

RIDING THE TREE

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The various journeys of the gods – often towards Jötunheim or Útgarðr, and occasionally also to Hel – form the basis for many myths. At first glance, these travels appear to follow the map of a kind of mythical landscape, resembling a physical landscape, in which the traveller can proceed from one point to the next, on foot or riding on an animal. I will show that this interpretation of travelling, which I like to refer to as ‘literary’ level of understanding, is only one of many levels of understanding. On this level we encounter the myth as an account of the ‘adventures’ of the gods, giants and other figures. Each figure appears as an individual. The scene in which a myth is set is vividly anthropomorphic. This level of understanding is most strongly characterised in the chronological, systematic narration of *Snorra-Edda*. Beyond this level of understanding, other levels may be defined which lead us to different interpretations of the travellers, as well as the means by which they travel. In this article I will focus on one of those other levels, the ‘inter- and para-mundane’ level of understanding. On this level, the physical landscape of the journey is supplanted by a paraphysical landscape, the distinctions between the traveller and other figures might merge, and the means of transport is no longer an ordinary animal.

The ‘love story’ of Freyr and Gerðr in *Skírnismál* serves as an example of this. At first glance, *Skírnismál* presents a tale about three characters: Freyr, Skírnir and Gerðr. However, it is striking that the borders between these three characters are blurred throughout the poem. Before embarking upon his ride to Jötunheimr in st. 10, Skírnir speaks of *báðir vit* (we two):

<i>báðir vit komomc,</i>	we two will both come back
<i>eða ocr báða tecr</i>	or the omnipotent giant
<i>sá inn ámatki iotunn.¹</i>	will take us both. ²

The question arises who these two are. The only two figures who, on the literary level, are on their way to Jötunheimr are Skírnir and the horse. It may be doubted, however, that this is the duo meant here, for Skírnir and the horse are not described as a unit anywhere else in the poem. On the other hand, Skírnir and Freyr are described in st. 5 as having been together in ancient times (*í árdaga*). In addition, *báðir vit* (we two) in st. 10 is reiterated in Gerðr’s *vit bæði* (both of us) in st. 39. Who Gerðr is referring to here is unclear. *Vit bæði* (both of us) could mean either Gerðr and Skírnir or Gerðr and Freyr. The distinction between ‘servant’ and ‘master’ is blurred and not only at this point. Skírnir and Freyr appear to be on such familiar terms that Skírnir speaks of his will to tame Gerðr (*at mínom munom*, st. 26). In st. 35 he similarly execrates her according to his own will (*at mínom munom*). The distinctions between Skírnir and Freyr, who in st. 43 of *Grímnismál* is also described with the adjective *skírr* (bright), are blurred not only in *Skírnismál* and indeed beg the question of whether Skírnir is an autonomous figure at all.

¹ All quotations of eddic poems are from the edition by Neckel, revised by Kuhn (1983).

² Translations of eddic poems are based on Larrington (1996) with modifications by the author.

Let us now turn to Skírnir's preparations for the journey and the journey itself. In st. 8, Skírnir calls for a horse to carry him through the *vafrogi* (wavering fire): *Mar gefðu mér þá, / þann er mic um myrquan beri, / vísan vafroga* (Give me that horse, / which will carry me through the dark, / sure, flickering flame). For this ride through the *vafrogi*, it is obvious that a very special horse is needed. Parallel examples to this are Sigurðr's horse in *Skáldskaparmál* (ch. 48) and Óðinn's horse Sleipnir, with which not only Óðinn (according to *Baldr's draumar* 2), but also Hermóðr (*Gylfaginning* ch. 49) is able to jump over the boundary fence to Hel. Thus the question arises as to what kind of world that very Jötunheimr represents in *Skírnirmál* if Skírnir needs such a special horse to take him there. In the poem, there are several references to his ride through the fire. As well as the *vafrogi* in st. 8, it can be gleaned from sts 17 and 18 that Skírnir comes to Jötunheimr *eikinn fúr yfir*. The etymology and meaning of *eikinn* is uncertain. In Modern Icelandic *eikinn* is used with reference to fierce bulls; in Nynorsk, *eikjen* means 'belligerent' (von See and others, 1997, 96). Most interpreters understand *eikinn* as 'violent, raging, furious, mad', though there might also be some connection with *eik* (oak) (von See and others, 1997, 96). So *eikinn fúr yfir* might mean that Skírnir rides to Jötunheimr through a very fierce fire (maybe an oak-wood fire). Having arrived there, he has to get past the hounds of Gymir (st. 11). A parallel to this is the appearance of the hounds in *Baldrs draumar* (sts 2-3) whom Óðinn encounters on his way to Niflhel. And in both poems (*Skírnismál* st. 14 and *Baldrs draumar* st. 3) the earth shakes. The underlying sense of impending threat is further reinforced by the question of the shepherd in st. 12: is Skírnir fey or risen from the dead (*ertu feigr, eða ertu framgenginn*). In st. 13 Skírnir answers:

