

*Clive Tolley*

## HEIMDALLR AND THE MYTH OF THE BRÍSINGAMEN IN *HÚSDRÁPA*

Úlfr Uggason's *Húsdrápa* was composed around 980-985 on the basis of depictions in the hall of Óláfr pái in Iceland. Its antiquity, and the fragmentary state in which it is preserved, have made interpretation difficult; one of the most puzzling stanzas is the second, which recounts a dramatic contest between the gods Heimdallr and Loki (*Skjaldedigtning* B I, 128):

Ráðgegninn bregðr ragna  
rein- at Singasteini  
frægr við firna slægjan  
Fárbauta mog -vári;  
móðoflugr ræðr mœðra  
mogr hafnýra fogru,  
kynník, áðr ok einnar  
átta, mæðar þottum.

The following prose ordering is suggested: *Ráðgegninn frægr ragna-reinvári bregðr at Singasteini við Fárbauta firna slægjan mog; móðo flugr mogr átta ok einnar mœðra ræðr áðr fogru hafnýra, kynník mæðar þottum*. I suggest the following rendering into English:

The ready in counsel, famous guardian of the territory of the gods turns against the monstrously sly son of Fárbauti over the Gleaming Stone; the spirited son of eight mothers and one gains control of the fair sea-kidney first; I declare it in strands of praise.

Snorri (*Edda* 99) gives the following information on Heimdallr, based on this stanza and surrounding passages now lost:

Hann er ok tilsoekir Vágaskers ok Singasteins; þá deildi hann við Loka um Brisingamen; hann heitir ok Vindlér. Úlfr Uggason kvað í

Húsdrápu langa stund eptir þeiri frásogu, ok er þess þar getit, at þeir váru í selalíkjum.

He is also the visitor of Vágasker [Wave-skerry] and of Singasteinn; he then contended with Loki over the necklace of the Brísings; he is also called Vindlér. Úlfr Uggason wrote a long passage in *Húsdrápa* about that story, and it is mentioned that they were in the form of seals.

Much that is archaic underlies this odd myth, and I would like to present as concisely as possible some of the more illuminating research on it, and refine this with further ideas.<sup>1</sup>

The most ancient mention of the necklace of the Brísings, and hence (following Snorri) to the myth recounted in *Húsdrápa* 2, is found in the Old English *Beowulf* 1197-1201, where Beowulf is presented with a necklace for his defeat of Grendel:<sup>2</sup>

Nænigne ic under swegle selran hyrde  
hordmaðum hæleþa, syþðan Hama ætwæg  
to þære byrhtan byrig Brosinga<sup>3</sup> mene,  
sigle ond sincfæt, — searoniðas fleah  
Eormenrices, geceas ecne ræd.

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<sup>1</sup>I would class as most significant the contributions of Pering and Schier (see bibliography); I am above all indebted to the valuable discussion by Dronke (1992, 669-70) for its perception of the richness of Úlfr's verse. It has been pointed out to me that the stanza is also considered by T. Krömmelbein in *Skaldische Metaphorik*, but I have been unable to obtain a copy of this work.

<sup>2</sup>It is beyond the scope of this article to consider the complex issue of the dating of *Beowulf*, but I would note that attempts to date the poem to the viking period have not proved convincing, and an ascription to a time around 750 remains the most likely: see Newton 1993 for a recent defence of this dating.

<sup>3</sup>The form *Brosinga*, unique to *Beowulf*, (against the Norse *Brísinga*) is unexplained; it is not impossible that it stems merely from a scribal error at some point.

I have heard of no finer hoarded treasure of men under the clear sky,  
 since Hama carried off to the bright city the necklace of the Brosings,  
 the jewel and its precious setting, — he fled the treacherous on-  
 slaughts of Eormenric, and chose eternal counsel.

