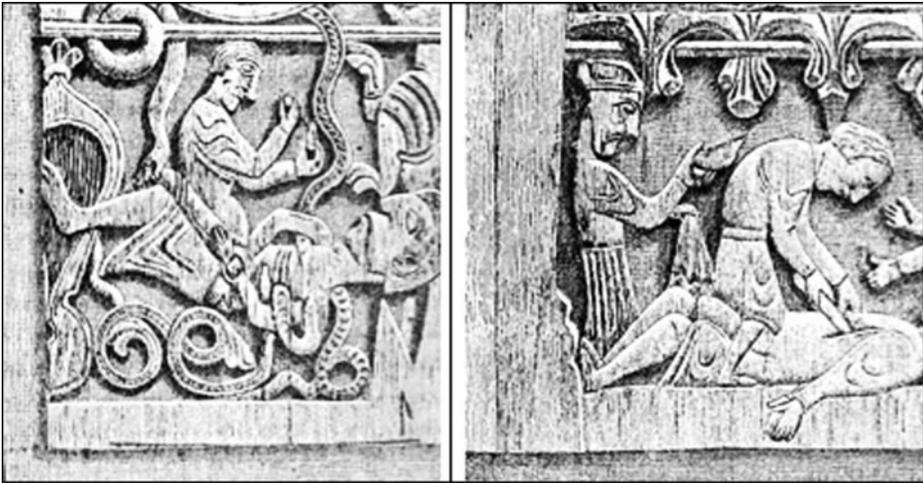


Fig. 7. The carvings from the church at Austad (C8666). Illustration from Schück, *Illustrerad Svensk Litteraturhistoria*, 1:110.



Fig. 8. The baptismal font from Näs, later Lockne, now in Stockholm, Historiska museet (23002:51). Photo by the author.

difficult to determine whether the man depicted is sitting or lying down, but at least he is playing the harp with his feet. The image is reminiscent of that from Västerlång.

6. 13th century: Pew from the stave church at Heddal, Telemark, Norway.
7. 13th–14th centuries: Portal from the stave church in Uvdal, Numedal, Norway.
8. 13th–14th centuries: Portal from the main room of the farmhouse at Mellom Kravik, Numedal, Norway.
9. 14th or 15th century: Drinking horn from Mo, Telemark, Norway.⁶¹

Besides these “typical” images of Gunnarr, other images are found in these same countries, and also on the island of Gotland, showing a man surrounded by snakes, but without any musical instrument. These have generally not been classed as portraying Gunnarr, though opinion on this point is divided, and Gunnarr has been associated with most of them.⁶² There are seven of these images, as follows.⁶³

1. 9th century: The carvings on the cart from the Oseberg ship burial, Norway (C55000, no. 224).⁶⁴
2. 9th–10th century: The picture stone Klinte Hunninge I, Gotland (GF C9286).
3. 10th century: The picture stone Stenkyrka Smiss I, Gotland (GF 3428).
4. 10th century: The picture stone Ardre VIII, Gotland (SHM 11118:8).⁶⁵

⁶¹ For items from Heddal, Uvdal, Mellom Kravik, and Mo, see Blindheim, *Sigurds saga i middelalderens billedkunst*, 36–37.

⁶² See, e.g., Michaela Helmbrecht, *Wirkmächtige Kommunikationsmedien: Menschenbilder der Vendel- und Wikingerzeit und ihre Kontexte* (Lund: Lunds Universitet, 2011), 107–8.

⁶³ Gunnarr has also been mentioned in connection with the figure on the English Gosforth cross and another carving from the church at Nes, Telemark, in Norway, but a great deal of uncertainty surrounds the subject matter of both these images. See, e.g., Nordanskog, *Förställd hedendom*, 254; James Lang, *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture*, vol. 6, *Northern Yorkshire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 186. Furthermore, we might mention a capital from the church at Östra Herrestad in Skåne, Sweden (Anders Piltz, “I begynnelsen var idén,” in *Den romanska konsten*, ed. Lennart Karlsson et al., *Signums svenska konsthistoria* 3 [Lund: Signum, 1995], 7–26, at 23); a rune stone from Lagnö in Aspö parish, Sweden (Sigmund Oehrl, “Der runenfels von Aspö, die Goldbrakteaten der Völkerwanderungszeit und die Chiffren der Gott-Tier-Kommunikation,” *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur* 139, no. 4 [2010]: 418–58, at 422); a stone from Stora Ramsjö in Uppland, Sweden (Schück, *Illustrerad Svensk Litteraturhistoria*, 109); carvings on the Danish Jellinge stone; and a belt brooch from the Thames in London (Oehrl, *Vierbeinerdarstellungen auf schwedischen Runensteinen*, 132 and 142–43). Interesting parallels are also to be found on some late Saxon stirrup straps (David Williams, *Late Saxon Stirrup-Strap Mounts: A Classification and Catalogue. A Contribution to the Study of Late Saxon Ornamental Metalwork* [York: Council for British Archaeology, 1997], 36–39); on a carved portal from Nordre Vangstad in Flesberg, Norway (Gry Charlotte Gj. Andersen, “Gunnar i Ormegården,” at <http://www.visitmiddelalderdalen.no/default.aspx?ArticleID=53946&MenuID=10495> [2005; accessed on June 20, 2012]); and on pictures on English stone crosses from the Giant’s Grave in Penrith, from Whalley, from Lancashire, and from Great Clifton near Workington (W.G. Collingwood, *Northumbrian Crosses of the Pre-Norman Age* [London: Faber & Gwyer, 1927], 96, 107–8, and 157). None of these images is, however, distinctive enough to be considered of equal importance to other, and much more probable, depictions of the legend of Gunnarr.

⁶⁴ Nordland, “Ormegården,” 91–92.

⁶⁵ For datings of Klinte Hunninge I, Stenkyrka Smiss I, and Ardre VIII, see Lisbeth M. Imer, “Gotlandske billedsten—dateringen af Lindqvists gruppe C og D,” *Aarbøger for nordisk oldkyndighed og historie* 2001 (2004): 47–111, at 105. Previously, Sune Lindqvist dated the Gotland picture

5. 9th–11th century: Tapestry from Överhogdal, Härjedalen, Sweden, an area that formerly belonged to Norway (no. 1890). The tapestry is seen as containing scenes from five different legends, including *Völsunga saga*, one of these scenes being of Gunnarr in the snake pit.⁶⁶
6. 11th century: The sandstone carving Ardre III, Gotland (SHM 11118:3).
7. 11th century: The stone chest Ardre VI, Gotland (SHM 11118:6).⁶⁷

As is immediately evident, these images, ranging in date from the ninth to the eleventh century, predate the “typical” Gunnarr images. Let us therefore consider the four oldest images, namely the three images on memorial stones in Gotland (items 2, 3, and 4 above) and the image carved on the wooden cart found in the Oseberg ship in Norway (item 1). All are from the ninth/tenth centuries.