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| <p>13. <i>Kostir ro betri,
heldr en at kløcqvá sé,
hveim er fúss er fara;
eino dægri
mér var aldr um scapaðr
oc allt líf um lagit.</i></p> | <p>The choices are better
than just lamenting,
for him who is eager to advance;
for on one day
my life was shaped
and its whole term determined.</p> |
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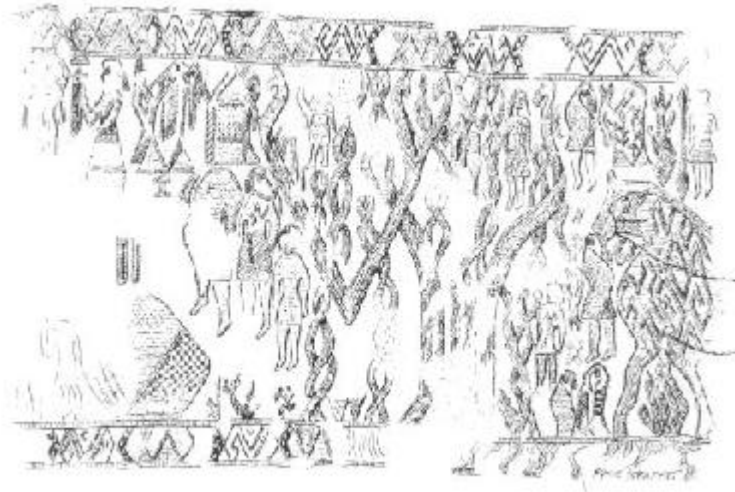
The Jötunheimr that Skírnir enters at this point seems to be a place on the threshold of death. At this threshold he enters Gymir's *garðar* and struggles to get Gerðr. The term *garðar* and the name *Gerðr* underline the threshold character of this transitional world.³ The distinction between Freyr and his 'servant' Skírnir becomes blurred in this process. One cannot escape the impression that Skírnir merely represents another aspect

³ The significance of such a threshold is illustrated in a ritual involving a young girl who is killed to accompany her dead master to the grave, which is described by Ibn Fashlan as follows: „...so führte man das Mädchen zu einem Dinge hin, das sie gemacht hatten, und das dem vorspringenden Gesims einer Thür glich. Sie setzte ihre Füße auf die flachen Hände der Männer, sah auf dieses Gesims hinab und sprach... Sieh! hier seh' ich meinen Vater und meine Mutter, das zweite Mal: Sieh! jetzt seh' ich alle meine verstorbenen Anverwandten (zusammen) sitzen; das dritte Mal aber: Sieh! dort ist mein Herr, er sitzt im Paradiese. Das Paradies ist so schön, so grün. Bei ihm sind (seine) Männer und Knaben. Er ruft mich; so bringt mich denn zu ihm.“ (Fraehn 1976, 15 & 17) (she placed her feet upon the spread hands of the men, looked upon the frame and spake [...] See! Here I see my father and my mother, the second time: See! Now I see all my dead relatives, sitting (together); but the third time: See! There I see my Lord. He sits in paradise. Paradise is so beautiful, so green. With him are (his) men and boys. He calls to me; so then – bring me to him.) This ritual has a parallel in the thirteenth verse of the *Völva þáttr*. See also Anders Andrésen's research on gateways as a symbol of the entrance to other worlds, in particular, those of the dead (1993).

of Freyr, who, perhaps from Hlíðskjálf, for just half a night (st. 42: *hálf hýnótt*), is sent out into the transitional world of Jötunheimr in order to establish a lasting contact with it.