An episode involving gods in Norse is represented by the Old English poet by a tale focused on the legendary Eormenric: in other words, the poet has euhemerized what was originally a myth, preserving a reflection of the god Heimdallr's name in the Hama who escapes with the necklace, and recalling, in the 'bright city', Heimdallr's title 'the white god'. These points are raised by Dronke, who argues convincingly the case for the *Beowulf* poet as a euhemerist (she considers several examples in her 1969 article; see esp. 322-5 on the Hama episode). In the same vein, note how Hama *geceas ecne ræd*, 'chose eternal counsel', and Úlfr declares Heimdallr to be *ráðgegninn*, 'endowed with counsel'. Dronke's line of argument is certainly more convincing than Damico's (1983): she takes Hama to be 'cricket' and Eormenric to be 'world power', standing for Loki and Óðinn, and relates this to the version of the myth recounted in *Sorla þátr* (see below), which is, however, both late and confused.

The earliest reference to the Brisingamen in Old Norse is in the ninth century *Haustlong* of Þjóðólfr of Hvin, where Loki is called in stanza 9 *Brísings girðipjófr*, 'the thief of the girdle of Brisingr' (*Skjaldedigtning* B I, 16), which is consistent with the myth recounted in *Húsdrápa*. In *Þrymskviða* 15:8 the form *men Brisinga*, 'necklace of the Brísings' is found; a different myth is involved here, in which the necklace serves a subsidiary role in the retrieval of Þórr's hammer. Snorri (*Edda* 99) has the form *Brisingamen* (MS U divides it into two words, *Brisinga men*). North (1988, 218-27, esp. 222-3), going beyond de Vries's rather vague association of Gefjun and Freyja (1956-7, §555), argues with insight that *Lokasenna* 20 reflects a version of the concluding episode of the Brisingamen myth. Gefjun is accused of sleeping with the 'white lad' (*sveinn inn hvíti*), who gave her a jewel: the only known myth this could refer to is the retrieval for Freyja of the Brisingamen by Heimdallr, the 'white god', in which case *Lokasenna* presents a variant involving another fertility goddess. One of the few other myths recorded concerning Gefjun is that she ploughed Själland out of a lake in Sweden (*Heimskringla* I, 15-16; Snorri cites a

verse of Bragi in support): she is thus associated with the very same motif of 'earth out of ocean' as appears, I shall argue, in *Húsdrápa*.<sup>4</sup>

A full version of the theft of the Brisingamen is not found until the 14th century *Sorla þáttur* (*Flateyjarbók* I, 275-83), where however the necklace is referred to merely as a *gullmen*, 'golden necklace'. It is recounted that four dwarves made the necklace, which Freyja coveted, but their price was that she sleep with each of them for a night. Loki found out about this, and told Óðinn, who forced him to steal the necklace for him; to achieve this, Loki had to change himself into a flea and sting the goddess, as access to her chamber and the subsequent removal of the necklace while she was asleep proved difficult. Finding her treasure stolen, she approached Óðinn, whose price for its return was that she should bring about the eternal battle known as the Hjaðningavíg between two kings: they were to fight and kill each other each day, and spring to life to renew the contest each day until the end of the world.

While elements of *Sorla þáttur's* account are ancient - for example, the tradition of the Hjaðningavíg goes back to our earliest Norse poem, *Ragnarsdrápa* - it is evident that the tale is garbled. It contradicts the earlier form of the myth found in *Húsdrápa* (and confirmed, it would appear, by *Beowulf*), and many of its actions seem ill motivated. I would isolate the following points as likely to reflect ancient aspects of the myth: (a) the origin of the necklace among the dwarves, which indicates that it emerges from the earth, and, possibly, from the underworld realm of death; (b) the necklace as the prize, or fruit, of sexual union (compare too how Gefjun granted sexual favours for the jewel brought by 'the white lad'): an underlying fertility connexion is apparent (we are reminded of the need for sexual union in the corn-fields to ensure the fertility of the crop in rites recorded in more recent times); (c) Loki's transformation into animal or insect form (though its mythological significance in this context is unclear); (d) Loki as the thief of the necklace; (e) a connexion between the necklace and eternal death and resurrection (though the linking of the Brisingamen with the Hjaðningavíg is probably the invention of the author of *Sorla*

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<sup>4</sup>Further parallels might be drawn: for instance in the four mythical helpers realized in the case of the Brisingamen as the four dwarves responsible for its manufacture, in the Sjælland myth as the four giants who assume the form of oxen to effect the massive feat of ploughing.