Before we examine the details of the picture stones, we should stress that snakes are depicted in a variety of pictorial contexts on many other Gotland stones, not all of which have been explained. Even if the semiotic or iconographic significance of the three stones under examination here, all studied at first hand by the author of this article, is unlikely to be unequivocal, it can at least be demonstrated that the stones show similar characteristics. First is the stone Klinte Hunninge I (item 2 above), which shows a man lying in a snake pit (Fig. 9). The image, on the left-hand side, below the center, apparently shows one of the snakes biting the man in his left breast, as is described in the story of Gunnarr as it is related in *Völsunga saga* and in other sources.⁶⁸ As far as one can see, the female figure approaching the captive is bringing him something, as is the woman

stones and divided them into five groups, A–E. According to his dating, Klinte Hunninge I is the oldest of the three stones mentioned here, from about 700, while the other two can be dated to the eighth century or even later: Sune Lindqvist, *Gotlands Bildsteine*, 2 vols. Kungliga vitterhets historie och antikvitets akademien (Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand, 1941–42), 1:108–23; see further discussions in 2:22–24, 80–81, and 128–29. The datings are also discussed in Erik Nylén and Jan Peder Lamm, *Bildstenar* (Stockholm: Gidlunds, 2003), 180–206: cf. Ardre VIII (pp. 52 and 71), Klinte Hunninge I (p. 99), and Stenkirka Smis I (p. 105). The stones from Klinte Hunninge I and Stenkirka Smis I are preserved in Gotlands Fornsal, Gotlands Museum in Visby, and Ardre VIII is preserved in Historiska museet, Stockholm.

⁶⁶ The tapestry shows a man surrounded by loops, lying inside a hexagon: see Agnes Branting and Andreas Lindblom, *Medeltida vävnader och broderier i Sverige*, vol. 1 (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1928), 16; Karl Hauck, “Germanische Bilddenkmäler des früheren Mittelalters,” *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 31 (1957): 349–79, at 367–69; Lena Elisabeth Norrman, “Visual Poetry, Weaving Meaning: Micronarratives in the Nordic Oral Tradition,” *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 1 (2005): 137–62, at 148–56 and 159. Cf. Karl Hauck, “B. zur Religion” and “B. zur Heldensage,” in *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1976), 2:577–98, at 596. The tapestry is preserved in Jamtli (Jämtlands läns museum), Östersund.

⁶⁷ On Ardre III and VI, see Lindqvist, *Gotlands Bildsteine*, 1:123, table 66–67, figs. 161 and 165, and 2:20–22; cf. Sven B.F. Jansson and Elias Wessén, *Gotlands runinskrifter*, vol. 1.2, Sveriges runinskrifter 11 (Stockholm: Vitterhets historie och antikvitets akademien, 1962), 205–6 and 210–12, plates 60–62. On Ardre VI see Nordland, “Ormegarden,” 92.

⁶⁸ See Lindqvist, *Gotlands Bildsteine*, 1:95–102, table 52, fig. 128; 2:80–81; and Nylén and Lamm, *Bildstenar*, 52. The interpretation is based on Lindqvist’s painting, but an earlier drawing made by Olof Sörling is less distinctive, as seen in fig. 428.



Fig. 9. Klinte Hunninge I, now in Visby, Gotlands Museum, GF C9286. Photo by Per Widerström.

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depicted below the snake pit; they seem to be bringing more snakes to add to the pit.⁶⁹

The scene in Stenkyrka Smiss I (item 3 above) is in many ways comparable with that of Klinte Hunninge I: in the centre of the stone there is the figure of a man standing (or lying) among snakes (Fig. 10). The upper part of the carving is worn away, but, even though this makes part of it difficult to make out from a photograph, the important elements are immediately clear at first glance, including the way one of the snakes has its jaws open as if about to bite the man.⁷⁰

The third of the Gotland stones, Ardre VIII (item 4 above), has an image in the bottom right-hand corner showing a man in a snake pit, and the scene is very much similar to the other two (Fig. 11).⁷¹

Stenkyrka Smiss I has only been discussed superficially from the point of view of the snake-pit motif, though the stone has been mentioned in connection with the preservation of the Burgundian legend;⁷² the snake-pit images on Klinte Hunninge I and Ardre VIII, on the other hand, have been interpreted in various ways. The Ardre stone has been seen as a reference to the myth of the binding of Loki, in which drops of snake's venom fall into his face, as is related in *Gylfaginning* in *Snorra-Edda*.⁷³ However, this interpretation does not correspond with the smaller details of the image—for example, *Gylfaginning* mentions only one serpent, while on the stone there are at least two. Furthermore, Snorri, the author, says that Sigyn, Loki's wife, held a hand basin to prevent the drops of poison from falling onto him, but the female figure on the left of the scene on Ardre VIII is holding not a basin or a tub of any kind, but apparently a drinking horn. The same applies to Klinte Hunninge I; here, too, Loki has been named, while others have felt that the image depicts Gunnarr Gjúkason.⁷⁴ Before

⁶⁹ The female figure to the side of the snake pit has been taken as a valkyrie, in which case she may be welcoming Gunnarr to Valhalla. This interpretation may be criticized, as she is not holding a drinking horn; also, as Gunnarr was not killed by weapons, he had no place in Valhalla according to Norse mythology. The same figure has been interpreted as a woman watching Gunnarr in the pit; going by the written sources, she could then either be his sister, Guðrún Gjúkadóttir, as described in *Völsunga saga*, where she sends him the harp, or his beloved, Oddrún, as described in *Oddrúnargrátr*.

⁷⁰ See Lindqvist, *Gotlands Bildsteine*, vol. 1, table 39, fig. 97 and vol. 2:128–29; Branting and Lindblom, *Medeltida vävnader och broderier i Sverige*, 17; Nylén and Lamm, *Bildstenar*, 105. As the image of the snake pit is shown inside a frame, it is not necessary to interpret it in relation to the surrounding images. Many of the images on the Gotland picture stones indicate that a single pictorial motif could have been sufficient to allude to a certain legend.

⁷¹ Ludwig Buisson, *Der Bildstein Ardre VIII auf Gotland: Göttermythen, Heldensagen und Jenseitsglaube der Germanen im 8. Jahrhundert n. Chr.* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976), 65–66. Cf. Lindqvist, *Gotlands Bildsteine*, vol. 1, table 59, figs. 139–40 and vol. 2:22–24; Nylén and Lamm, *Bildstenar*, 71; Klaus von See, *Germanische Heldensage: Stoffe, Probleme, Methoden* (Frankfurt: Athenäum, 1971), 118.

⁷² Hauck, “Germanische Bilddenkmäler des früheren Mittelalters,” 367–69 and Hauck, “B. zur Religion” and “B. zur Heldensage,” 594; cf. Jörn Staecker, “Heroes, Kings, and Gods,” in *Old Norse Religion in Long-Term Perspectives*, ed. Anders Andrén et al. (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2006), 363–68, at 365.