The special horse needed for this journey is reminiscent of Sleipnir, and the circumstances of the journey into the transitional world to the threshold of death as well as the shaking of the earth recall Óðinn's journey to Hel. Yet Óðinn travels to the other world not only on Sleipnir. Another one of his journeys, according to *Hávamál* (st. 138), begins with him clinging to a wind-blown bough. It is said of the tree from which he is hanging that non one knows from what roots it springs. There is a similar description of the tree Mímameiðr in *Fjölsvinnsmál* (st. 20) and perhaps Mímameiðr corresponds to Yggdrasill. According to *Völuspá* (st. 19), the well of Urðarbrunnr is located under Yggdrasill; *Gylfaginning* (ch. 15) adds two other wells: Mímisbrunnr and Hvergelmir. Although *Míma-* in *Mímameiðr* cannot be derived from *Mímir* (only from *Mími*), there are nevertheless strong grounds for associating it with Mímir. Yggdrasill is generally interpreted as 'Yggs drasill', that is, the horse of Yggr (= Óðinn) (Simek 1984, 467). It is conspicuous, raising doubts about the certainty of the derivation from *Yggr* (= Óðinn). *Ygg-* could simply mean 'terrible' and could be a term for a 'tree of terror / hanging tree' or gallows (Detter 1897). At this point reference needs to be made to the kenningar *gálga valdr* (lord of the gallows) (Helgi traust, *Skj* BI, 94) and *gálga farmr* (load of the gallows) (Eyvindr Finnsson skáldaspillir *Háleygjatal*, *Skj* BI, 60-62) for Óðinn, and in addition to the numerous kenningar which refer to the act of hanging, such as *Hangi* (Tindr Hallkelsson, *drápa* for Hákon jarl, *Skj* BI, 136), the hanging one, and *Hangatýr* (Víga-Glúmr, *Lausavísur* 10, *Skj* BI, 136-138; Einarr Gilsson, *Selkolluvísur* 7, *Skj* BII, 434-40). The association with Óðinn/Yggr is therefore strong enough not to be dismissed, and an understanding of Yggdrasill as Óðinn's horse seems to be implied in a range of the sources. And yet the association with 'gallows' resonates menacingly. At this point reference ought also be made to the kenning *hábrjóstr h rva Sleipnir* (Finnur Jónsson, 1929, 6) for the gallows (*Ynglingatal* 22). If both Sleipnir and Yggdrasill are understood as horses of Óðinn, it may be safely assumed that the conceptions of both are comparable. Yggdrasill appears as a tree, connecting various worlds. The particular association of Yggdrasill with the world of the dead is reinforced by the term *fyr nágrindr neðan* (below the corpse-gates) (*Skírnismál* 35 and *Lokasenna* 63) as the position of the roots of Yggdrasill⁴. Yggdrasill appears here as the connecting link between the world of the living and the world of the dead. In order to cross this boundary, it is necessary to have, just as in *Skírnismál*, a particular means of transport. Skírnir's journey, as already mentioned, recalls the rides of Óðinn and Hermóðr to Hel on Sleipnir. Whether Yggdrasill is a tree (as in *Völuspá* 19) or a horse attached to a tree (as in *Völuspá* 47 and *Grímnismál* 35 and 44) is perhaps not as important as the fact that both, the tree as well as the horse, appear to be the means necessary for depicting the journey between the world of the living and the world of the dead. That the transition between tree and horse may be seen as fluid is also evidenced in a textile fragment discovered among the Oseberg finding (Fig 1). The sacrificial ritual depicted shows persons hanging from trees with the strongest branches of these trees terminating in heads, which could be construed as the heads of horses.

⁴ Hel's position in *Lokasenna*



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Figure 1. A sketch of the textile fragment from the Oseberg finding
(Ingstad 1992, 242)

Thus Yggdrasill appears as a connecting link between the worlds, and the the crossing of the boundary into another world is just as fraught with dangers as it is with chances. The journey on a tree, depicted by Óðinn's self-sacrifice, leads to the acquisition of wisdom, to the knowledge of secrets. One example of the acquisition of wisdom through contact with the world of the dead is offered by Óðinn's comment in *Hárbarðsljóð* (sts 44 and 45): that he has learned from the old people in the forests:

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| 44. | <i>Nam ec at m nnum
þeim inom aldrænom,
er búa í heimis scógum.</i> | I learned from the people,
from the old ones,
who live at home in the forests. |
| 45. | <i>Þó gefr þú gott nafn dýsiom,
er þú kallar þat heimis scóga.</i> | That's giving a good name to burial cairns,
when you call them the woods at home. |

Lik Yggdrasill, the forest appears as a connecting link to other worlds outside and beyond the world of the living. At this point some consideration needs to be given to the term *búa í skógum* (to be banished). The forest (*skógr*) is not perceived as part of the world of the living but rather as being beyond it, opening the gateways into the world of the dead. The other world, the world of the dead, appears to begin at the threshold to the forest. In *Hyndluljóð* (st. 48) Hyndla is called *íviðju* (forest dweller)⁶:

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| 48. | <i>Ec slæ eldi
of íviðio,
svá at þú eigi kemz
á burt heðan.</i> | I (will) cast fire
over the forest dweller, ⁷
so that you can never get away
from here. |
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⁵ Sketch: textile fragment from the Oseberg finding (Ingstad, 1992, 242)

⁶ This term could be interpreted as a *v lva* although Hyndla is not explicitly called one here. The question arises as to what we might understand a *v lva* to mean in this context: the term is not clearly differentiated from terms such as *spákona* or *seiðkona* in Old Norse literature. Indeed the concepts tend to overlap; see, for example, Ólína Þorvarðardóttir (2000, 231).