*þátr*): Freyja is mistress of half the slain in *Grímnismál* 14, and in *Voluspá* it appears that the Vanir, among whom she belongs and whose main activist she is, have the power of resurrection on the battlefield (see Dronke 1988, 230-1). What particular form these five traditional elements would have assumed in the pagan period cannot be established from *Sorla þátr*.

The allusive presentation in *Húsdrápa* 2 must remain our main source from which to draw any inferences about the myth as it was during the pagan period. There have been many interpretations of the myth; the most noticeable problem has been not so much incorrectness of interpretation, as a failure to perceive the many levels of meaning Úlfr has intended in his short passage.

The name *Singasteinn* remains one of the more obscure features of the poem; several interpretations have been suggested, none of them without problems. Less likely suggestions are that the name is a corruption of \**Signasteinn* 'magic stone, amulet' (Pering 1941, 219-20): this involves emendation, and, as Schier (1976, 584) points out, the use of the foreign word *signa* cannot be paralleled from early sources; or that it is 'the stone of song': however, the form expected in this sense would be \**Songvasteinn*, and the sense (amounting merely to 'famous stone') is superficial. More promising is the etymology that derives the first element from an adjective cognate with Gothic *sineigs* 'old' (*Lexicon Poeticum* s.v. *Singasteinn*; also de Vries 1977, s.v.; *Singa-* would be the form with thematic vowel for use in compounds, c.f. *hvítabjorn*). Hence it would be 'the Ancient Stone'. Now whilst 'Ancient Stone' seems to be philologically acceptable - though it requires us to resort to Gothic - there is little support for this sense from the context of the poem: even if the events of the myth took place in ancient days (at the creation), this is not stressed by Úlfr. Most likely I believe is the etymology offered by de Vries (1977, s.v.) connecting the word with *sía*, 'sinder, gleaming material'. *Singasteinn*, 'the Gleaming Stone', would then be none other than Freyja's *Brísingamen*, 'necklace of the Glitterers'. The name may in addition be a play on Old English *sinestan* 'treasure stone' (de Vries 1933, 140). In *Beowulf* 1200 part of the *Brosinga mene* is called a *sincefæt*, literally 'treasure vessel' (probably meaning 'precious setting'); the term *sinestan*, 'treasure stone' also occurs in Old English verse. There is some evidence of an awareness of this sense of 'what is sunken' as 'treasure' in Norse in the names *Sokkvabekkr* and

*Sokkdalir* (Davidson 1983, 79-80). Finally, the poet may possibly have intended a pun, *Brísinga steinn* (*steinn* = *men*).

The identification of the Singasteinn as Freyja's necklace does not exhaust the possibilities of interpretation, however. Snorri took *Singasteinn* as a place name, parallel to, or identical with *Vágasker*, a transparent formation meaning 'Wave-skerry', which must be taken as the name of the site of the contest. In Úlfr's verse the *Singasteinn* parallels, and on one level is surely to be identified with, the 'sea-kidney' in the second half of the stanza. Now 'sea-kidney' is a kenning for 'island' (Schier 1976, 583: compare *lagar hjarta* 'sea heart' in *Ynglingatal* (*Skjaldedigtning* B I, 11)), which here indicates *Vágasker*;<sup>5</sup> hence the fight is over the Gleaming Stone which is also conceived as an island raised from the ocean. This play on senses is also perhaps hinted at if the name *Singasteinn* is seen as alluding to an Old English *sincstan*, 'sunken, i.e. treasure stone'.