⁷³ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, 69–70; cf. Lindqvist, *Gotlands Bildsteine*, 1:88, table 59, figs. 139–40 and 2:24; Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, 66; Staecker, “Heroes, Kings, and Gods,” 363; Oehrl, *Vierbeinerdarstellungen auf schwedischen Runensteinen*, 139.

⁷⁴ See, e.g., Oehrl, *Vierbeinerdarstellungen auf schwedischen Runensteinen*, 140.

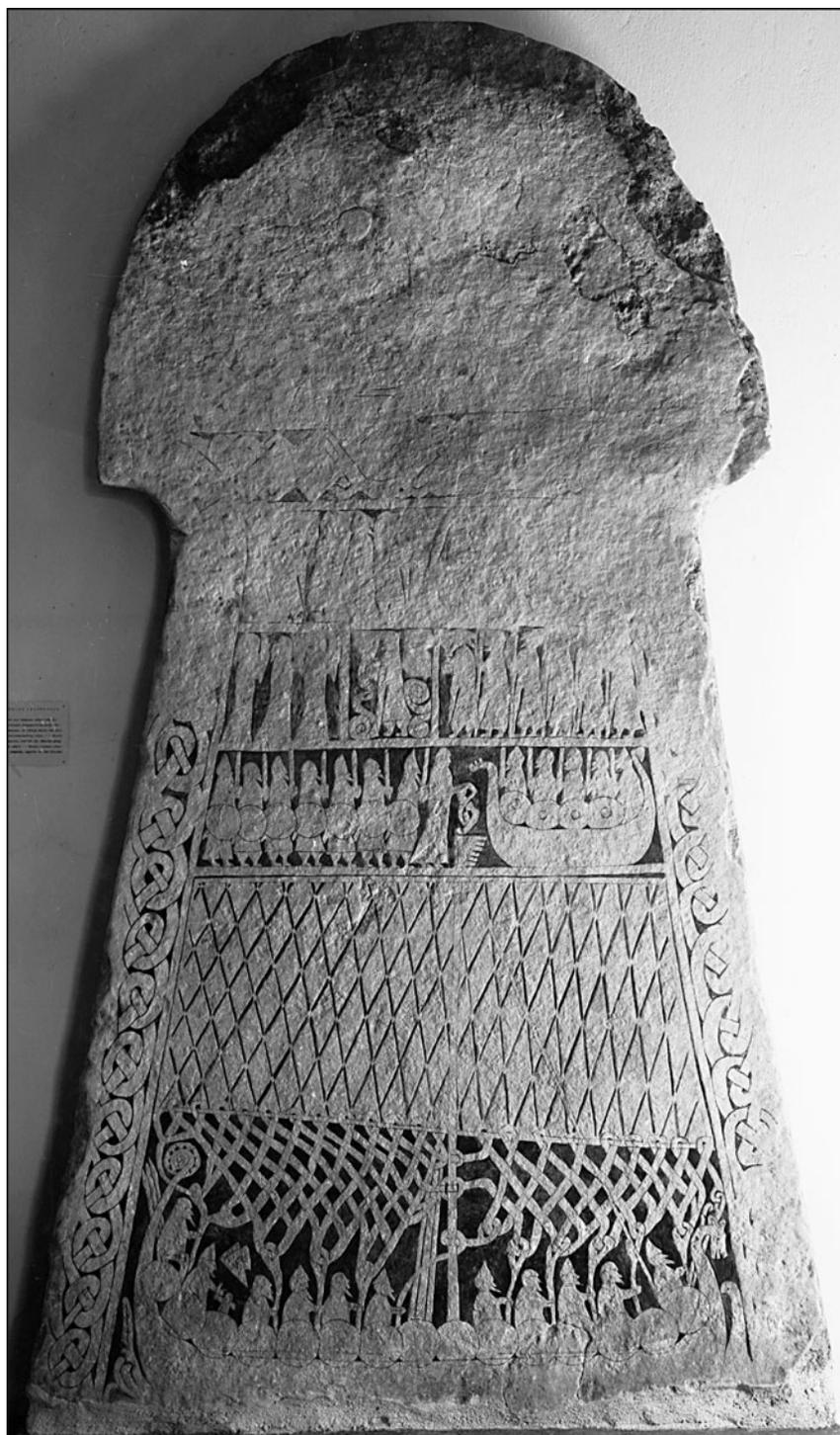


Fig. 10. Stenkyrka Smiss I, now in Visby, Gotlands Museum, GF 3428. Photo by Harald Faith-Ell. ATA. Stockholm.

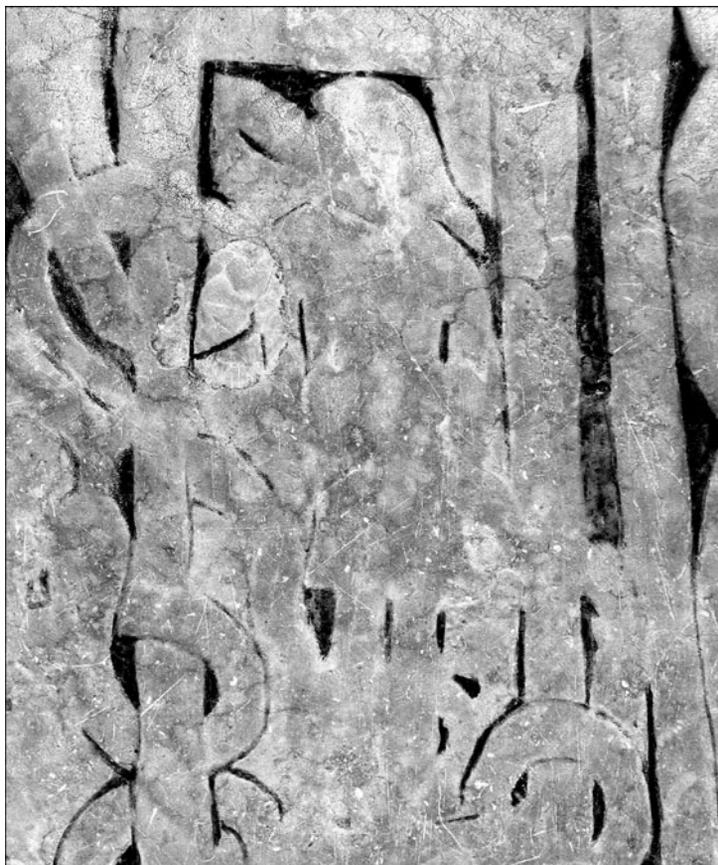


Fig. 11. A detail on Ardre VIII, now in Stockholm, Historiska museet, SHM 11118:8. Photo by the author.