⁷ Von See and others (2000, 828) note that *viðja* is included in the *Þulur* of troll women and giantesses and translate it more freely as 'witch'; note too the discussion on the use of the dative form *íviðju*.

Her connection with the world of the dead is also revealed in st. 46:

46. <i>Snúðu braut heðan!</i>	Go away from here!
<i>sofa lystir mic,</i>	I long to sleep;
<i>fær þú fátt af mér</i>	little will you get from me
<i>fríðra kosta.</i>	of things to delight you.

Likewise, the *v lva* of *Völuspá* also appears to belong to the other world. Óðinn called her to learn about the fate of the gods. But the end of the questioning is determined by the *v lva* herself: *nú mun hon sœcqvaz* (*Völuspá* 66) (now she will sink).

The sexual component, which becomes evident in *Skírnismál* in connection with the other world, may be seen reflected in the *v lur*. The word *v lva* may be derived from *v lr* (staff) and means ‘staff bearer’. *Skáldskaparmál* (ch. 18) relate that Þórr borrows *Gríðav lr* (Gríðr’s staff) from the giantess Gríðr, with the help of which he crosses a river. It is also possible to interpret *gandr* as a staff, which is attributed with phallic significance. Thus, *g ndull* in *Bósa saga* (ch. 11) is used in the sense of ‘penis’. Accordingly, the term *gandreid*, by which we have another intersection of means of travel, *seiðr* and the other world, might also have a sexual undertone.⁸

It is also worth noting in this context that such a purative meaning of *gandr* is not reflected in translations of *J rmungandr* and *Vánargandr*. On the contrary, here *gandr* is frequently translated as ‘monster’, which actually forestalls interpretation. *Vánargandr* is found only in *Skáldskaparmál* (ch. 23), in which it is used as a synonym for Fenrir: *Hvernig skal kenna Loka? Svá, at kalla hann [...] föður Vánargands, þat er Fenrisúlfr, ok Jörmungands, þat er Miðgarðsormr* (Guðni Jónsson 1954, III, 126-127) (How shall Loki be called? So that he shall be called [...] father of Vánargandr, that is the wolf Fenrir, and of Jörmungandr, that is Miðgarðsormr). Confirmation of the meaning ‘monster’ cannot be inferred from this passage, in which *Vánargandr* is used parallel to *J rmungandr*.

Ursula Dronke translates *gandr* in *Völuspá* as ‘spirit’ (1997, 12-15). In this she follows the argument put forward by Cleasby and Vigfússon (1957, 188) and Johan Fritzner (1877, 166-170), based on a well-known passage from the *Historia Norvegiae*.⁹ Perhaps such a *gandr* might be the reason for the switch between the first and third person singular pronoun on the part of the *v lva* when referring to herself in the *Völuspá*.¹⁰ Apart from the interpretation of their being two seers, one could also assume that there is a third figure in the form of a helpful spirit,¹¹ comparable to the

⁸ Jenny Jochens (1996, 260) interprets *vitti hon ganda* in *Völuspá* 22 following Hugo Pipping as ‘influencing the penis by magic’. The most extensive discourse on the connection between *v lur* and *seiðr*, sexuality and *gandir* is conducted by Neil Price (2002).

⁹ *Historia Norvegiae*, 85f., cited and translated according to Neil S. Price (2002, 224): ‘Sunt namque quidam ex ipsis, qui quasi prophetae a stolido vulgo venerantur, quoniam per immundum spiritum, quem gandum vocitant, multis multa praesagia ut eveniunt quandoque percunctati praedicent’ (There are some of these [Sámi sorcerers] who are revered as if they were prophets by the ignorant commoners, because by means of a foul spirit, which they call a gandum, when asked they will predict for many people many future events, and when they will come to pass).