The multivalent meaning of *Singasteinn* seems to be reflected in the other words associated with it. The verse reads *at Singasteini*. *At* may signify: (a) 'at, to' — Heimdallr rushes (*bregðr*) towards, or acts quickly at Singasteinn (taking this as a place name); (b) 'for' (as in *leita at*, 'seek for') — Heimdallr rushes for the Singasteinn (taking this as the name of an object); (c) given the overall context, the predominant sense is probably 'over, in the matter of' (as used in legal contexts) — Heimdallr contends with Loki over the Singasteinn. Snorri says that Heimdallr is the *tilsækir* of *Vágasker* and *Singasteinn*; *tilsækir* appears to be an ancient word lifted by Snorri from a lost section of Úlfr's poem. Snorri apparently takes the word in the sense 'visitor' (cf. *tilsækjandi*), but it could equally mean 'claimant': *sækja til* is used in the sense 'lay claim to' (in particular land). It is Heimdallr who successfully lays claim to the Singasteinn, identified with the Wave-skerry: but Snorri (*Edda* 98) also gives *mensækir Freyju*, 'retriever of Freyja's necklace' as a kenning for Heimdallr, paralleling *tilsækir Singasteins*, which may be taken as signifying also 'retriever of the Gleaming Stone'.

Islands are associated with fertility beings elsewhere in Germanic: Nerthus dwells on one, and Gefjun drew the isle of Sjøælland from the water. However, the closest analogues to the motif of a contest between

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<sup>5</sup>In the opposite way de Vries (1933, 140) takes *Vágasker* as equivalent to the 'sea-kidney' which he regards as amber.

beings, one of whom is defending the fertility, indeed the existence, of the earth, is found in Eurasian myths; it was Schier's (1963) great contribution to the study of *Húsdrápa* to have noted these. In outline, the mythologem relates how two contestants, often God and the devil, contend with each other over the drawing up of earth from the sea bed; from this the world is created. It is clearly the fresh new world, 'the gleaming stone', at its first emergence from the ocean that Úlfr is describing; his contemporary, the poet of *Voluspá*, described that same world, *miðgarð mæran*, 'famed middle earth', drawn out of the ocean, when

sól skein sunnan  
 á salar steina,  
 þá var grund gróin  
 grœnom lauki.

the sun shone from the south  
 on the stones of the hall [the earth],  
 then was the earth grown  
 with the green leek.

The term *hafnýra*, 'sea-kidney', defines the nature of the Brisingamen still further. Pering's identification (1941, 217-9) of the sea-kidneys as a type of bean washed up on the shores of Norway and later called *vettenyrer* opens a new dimension of interpretation in the poem. These beans were used, probably bound into a belt, as a talisman of birth. Freyja's necklace emerges from the sea as a guarantor of fertility and protector of birth. The poet perhaps lays emphasis on the theme of birth by calling both gods by kennings describing them as sons; moreover, Heimdallr is the son of nine mothers, reminiscent of the *matronae* or *matres*, goddesses of fertility and childbirth worshipped in groups of three in Roman times by the Germanic peoples at mouth of the Rhine (de Vries 1956-7, §522-7).

Several levels of meaning are at play: the myth of Freyja's necklace the Brisingamen emerging from the ocean where Loki has stowed it makes allusion, in Úlfr's treatment, on the one hand to the cosmic myth of the origin of the fertile earth from the deathly primordial ocean, and on the other to the folk practice of binding magic beans, swept up from the sea, into a belt to safeguard birth.