Fig. 12. The Oseberg cart, now in Oslo, Kulturhistorisk museum, C55000, no. 224. Photo by the author.

pursuing this point, these three pictures should be put in the context of the fourth image under consideration here, that on the cart (item 1 above) that formed part of the Oseberg ship burial and is dated to the ninth century (Fig. 12). This extraordinary cart is decorated with a large amount of skilfully executed carving, including a picture that in many ways can be compared to the three pictures from Gotland (Klinte Hunninge I, Stenkyrka Smiss I and Ardre VIII), and shows a man lying entangled among serpents; it looks as if he is being attacked by the snakes from different directions, while a frog or a reptile bites him in the side. Beside the man is a woman, reminiscent of the woman depicted beside the snake pit on Klinte Hunninge I and Ardre VIII.⁷⁵

Opinion is divided on the interpretation of the carving, and various possibilities—such as that the reference is simply to Old Norse notions about Hel, or to the Christian hell, as was mentioned above—have been put forward. However, other images on the cart and on textile fragments from the Oseberg find have been seen as referring to heroic legends, which indicates that the image of the snake pit may well be of a similar heroic origin.⁷⁶ Despite this probability, commentators have thought it safest to stop short of concluding that the picture on the cart definitely shows Gunnarr Gjúkason, because, as is the case with the picture stones, there is no sign of a musical instrument, the visual element that connects other—albeit more recent—snake-pit images indubitably with the figure of Gunnarr.⁷⁷ Furthermore, it has been pointed out that visual motifs can be stereotyped without necessarily conveying a particular narrative.

Signe Horn Fuglesang, whose discussion of three of these pictures, though only superficial, is one of the most recent, is one of the scholars who cast doubt on them as witnesses to the Gunnarr legend, principally on the grounds that images of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani do not appear in Scandinavian art before the eleventh century, and images of Gunnarr (in the form showing him playing the harp with his feet) not until the twelfth.⁷⁸ Jón Helgason, who makes no claims regarding the source value of these images, says that if “it were certain that the man [on the Oseberg cart] was supposed to represent Gunnarr” then we could conclude that *Atlakviða* was known in Norway early in the ninth century.⁷⁹ The same could therefore probably be said regarding the probability of Norwegian familiarity with the legends that seem to be depicted on the stones from Gotland in the same century. Whether the source for the images on these stones was *Atlakviða* or other types of poetry and oral traditions covering the same material is an unresolved question.

⁷⁵ See, e.g., Paulsen, *Drachenkämpfer, Löwenritter und die Heinrichsage*, 57. Cf. Hauck, “B. zur Religion” and “B. zur Heldensage,” 595. It is considered possible that the carving was based on a model from the eighth century (Nordland, “Ormegarden,” 91).

⁷⁶ On the possible depiction of the so-called Hildir legend on the Oseberg cart, see, e.g., Signe Horn Fuglesang, “Ekphrasis and Surviving Imagery in Viking Scandinavia,” *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 3 (2007): 193–224, at 194–97. Cf. Hauck, “B. zur Religion” and “B. zur Heldensage,” 586–87 and 596, for a hanging tree, as described in *Gautreks saga*, and on the legendary battle at Brävalla.

⁷⁷ Blindheim, *Sigurds saga i middelalderens billedkunst*, 12.

⁷⁸ Fuglesang, 204–7; see also Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, 66; Blindheim, *Sigurds saga i middelalderens billedkunst*, 12; von See, *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, 6:928.

⁷⁹ Helgason, *Tvær kviður fornar*, 93.

THREE STAGES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE LEGEND

Certainly, it must be borne in mind that images of a man in a snake pit are older than our literary sources for the story of Gunnarr and more widely disseminated,⁸⁰ and consequently it is natural to be cautious when interpreting such pictures, particularly when they show a man without a musical instrument. Nonetheless, it is no less correct to emphasise the fact that *Háttalykill inn forni*, *Piðreks saga af Bern*, and other sources make no mention of Gunnarr's playing the harp, and that in *Atlakviða*, which is probably the oldest poem about Gunnarr in the snake pit, he plays the harp with his hands. Therefore it is natural to expect that images based on oral sources of this type will not show a harp at Gunnarr's feet, and possibly no harp at all. In other words, the presence of a musical instrument at his feet might reflect a more recent variant of the legend, that is, poems or tales such as *Atlamál*, *Snorra-Edda*, and *Völsunga saga*. In the light of this possibility it is relevant to ask whether the detail of Gunnarr's harp might be a later addition to the legend of his death or, in other words, whether in older variants of the legend he died in the snake pit without a musical instrument.

Our certainty about the conclusions we can draw from this argument from silence—namely, the argument that some sources that include accounts of Gunnarr's death do not mention a harp—must be qualified, since these sources are very concise and were probably never intended to present a detailed description of the events. But this qualification does not apply to *Piðreks saga af Bern*. This saga is closer than the other Norse variants to the German version of the legend and may therefore testify as to whether the oldest visual sources correspond with legends or poems under German influence, possibly of an even earlier date than *Atlakviða*,⁸¹ or perhaps with older legends or poems that exercised an influence on *Piðreks saga af Bern*. The existence of sources that mention no harp lead us back to consideration of the bracteates and memorial stone from Sweden and Germany, which also show no harp. In this context, we may also recall that the snake pit does not feature at all in the German *Nibelungenlied*, which was composed on the basis of related material in about 1200.

Examining the sources discussed above in context with each other, we find more in favor of than against the view that the four Scandinavian images (Klinte Hunninge I, Stenkirka Smiss I, Ardre VIII, and the Oseberg cart) should be grouped with the other pictures of Gunnarr. Firstly, they share certain motifs—such as that of the serpent biting the man in his breast or side—that are also found in the written accounts of Gunnarr's death.⁸² Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, other images on the same stones or objects also refer to figures from Norse heroic legends, a fact that makes it not unlikely that the snake-pit images do the same. In addition, some scholars are of the opinion, and not without

⁸⁰ See, e.g., Nordland, "Ormegarden," 95–106.

⁸¹ The fact that the poet of *Atlakviða* calls the *Gjúkungs* "Niflungar" (Nibelungs), suggests a German influence (stanza 27, *Konungsbók Eddukvæða*, ed. Gunnlaugsson, 250–51).

⁸² Iconographic sources showing a serpent biting Gunnarr in the side are listed in Table 1. The following written sources contain the same motif: *Oddrúnargrátr*, *Atlamál*, *Dráp Niflunga*, *Snorra-Edda*, and *Völsunga saga*.