¹⁰ See McKinnell (2001)

¹¹ See Neil S. Price (2002, 225), following on from Clive Tolley (1995) develops the theory that *gandir* could frequently be helping spirits in the form of animals. Tolley subdivides *gandir* into helping spirits in the form of wolves and those in the form of serpents.

usage of *gandr* in the *Fóstbræðra saga* (ch. 9): *Víða hefi ek göndum rennt í nótt, ok em ek nú vís orðin þeira hluta, er ek vissa ekki áðr* (Björn Karel Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson 1943, 234) (I ran far and wide with *gandir* during the night. Now I know things I did not know before). Cleasby and Vigfússon (1957, 188) have already pointed to the possibility of interpreting *gandr* in *gandreid* as a spirit and drawn attention to the connection with wolves in kenningar such as *leiknar hestr* (Cleasby and Vigfússon 1957, 382) and *kveldriðu stóð* (Cleasby and Vigfússon 1957, 362) referring to a journey to the other world on a wolf. Finally the name *Viðólfr* (Forest Wolf), according to *Hyndluljóð* (st. 33) an ancestor of the *v lur*, provides a further overlapping of tree/copse/forest and horse/wolf/*gandr*.

Accordingly, the links to the other world may be imagined in quite different forms, as *gandr*-spirit, wolf, horse or even a tree or part of one in the form of a staff, et cetera. Here it is not so much the form of the *gandr* which is significant, but rather its function as an aid on the journey into other worlds.¹² In this reading, the interpretation of the *gandr* as an object used by sorcerers (Cleasby and Vigfússon 1957, 188) makes sense, an interpretation which could be supported by the appellation *spá gandir* (*gandir* of prophecy) in *Völuspá* 29.

Journeys into the other world, or on the threshold of the other world, not only pose a mortal risk for the traveller but also seem to bring with them knowledge and therefore power. Yet, in order to obtain this knowledge, it is necessary to undertake a tortuous ride to the threshold of death, a ride which, as briefly shown by several examples, also comprises a sexual dimension. Thus it is not surprising that *Skírnismál* also illustrate a sexual dimension. However, this perspective does not constitute proof for the interpretation of *Skírnismál* as a ‘love story’, but rather appears as one component of a tale concerning journeys to the other world. Here, perhaps, a distinction can be made between *Skírnismál* and *Hávamál*, although there are also overlapping references to the painful nature of such connections with the other world.¹³ The period of nine nights during which Óðinn was hanging from the branch (according to *Hávamál* 138) is reflected in the nine nights (*nætr níu*) Freyr needs to wait before he may join his ‘dearest one’ in the *lundr lognfara* (*Skírnismál* 41). It should also be noted in this context that *Skírnismál* provides no clues as to where Freyr spends these nine nights. It is possible that it takes Freyr nine nights before he reaches the grove of Barri (comparable to Hermóðr riding nine nights to Hel), though it is also possible that he must endure nine nights of torture before he is able to win Gerðr from *Gymis garðar*.

I am therefore arguing that on the para-mundane level of understanding, *Skírnismál* does not present a love story but the struggle of the god Freyr for access to the threshold between life and death, to the other world. Of course this need not be understood as the ‘actual’ interpretation of *Skírnismál*. It is merely one of several possible access routes, one of many possible levels of understanding on which we may

¹² Accordingly, it is possible to advance a theory that both Fenrir as well as the Midgarðsormr can be understood as *gandir* in the sense of entities that are able to establish (magic) connections between the various worlds. Read in this way, *j rmungandr* appears not as a ‘huge monster’, but rather as a *gandr*, whose positioning in the ocean leads to the stabilization of the world and, accordingly, whose disturbance to its destabilization. According to the Christian theology, this interpretation would, of course be a *sjónhverfing* (optical illusion), masking the fact that the Midgarðsormr does not stabilize the world but rather, the moment it is disturbed, it destabilizes the divine order. This interpretation would involve a degradation of this *gandr*, reducing it to a demon and a monster.

¹³ *Hávamál* 139: *nam ec upp rúnar, / æpandi nam* (I learned runes, / learned (them) screaming)

apprehend the poem. I hope that I have succeeded, by means of this far too brief argument, in offering at least some food for thought for further possible interpretations of the journey of the gods and their means of transport, and that I have shown that horse, tree, *gandr*, and perhaps even the wolf and the serpent (which have not been treated in detail here) can be perceived not only as objects but also as symbols of para-mundane journeys.

With this perspective, one could also pose the question to what extent Baldr's death, or more precisely his immolation and mission, might be interpreted as a journey, and this turn might lead into a discussion of the role of Loki, especially as it is presented in *Hautlöng*. But for this discussion, I refer the reader to my recently published thesis *Der nordgermanische Gott Loki aus literaturwissenschaftlicher Perspektive*.

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