In the disappearance of the necklace and its plunging into the ocean, followed by its retrieval, may be discerned an act of renewal and atonement. The fertility goddess Nerthus is freed each year from her sanctuary on an island, and after a sojourn among men she is washed in a lake before being returned to her sacred abode (Tacitus *Germania* ch. 40); more precisely, Freyja, with her necklace, belongs among the class of 'bound divinities' (such as Artemis and Dionysus) identified by Meuli (1975, 1035-81, esp. 1043-4; Jungner (1922, 147-151) and Ström (1956) also mention migration age Scandinavian bronze figures of a naked female fertility deity, endowed with a necklace). Once a year the bound god was 'released': a procession took place, in which, typically, the (fettered statue) of the god was 'lost' and, having been found, was taken to a lake and ritually washed and dressed in a new costume. The washing of the god was believed, Meuli claims, to effect the washing away of the worshippers' corruption too, and a new age would begin. Myths of fettered deities often told of a deluge, in which the world was renewed. The fettered deities were also often connected in some way with death. As pointed out by Dronke (1992, 669-70), the closest parallel to the Norse myth is found in the Akkadian tale of the Descent of Ishtar (which derives from an earlier Sumerian Descent of Inanna) - herself a goddess of fertility and of violent death, like Freyja. The goddess descends to the underworld (though no water is mentioned), and is forced to relinquish all her regalia, including a belt of birthstones, which are returned to her on her ascent. Whilst she is in the underworld no procreation takes place. The text seems to have been associated with the *taklimtu* ritual, in which a statue of the fertility god Dumuzi was washed and lay in state in Nineveh (see Dalley 1991, 154-62, for English version of the text with commentary). In Norse, it is not the goddess herself who is bathed in the flood-like waters of Wave-skerry, but her necklace, the symbol of her dominion over life and death. We may suspect that the myth of the Brisingamen was realised in some rite of annual laving, directed at the renewal of the land and its people, but all evidence for such pagan Norse rituals is lost.

*Brísa* 'shine, glitter' is the root of *Brisingr*; Pering (1941, 227) suggests that *Brisingr*, as a name for the necklace, would refer to the brightness of the sea-kidney beans. This is unlikely because there is no evidence that the necklace was called simply *Brisingr*, and the Old English *Brosinga mene* indicates the necklace was not specifically Norse, in which case the

sea-kidneys can only later, in Norway, have been associated with the necklace. Rather, the *Brísingar* would be people somehow associated with shining things; who the *Brísingar* were is unknown, but it is possible that they are identical with the four dwarves said to have made the necklace in *Sorla þáttur* (*Flateyjarbók* I, 275). Dwarves often have names including an element meaning 'fire': whilst this may relate to their smithing, it may also be seen as the fires of death, with which dwarves are associated (for a survey of dwarf names arranged according to sense, see Gould 1929: examples of names connected with gleaming are listed on p. 961). Thus, as well as the analogues noted above, the name too of the necklace may characterize it as drawn from the realm of death.<sup>6</sup> Probably the only indication of dwarves being associated with undersea treasure is found in *Voluspá* 37, where Sindri, whose name refers to the sparks flying off metal as it is smithied (and is from the same root as *Singasteinn*, as proposed above), has a golden hall beside the hall of the sea-god Brimir (or Ægir). Ægir's hall is lit by shining gold (*lýsigull*) in *Lokasenna*, and gold is frequently called 'light or fire of ocean' in poetic expressions. Ægir is chiefly renowned for furnishing the gods with a beer festival: behind this lies a variant of the retrieval of the myth of poetry and, originally, of immortality (Doht 1974, 158-9): the sea is viewed here as a source of inspired wisdom and immortality, a motif shared, it seems, with the *Brísingamen* myth.

It appears then that on one level the myth recounted in *Húsdrápa* 2 contains elements of the well-documented motif of the theft of fire from the gods, as indeed Much suggested long ago (1898; a good survey of versions of the theft of fire mythologem, and its Norse versions, is given by Doht 1974, who does not however discuss *Húsdrápa*). However, the Norse myth differs markedly in some respects: as recorded, there is no hint that the theft of the *Brísingamen* brought about the benefits of fire for men,

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<sup>6</sup>A parallel retrieval of life, symbolized by some physical object, from the fires of death, set on an island, is found in *Hervarar saga*, where the orphaned Hervor wrests the family sword from her father's flame-swathed barrow on an island that none but her would visit (*Fornaldar Sögur Norðurlanda* II, 13-23); similarly, in Egyptian myth there was an isle of fire, the destination of departed souls, which was nonetheless the source of life for gods and men (Clark 1959, 246-7).

which is a common feature of the theft of fire mythologem — rather, the necklace needs to be restored to the goddess, in order to restore fertility. If the 'theft of fire' motif played a part in the formation of the Brisingamen myth, it has become subsumed within the 'salvation of birth' motif: the linking of fire and birth in mythological contexts can indeed be demonstrated.