TABLE 1
Images of Gunnarr in the snake pit

Location of motif	A man, bound	A harp/lyre	A man and snakes	Snake(s) biting the man	Other figures	Century or date
N: Oseberg cart			x	x	woman	9th
S: Klinte Hunninge I			x	x	woman	9th–10th
S: Stenkyrka Smiss I			x	x		10th
S: Ardre VIII			x		woman	10th
M: Kirk Andreas	x		x	x	(woman)	10th
S/N: Överhogdal			x			9th–11th
S: Västerlång	x	(x)	x	x		11th
S: Ardre III	x		(x)			11th
S: Ardre VI			x			11th
S: Norum	x		x			12th
N: Hylestad	x	x	x			<1200>
N: Austad I and II	x	x	x	x	Atli? and Högni	c.1200
S/N: Näs	(x)	x	x	(x)		c.1200
N: Heddal, a pew	x	x	x			13th
N: Mellom Kravik	(x)	x	x			13th–14th
N: Uvdal		x	x			13th–14th
N: Mo	x	x	x	x		14th or 15th

S: Sweden, N: Norway and M: Isle of Man. Though the sources used do not always agree on dating, they seldom differ by more than a century. Ranges given here span the interval from the earliest to the latest dates proposed. < means *or earlier*, and > *or later*. In case of uncertainty, the x marking is shown in parentheses.

reason, that two of these stones, and also two other comparable stones from Gotland, show other scenes from *Völsunga saga*, and in particular from the story of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani.⁸³ If Norsemen, at least on Gotland, were familiar with that story, then it can be considered likely that they also knew the story of Gunnarr in the snake pit. Last but not least, the fact that a man in a snake pit is found in similar images dating from the ninth and tenth centuries, and then with some continuity thereafter, suggests that they were based on a well-known story; consequently, these four images corroborate each other's authenticity and they are corroborated still further by the three other images, on the Överhogdal tapestry and the carvings on Ardre III⁸⁴ and VI,⁸⁵ dating from the ninth to eleventh centuries, as mentioned above, and also the one from the Isle of Man.⁸⁶ The snake-pit images must therefore be seen in this overall context, and the criticism that this interpretation is incautious because pictures of Gunnarr do not appear before the twelfth century—based as this criticism is on the assumption that Gunnarr's iconography must include a harp—does not stand up. As has been suggested in the discussion above, the harp is in all likelihood not a crucial element for the analysis of these images.

It can be difficult to study oral traditions, particularly when they are as old as the ones under examination here, because sources and indications may be—and probably are—fragmentary, with the result that it is almost impossible to chart out with absolute confidence the development of the legend of Gunnarr's death. Like other oral tales, versions of the legend would have been passed from person to person, spreading in various directions. Broadly speaking, though, we can imagine the following three stages in the evolution of the images that refer, or may refer, to the legend.

Stage 1. The images from the ninth and tenth centuries show that the legend of the fall of the Burgundian kingdom, and specifically of the death of the Burgundian king Gundaharius, was familiar to Norsemen in that period and

⁸³ Anders Andrén, "Doors to Other Worlds: Scandinavian Death Rituals in Gotlandic Perspectives," *Journal of European Archaeology* 1 (1993): 33–55, at 40–43; Jansson, *Runinskrifter i Sverige*, 148; Staecker, 363–68; Hauck, "Germanische Bilddenkmäler des früheren Mittelalters," 367–69. See also Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, "Þar sem Sigmundur og Artúr mætast," in *Greppaminni: Rit til heiðurs Vésteini Ólasyni sjötugum*, ed. Margret Eggertsdóttir et al. (Reykjavik: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 2009), 3–17, at 5–6.

⁸⁴ In the bottom left corner of the stone there is a picture of a fettered man; the fetters (or possibly a snake) lie around his legs: Lindqvist, *Gotlands Bildsteine*, 1:123 and 2:20–21; Jansson and Wessén, *Gotlands runinskrifter*, 205–6 and plate 62; Oehrl, "Wieland der Schmied auf dem Kistenstein von Alskog kyrka," 550–53; and Thorgunn Snædal, "Ailikns vegn och Odens kämpar: Om Ardremonumentens bildvärld," in *Gotland-vikingaön*, ed. Gun Westholm (Gotland: Gotländskt arkiv, 2004), 57–64, at 62.

⁸⁵ The picture on Ardre VI shows two men surrounded by snakes. One of them, at the top of the stone, holds a child or a dwarf, while being attacked by one of the snakes that bites him in the chest; bites are also visible on his stomach, his back, and one of his hands. Another man, lying at the bottom of the stone, is surrounded by the same group of snakes and grips one of them with his hands: Lindqvist, *Gotlands Bildsteine*, vol. 1, tables 66–67, figs. 161 and 165 and vol. 2:22; Snædal, "Ailikns vegn och Odens kämpar," 58; Jansson and Wessén, *Gotlands runinskrifter*, 210–12 and plates 60–61.

⁸⁶ It is quite possible to interpret the images on Ardre III and VI in a different way. As the evidential value of the images is, however, not crucial for this study, they will not be analyzed any further at this point, but will be treated more thoroughly in my forthcoming study.

was probably associated with the story of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani. While Gunnarr's (Gundaharius's) death in Atli's (Attila's) snake pit seems to have been the standardized symbol of this legend, there is nothing to indicate that a harp featured in the story. The same can be said of the picture on the cross on the Isle of Man and other Norse pictorial representations from the tenth and eleventh centuries. From this we can conclude that the harp originally played no part in the legend of Gunnarr's death among the snakes; written sources, such as *Piðreks saga af Bern*, in which no harp is mentioned, also support this conclusion.

Stage 2. The first mention we have of Gunnarr's harp is in *Atlakviða*, where he plays it with his hands. Texts that can be seen as drawing on the account in *Atlakviða* are *Dráp Niflunga* and *Oddrúnargrátr*; these contain no mention of his playing the harp with his toes. No definitely comparable pictorial representation has survived, though if the portrayal from *Västerljung* (eleventh century) included a harp, as it quite possibly may have done,⁸⁷ then it would have corresponded with the account given in *Atlakviða*. There is nothing to rule out the possibility that the poet of *Atlakviða* added the harp into the scene of Gunnarr's death in the snake pit, but he may also have followed a version of the legend that included that addition. As is discussed above, the great antiquity of *Atlakviða* has been called into question and it has been argued that it may date from as late as after the mid-eleventh century; this would in fact fit in with the line of development proposed here.

Stage 3. The harp that appears by Gunnarr's feet and is a characteristic feature of portrayals from the twelfth century and later must indicate a more recent variant of the legend, and should be compared to later poems or oral tales, like *Atlamál*, which is dated to the twelfth century, and *Snorra-Edda* and *Völsunga saga*, from the thirteenth. In these variants of the tale, Gunnarr's hands are said to be bound, which is why he plays the harp with his toes.

As outlined above, it can be argued that the legend of Gunnarr's death and its pictorial representations followed a line of development from a version without any musical instrument to one with a harp that Gunnarr played with his hands, and on to one that he played with his toes. In other words, the conclusion is that Gunnarr Gjúkason did not acquire his skills as a performer, whether on the lyre or the harp, until the instrument was added in certain variants that might have taken shape in the ninth, tenth, or eleventh century, depending on the age of *Atlakviða*. Consequently, it is tempting to try to find out where the idea of the harp could have originated and how it became associated with Gunnarr.

THE HARP

Reference was made above to the death of the Vandal king Gelimer and to the possibility that his request for a harp as his death approached may have influenced the story of Gunnarr. On the other hand, if Gunnarr's harp did not come into the picture until the ninth to the eleventh century, as the above comparison of sources suggested, then the possibility that the account of Gelimer's

⁸⁷ Jansson, *Runinskrifter i Sverige*, 151.

death influenced a poem on the fall of the Burgundian kingdom as early as the sixth century can be discounted. Even if Gelimer's playing of a harp is not necessarily a direct model for Gunnarr's playing of the harp, there is nothing to prevent a dissemination of the motif through the network of even older legends. Moreover, on closer examination, the similarities between the two accounts are not in fact very great, since the two characters' musical performances serve different purposes: Gelimer used music to lament his lot, while the purpose of Gunnarr's harping is rather unclear in the older sources up until the composition of *Dráp Niflunga*, and other accounts of subsequent date, which state that he used music to lull the serpents and so stave off imminent death. *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, on the other hand, shares similarities with both the legends of Gunnarr's death and the legend of Gelimer. It relates how, when Ragnarr loðbrók was put in King Ella's snake pit, he recited a poem, a sort of funeral ode (*erfidrápa*), before he died.⁸⁸ Wolfgang Mohr pointed out that Ragnarr's declamation of this ode is unique under such circumstances insofar as, in other literary works, only men who are dying from wounds declaim funeral odes. Mohr attributed the insertion of the funeral ode motif in *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* to the influence of the legend of Gunnarr in the snake pit, Gunnarr's performance on the harp being understood as the accompaniment to a funeral ode.⁸⁹ While it may be that some people interpreted Gunnarr's harp playing in this way, this can hardly have been the case without exception, as one can easily imagine harp playing serving other purposes.⁹⁰

Others besides Gelimer and Daniel in the lions' den have been brought forward as candidates in the search for models for Gunnarr, including Orpheus with his lyre. So great was Orpheus' skill in music that all creation, including animals and men, were charmed by his playing and singing, and in certain stories he is credited with having sent serpents to sleep. The myth relates how the newly married Orpheus descended into Hades to reclaim his dead wife, and how he succeeded in persuading the rulers of the underworld to set her free.⁹¹ Even though he lost his wife again shortly afterwards, Orpheus had managed to overcome death, and his achievement has been compared with Christ's redemption of men's souls through his harrowing of hell. A point in common between the myth of Orpheus

⁸⁸ *Völsunga saga ok Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, ed. Olsen, 158–59. The reason why Ragnarr loðbrók has not been associated with the snake-pit images is probably first and foremost that he is believed to have been, or to have represented, a historical king who lived in the ninth century; hence the three pictures from Gotland and the one on the Oseberg cart may have been carved before his day. Consequently, King Ella's snake pit has generally been considered secondary to Attila's, and we might ask if the resemblance of the kings' names (Ella/Ælla—Attila) could possibly have anything to do with their common method of torturing, according to legend. As is stated above, Ragnarr's harp playing is first mentioned in a poem from the twelfth century. Furthermore, the snake-pit images as listed above are not accompanied by other pictorial motifs from *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, but do include other motifs from *Völsunga saga*.

⁸⁹ Mohr, "Geschichtserlebnis im Altgermanischen Heldenliede," 93.

⁹⁰ It might be mentioned that among objects found in the ship burial at Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, was a harp, indicating that Scandinavian people of the seventh century might have known the instrument. See Myrtle and Rupert Bruce-Mitford, "The Sutton Hoo Lyre, 'Beowulf' and the Origins of the Frame Harp," in Rupert Bruce-Mitford, *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology* (London: Gollancz, 1974), 188–97.

⁹¹ Michael Grant and John Hazel, *Who's Who in Classical Mythology* (London: Dent, 1993), 250–51.

and the legend of Gunnarr's death is that there are ancient depictions of Orpheus playing his lyre among the wild beasts of the underworld, including snakes. If we want to interpret these similarities as meaning that the myth of Orpheus was reformulated into the account of the death of Gunnarr, then it is a short step from there to the claim that Gunnarr is the Norse Orpheus or, in other words, a Christ figure, and that this is his role in Norse ecclesiastical art from the twelfth century onwards.⁹² But, as Nordland points out, it has proved difficult to demonstrate any direct connection between Orpheus and the Norse images discussed above, and in fact it is far from clear whether images of Gunnarr or Orpheus should be seen as Christ figures in a Scandinavian architectural or monumental context. There may be many reasons that resist simple formulations for the incorporation of these "non-Christian" figures on Christian structures and monuments.⁹³

While it is dubious whether we can link Orpheus directly to the account of the death of Gunnarr, it is possible to associate him far more convincingly with two other instrumental performers who are known from Nordic legend. One of them, Geat, is first mentioned, together with his beloved Mæðhild, in the Old English poem *Deor*, which is dated to about 900 or shortly afterwards. The narrative is very terse, and in fact can only be understood or explained fully with the aid of a much more recent legend, a ballad that survives in various textual forms in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Iceland (Harpens kraft). The ballad relates how a woman/bride drowns in a river, whereupon her husband/groom seizes a harp and plays music of such power that the supernatural master of the river turns her back, and her body rises from the depths of the river.⁹⁴ The resemblance to the myth of Orpheus is obvious.⁹⁵

⁹² See Nordland, "Ormegarden," 104–6; von See, *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, 6:928–29. Gunnarr's brother-in-law Sigurðr Fáfnisbani has been seen as a type of Christ figure, as has Gunnarr, to a lesser degree. Some scholars have discussed the question of why their legends were told or sung in twelfth-century Norway. One of them is Jesse L. Byock, who especially considered the role of the images found by the entrance of Norwegian stave churches. He regards Sigurðr as a sort of symbolic protector of the churches in question and conjectures that his presence at the front of the church, by the entrance, can be explained by the view that the entrance marks the divide between the secular and the holy; thus, the protector's role is to ward off evil spirits: see Jesse L. Byock, "Sigurðr Fáfnisbani: An Eddic Hero Carved on Norwegian Stave Churches," in *Poetry in the Scandinavian Middle Ages: The Seventh International Saga Conference*, ed. Teresa Pàroli (Spoleto: Presso la sede del Centro studi, 1990), 619–28, at 623 and 627–28. Cf. Emil Ploss, *Siegfried-Sigurd, der Drachenkämpfer: Untersuchungen zur germanisch-deutschen Heldensage: Zugleich ein Beitrag zur Entwicklungsgeschichte des alteuropäischen Erzählgutes* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1966), 87. Gunnar has also been seen as an example of what happens to people who do not obey the exhortations given in other images in the church, which are usually more exemplary: Nordanskog, *Förställd hedendom*, 244–66.