The theft of the Brisingamen, its disappearance into the depths and its subsequent retrieval correspond to the Finnish myth of the origin of fire among men: it fell from the highest heaven into a lake, where it was swallowed by a fish, which was caught in a net, cut open and the fire released and cradled (Kuusi et al. 1977, no. 9). The rocking and cradling indicate a connexion with birth: the pagan Finnish concept of the origin of souls is not clear, but in some shamanic societies the soul is sent down from a resting place on the world tree, just as the fire sparks from the summit of the equivalent world mountain (for example, among the Nanay the souls of the unborn rest on the clan-tree in heaven (Anisimov 1963, 185); among the Lapps Veralden Rad, the same god that a symbolic world tree was set up for, was responsible for sending the soul down to a woman (S. Kildal 1807, 451)). The connexion between striking fire and conception is apparent in the practice, found throughout pagan Scandinavia, of mounting fire stones into belts, as these stones were formed to resemble the female *pudenda* (Salo 1990, especially 125-9).

Fire is often stolen by an animal, and the appearance of the two gods in animal form in *Húsdrápa* may originally have reflected this role. However, the reason for the appearance of seals in the myth is primarily that they would be seen as good diving animals, an essential characteristic of the protagonists of the Siberian 'earth out of ocean' tales noted by Schier, a type to which the myth of *Húsdrápa* undoubtedly belongs. Moreover, seals come to land chiefly to mate: the males fight over the females; hence the mythical contest over birth too is rooted in a natural phenomenon. In addition, in the Old English *Nine Herbs Charm* lines 27-8 (Storms 1948, 188-9) the seal appears as the bearer of a healing herb; hence the possibility exists of a Germanic concept of the animal as in some way life-giving, and of life coming from the sea. In the Descent of Inanna, noted above as forming a close analogue to the Norse myth, two special beings are sent down from heaven with a life-giving herb and the water of life to revive Inanna in the underworld (Pritchard 1955, 52; Dalley 1991, 161).

Why is Heimdallr the god who is charged with retrieving the life-giving necklace? *Húsdrápa* 2 characterizes him in four designations: *ráðgegninn*, *ragna reinvári*, *móðoflugar* and *m\_gr átta mœðra ok einnar*; the possible fertility implication in the last has been mentioned above.

*Ráðgegninn* 'ready with counsel', a designation that is reiterated by the poet when he uses another word from the same root, saying that Heimdallr gains control - *ræðr* - of the sea-kidney, relates to the god's connexion with wisdom which is found in other sources: he is said to be foresighted (*vissi hann vel fram*) in *Frymskviða* 15, and in *Rígsþula* 1:4 he is called *áss kunnigr* 'wise god'. Obviously foresight and wisdom would be required for the task of retrieving the sacred necklace, but it is perhaps significant that in the one other place where Heimdallr's *ráð* is mentioned the word bears its extra significances of 'marriage; life conditions' - *Rígsþula* tells us that, as he approached various hitherto childless couples, *Rígr kunnir þeim ráð at segja* 'Rígr [i.e. Heimdallr] knew how to offer them counsel/marriage', after which each couple conceived a son: Heimdallr is thus presented as responsible for the engendering of the three classes of human society. Apparently Úlfr too wished to imply Heimdallr's control over the conditions for conception and life in his term *ráðgegninn*.

*Rein- -vári* I take to be a tmesis of a compound *reinvári*. Whilst the tmesis is stylistically unusual, it is not unparalleled (compare for example the tmesis *njarð-, ráð fyr sér, -gjarðar* of *Þórsdrápa* 7 (*Skjaldedigtning* B I, 141)). There is thus no need to emend *rein at* to the more easily comprehensible genitive *reinar*. *Rein* means 'a strip of land', specifically that between two fields (Fritzner 1886-96, s.v.): it was a grass-grown strip of earth which might not be broken up by plough or spade, but was to serve as a field or property boundary (cf. Old English *ran* in the same sense: see Smith 1956, II s.v.); it thus implies 'borderland'. There is no reason to associate *rein* with the rainbow (as do Cleasby & Vigfússon 1957, s.v.). Rather far-fetched is the interpretation of *rein* as the acc. of an unrecorded *\*reinn* 'seal', on the basis of the possibly cognate Lithuanian *ruinis* (Lindquist (1937, 84-5). Many stanzas of the poem have been lost, from which Snorri is more likely to have derived his information that the gods were fighting in seal form. *Vári*, found only in this passage of *Húsdrápa*, is to be derived from *verja* 'defend'. The word *vári* is presumably Úlfr's invention, though the line is based on one from Þjóðólfr of Hvin's *Haustlong* 5:2