⁹³ Nordland, "Ormegarden," 106; cf. Ploss, *Siegfried-Sigurd, der Drachenkämpfer*, 87.

⁹⁴ Harpens kraft is listed as TSB A50. See Bengt R. Jonsson, Svale Solheim, and Eva Danielson, *The Types of the Scandinavian Medieval Ballad* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1978), 39; Sophus Bugge, "Harpens kraft," *Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi* 7 (1901): 97–141, at 98–99.

⁹⁵ Bugge explained the similarities between TSB A50 and the legend of Orpheus as being indebted to a more recent version of the Orpheus legend, the English poem *Sir Orfeo* from the beginning of the fourteenth century. He believed that the Norse ballad was based on *Sir Orfeo* as well as on a German poem and that the relationship was oral: Bugge, "Harpens kraft," 101–27. Bugge did not mention the Old English *Deor* in his study; nevertheless it must be of great significance in this

The other instrumentalist is the Danish poet Horant, one of the most renowned singers of Germanic heroic legend, who is mentioned frequently in medieval German literature. Horant has been seen as being modelled on Orpheus, the similarity being clearest in the power of their music, and in particular the power it exerts over animals. Horant appears, for example, in the Middle High German poem *Kudrun*, which is dated to the early thirteenth century. The substance of the poem, telling the story of Hilde and her daughter Kudrun, falls into three parts. The first tells of the Irish king Hagen; the second focuses on Hetel, king of the Hagelinger, who woos Hagen's daughter Hilde; Horant is Hetel's court poet. The third and last part draws heavily on the first two and tells the story of Kudrun, daughter of Hilde and Hetel. The main material in this poem is the "Hildir/Hilde legend," the story of how Hetel abducts Hilde. Horant's main role in the story is to charm Hilde with his music and so bring her to meet Hetel. The sixth part ("Abenteuer") of the poem describes the effects of Horant's spellbinding singing, which was so sweet that the beasts of the forest, the fish, and even the worms in the grass paused to listen.⁹⁶ The power attributed to his music calls to mind the myth of Orpheus, who could tame and control animals with his lyre. As Horant may play a significant role in the development of the Burgundian legend, we should take a closer look at his role in Old Norse literature.

Like Geat, the harpist, Horant is mentioned in *Deor*, where he is named Heorrenda and is said to be the court poet of the Heodeningas (who correspond to the Hagelingas in the German tradition).⁹⁷ The material of the Hildir legend is also preserved in Norse sources, including, for example, *Ragnarsdrápa* (ninth century), by Bragi Boddason; *Háttalykill*, by Hallr Þórarinnsson and Rögnvaldr jarl (1145); Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum* (c.1200); the thirteenth-century *Snorra-Edda* (in the figure of Skáldskaparmál); and the Icelandic legendary saga *Héðins saga og Högna* (*Sörla þáttr*, preserved in a manuscript from the fourteenth century). In all these sources, the characters are called Hildir (Hilda), Högni (Hoeginus), and Héðinn (Hithinus), the king of the Hjaðningar; in fact there is no mention of the court poet Heorrenda (Hjarrandi) in these Norse variants of the tale except in the poems *Ragnarsdrápa* and *Háttalykill*, where Hjarrandi is mentioned in kennings. The memory of Hjarrandi is, however, reflected in the preservation of a detail concerning the paternity of Héðinn, who is said to be Hjarrandason (the son of Hjarrandi) in *Snorra-Edda* and *Héðins saga og Högna*. There is a further isolated reference to Hjarrandi in another mythical saga, the fourteenth-century *Bósa saga og Herraud's*. This tells of Sigurðr, the counsellor of Goðmundr á Glæsisvöllum, who is described as "so great a master of musical

connection, since in variants from Iceland (*Gauta kvæði*) and Western Norway the names of the heroes, Gauti and Magnhild, resemble those of Geat and Mædhild in *Deor*.

⁹⁶ See, e.g., *Kudrun*, ed. Karl Stackmann (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2000), 79–91.

⁹⁷ Like Geat and Horant, Gunnarr Gjúkason was known as a saga hero among the Anglo-Saxons: he is mentioned in *Widsith*, which is preserved in a manuscript from the late tenth century. See Bernard James Muir, ed., *Leod: Six Old English Poems. A Handbook* (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1989), 1 and 8.

TABLE 2
Horant in different cultural environments.

	Old English	German	Icelandic
Character	Heorrenda	Horant	Hjarrandi
Court	Heodeningas	Hagelingas	Hjaðningar

instruments that he has no equal, near or far, and particularly for his harp playing” (“svó mikill meistari til hljóðfæra, at hans líki er engi, þó at allvíða sé leit-
tat, ok þó mest á hörpu-slátt”).⁹⁸ On the way to Goðmundr’s palace to play at a
wedding, Sigurðr is attacked by the hero of the saga, Bósi, who kills him, takes
on his appearance, and takes his part at the feast. So compelling is Bósi’s harp
playing that the wedding guests rush to the floor to dance, objects of all sorts fly
through the air, and “there was nothing that remained still” (“ok enginn hlutr
var þá sá, at kyr þoldi”).⁹⁹ This supernatural power in the music probably has
to do with the fact that among the tunes Bósi plays is the *Hjarranda(b)ljóð*, a
tune named after the poet who charmed both animals and men by his singing.

From the discussion above we can see that the Orpheus-like musician Horant
was widely known, with slight variations of his name, and that he was always
associated with Héðinn’s court, as seen on table 2. Finally, it should be men-
tioned that there was an Icelandic *rímur*-meter called Hjarrandalag. From all these
details, it must be considered quite probable that Hjarrandi was a known char-
acter in the medieval storytelling community in Iceland, just as he was in Germany
under the name of Horant.¹⁰⁰

THE ORIGIN OF THE HARP

As has been mentioned, the picture stones from Gotland, the carving on the
Oseberg cart, and the tapestry from Överhogdal contain images that refer to known
myths and legends. One of these is the Hildir legend, which has been touched on
above; more often than not, representations of this legend show the figure of a
woman standing between two groups of warriors (Högni’s/Hagen’s army and
Héðin’s/Hetel’s men). Most of these last mentioned scenes appear on the objects
that have been named in connection with the snake-pit scenes and other scenes
from the story of the Völsungs, including the picture stones from Gotland that are

⁹⁸ *Die Bósa-Saga in zwei Fassungen*, ed. Otto Luitpold Jiriczek (Strassburg: Karl J. Trübner, 1893), 43.

⁹⁹ *Die Bósa-Saga*, ed. Jiriczek, 46. Some Norwegian legends from later centuries include fiddlers who work the same sort of charm as *Bósa saga* describes, that is, they make furniture and household items dance to their playing, which is seen as embodying a type of magic. See Arne Bjørndal and Brynjulf Alver, *Og fela ho lét: Norsk spelemannstradisjon* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1966), 135–36.