*Fárbauta mog vára* (where *vára* is, unfortunately, obscure, but probably means 'of spring-times').

If the myth recounted in *Húsdrápa* 2 relates fundamentally to the formation of the earth through its being drawn up from the ocean, then Heimdallr's designation 'defender of the gods' land' (*ragna reinvári*) gives a clear reason for his involvement as a protagonist. Who better from among the gods to defend this new bright creation of earth than the defender of the gods' very own land? The designation is echoed by Snorri, who states (*Edda* 32-3) that Heimdallr 'is watchman of the gods and remains at the edge of heaven to guard the bridge against mountain giants' (*er vorðr goða ok sítr þar við himins enda at gæta brúarinnar fyrir bergisum*). Heimdallr is a guardian of the passage between worlds, and this unique position affords him peculiar powers of perception (Snorri *Edda* 33): 'he sees, by night as well as by day, a hundred leagues around him; he also hears when grass is growing on the earth and wool on sheep, and everything louder' (*hann sér jafnt nótt sem dag hundrað rasta frá sér; hann heyrir ok þat, er gras vex á jorðu eða ull á sauðum ok allt þat, er hæra lætr*); the god's ability to sense all that is happening in nature would enable him to take swift action (*bregðr*) against one attacking it. The term *vorðr goða* derives from *Grímnismál* 13 and *Lokasenna* 48; Loki says that Heimdallr has to remain awake (*vaka*) as 'watchman of the gods'. Úlfr presents a rather more active role for the god in *Húsdrápa*: he is more of a Þórr-like figure, a 'spirited (*móðofflutr*) defender of the gods' territory'. The term *vári*, 'defender', renders Heimdallr a stronger, less passive, figure than the (apparently) more traditional term *vorðr*, 'watchman'. He acts more like the wronged *várdráð*, 'guardian tree', of later Scandinavian farmsteads (of which, indeed, he may be a divine hypostasis, faithfully guarding the gods' realm), which exacted a destructive vengeance on anyone who wronged it (Olrík and Ellekilde (1926, 229-41) give a detailed picture of the *várdráð*: to fell the tree brought calamity; thus a man who did so heard the tree sing one night how he too would suffer, and his whole establishment burnt down). Heimdallr's spirited activity is also represented in the verb *bregða*. This means essentially 'to make a sudden, swift movement; to start off'; its uses often relate to fighting, as 'to draw (a sword)', 'to ward off (with a shield)' (cf. Heimdallr's role as a defender). Whilst *bregða við* + accusative of person does not seem to be directly paralleled, the basic meaning, rendered here as 'turns against', is surely clear. The placing of *bregðr* after

*ráð* suggests that the poet may also have had in mind the phrase *bregða á sitt ráð*, 'to go one's own way'; Heimdallr here 'follows his counsel' in attacking Loki.

Even the few extant lines of *Húsdrápa* that relate to the myth of Heimdallr's and Loki's strife over the Brisingamen show that Úlfr has created a complex and allusive poem. The necklace of birthstones (and its possible connexion with fire) rescued from the realm of death, the island setting and the implied atoning lustrations of the necklace all reflect the essential fertility aspect of the myth. The rescue of the necklace symbolizes both the primordial act of saving the earth, newly formed out of the ocean, and the ongoing guardianship of birth and fertility among men (safeguarded in a mundane manner through the belts of birthstones derived from the sea). Heimdallr's role as a protagonist in these mythologems derives from his guardianship both of the land of the gods, and of birth.

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