¹⁰⁰ Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1874), 774.

dated to the ninth to tenth centuries (Stenkyrka Smiss I, Lärbro Hammars I and Lärbro Tängelgård I).¹⁰¹ The conclusion to be drawn from this is that those who carved the snake-pit scenes of Gunnarr on Klinte Hunninge I and Ardre VIII knew both the tales about the Völsungar and the Gjúkungar, that is, the tales that made up the *Völsunga saga* of the day; and also the Hildir legend. These two groups of stories were therefore probably recited in close conjunction, that is to say, in the same places and for the same audience. In the light of this probability, it is intriguing that the names of the main female characters in the two stories are similar: Brynhildur corresponds to Hildir (both valkyrie figures), and Guðrún to Kudrun (or Gudrun).

Another indication that the Hildir legend and the story of the Völsungar were closely associated in Norse tradition down to the twelfth century is that three poems—the *Ragnarsdrápa*, by Bragi Boddason; the *Háleygjatal*, by Eyvindr Finnsson skáldaspillir (c.985);¹⁰² and the *Háttalykill*, by Hallr Þórarinsson and Rögnvaldr jarl—contain kennings based on, and other references to, both of these stories. This indicates that both legends were well known in the ninth and tenth centuries and onwards: kennings used in *dróttkvætt* verse are generally based on known stories, since otherwise they would probably never have been understood. The existence of the poems also testifies that the stories were known not only in Gotland but over a greater area; the images on the Oseberg cart and on the tapestry from Överhogdal also indicate the wider geographical distribution of the legends.¹⁰³

We can therefore assume that the legend of the death of Gunnarr was told in the same area as the story of Hildir (Hilde) Högnadóttir, Héðinn (Hetel), and Hjarrandi (Horant); this would have been during Stage 1 of its development. The variants of the legend as described in Stages 2 and 3, on the other hand, do not betray any contact with the Hildir legend at first glance. However, on closer examination of the evidence, it seems likely that the legend of Gunnarr as it is preserved in these later stages of its development preserves an echo of the Hildir legend, taking on new material by transferring the qualities of the musician

¹⁰¹ Sune Lindqvist, “Sagnet om Hild,” *Skalk* 3 (1968): 18–27; Hauck, “Germanische Bilddenkmäler des früheren Mittelalters,” 368–69 and figs. 13–15; cf. also Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, “Saga Motifs on Gotland Picture Stones: The Case of Hildir Högnadóttir,” an unpublished paper held at the Picture Stone Symposium, September 7–9, 2011, in Visby, Gotland. The paper is forthcoming in *Gotländskt Arkiv* 2012.

¹⁰² *Háleygjatal* does not mention the snake pit, but the kenning “vingameiðr” (7.3) could possibly refer to Vingi, the messenger of Atli, who threatened to raise a gallows for Gunnarr and Högni, cf. the tree of Vingi: *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning*, ed. Jónsson, B.1:61. Admittedly, “vingameiðr” could also stand for a swinging/swaying tree, i.e. a gallows.

¹⁰³ Other poets use kennings that contain references to the two legends in their poetry, but there are no other instances of such references to both in one and the same poem. For example, the Norwegian poet Þjóðólfr ór Hvini (c.900) refers to the Hildir legend in his poem *Hauströng*. Some tenth-century poets make references to the legends in question, and the numbers increase in later centuries. A more detailed discussion of these kennings will be presented in my forthcoming book (mentioned above); see also Margaret Clunies Ross, “Stylistic and Generic Definers of the Old Norse Skaldic Ekphrasis,” *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 3 (2007): 161–84, at 166–67, 174, and 180.

Horant/Hjarrandi to the Burgundian king, who needed the skill in order to lull the serpents to sleep.

The addition of the supernatural harp motif to the legend makes Gunnarr a more complex character than he was previously: it seems safe to say that the talents he exhibits in the snake pit come as something of a surprise, when compared with the characteristics and qualities he otherwise exhibits in the preserved texts of his story, in which he appears first and foremost as a rather down-to-earth king without any trace of supernatural abilities. According to *Atlakviða* and *Atlamál*, by contrast, his harp playing is very highly charged. In *Atlakviða* he plays angrily and the strings of his harp resound; in *Atlamál* his playing has such an effect as not only to move people to tears, but even to break the rafters in a building: “wept all the women, so well could he play it, men burst into tears eke, who could best hear him; of his wrongs he told her: burst the rafters asunder”¹⁰⁴ (“slá hann svo kunningi að snótir grétu, klukku þeir karlar er kunningi görst heyra, ríkri ráð sagði, raftar sundur brustu”;¹⁰⁵ stanza 61).

Could it be that the material of these two stories—*Völsunga saga* and the Hildir legend—went on travelling together, and that over time Gunnarr was credited with the talent of Horant/Hjarrandi—a talent that, at some stage of the development of the legend, was seen as being of advantage to him in the snake pit? This conflation would probably have taken place in the Norse world, since in the German tradition, Horant’s abilities are not transferred to Gunnar, who, in *Piðreks saga af Bern*, dies in Etzel’s (Atli’s) snake yard or snake tower, commemorated first and foremost as a military leader and king.

CONCLUSION

The present article gathers together the diverse material relating to Gunnarr Gjúkason, all the way from tales about the historical king Gundaharius to legends of the musically talented king in the snake pit. Neither the examination of comparable motifs from Old Norse literature nor a consideration of the snake-pit motif in a broader context was found to explain all the relevant features of Gunnarr’s role in legend. Analysis of the variants of the legend revealed three stages that can be traced both in the written sources and in the images examined. The linear progression of these stages indicates that the tale of Gunnarr in the snake pit may be old, while in all likelihood that of Gunnarr’s harp playing is an addition of later date. If extant versions of the Gunnarr legend are examined together with the Hildir legend, in which Horant/Hjarrandi plays the harp, it is tempting to conclude that the legendary depiction of Gunnarr was influenced by that of Horant/Hjarrandi. After this development, Gunnarr’s attempt to save his life in the snake pit by playing the harp to lull the serpents became a central feature of his story. Possibly this new representation of Gunnarr had a Christian reference, which may account for the popularity of the harp motif in

¹⁰⁴ Hollander, *The Poetic Edda*, 304.

¹⁰⁵ *Konungsbók Eddukvæða*, ed. Gunnlaugsson, 258–59.

ecclesiastical art in the medieval period. This is, however, not the place to go further into the possible role of the church in the dissemination of the legend, since resolution of this question would require extensive discussion and the likelihood of the Christian reference is far from certain. While this possible Christian significance has received some attention elsewhere,¹⁰⁶ my view is that the Gunnarr legend must be examined in a broader context than has been done hitherto, embracing all the preserved sources, as they are all interconnected.

Translated by Jeffrey Cosser

¹⁰⁶ See Byock, "Sigurðr Fáfnisbani"; Nordanskog, *Förställd hedendom*, and the references given there.