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A BASIC SCHEME OF ORAL POETRY as found in Ancient Scandinavia

Among the different types of poetry in ancient Scandinavia there is especially one group of songs lending themselves to be studied in the light of the laws and formulas of oral poetry, which Parry and Lord have tried to define. These are the heroic songs of the Edda. Scarcely five years after *The Singer of Tales*¹ had appeared, Robert Kellogg touched upon the subject in a contribution to the Festschrift for Magoun² and much new insight has been gained in the meantime, amassed by scholars writing on some or on all the Eddic poems as oral poetry.³ But: Whereas much work has been done on formulas, which are the smallest entities in Lord's poetic grammar, little attention has been paid to type scenes in these Old Norse heroic lays, to scenes which sometimes have their counterpart in pieces of heroic poetry far-off in space and time. In his survey in *Islandica XLV* Joseph Harris, in spite of all the work he had done in the field, put the question as follows:

Does eddic poetry have themes or type scenes? Probably the question should be put in terms of a complete theory of oral

¹Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. (1960) Third Printing 1971.

²Robert L. Kellogg, 'The South Germanic Oral Tradition', *Franciplegius*. Festschrift Magoun, New York 1965, pp. 66-73.

³See the selected bibliography given 10 years ago by Joseph Harris under the heading 'Eddic poetry as oral poetry' in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature* (= *Islandica XLV*), 1985, pp. 138-143. Regarding contributions from the last decade see especially (although they do not even mention Hloðskviða) Robert Kellogg, 'The Prehistory of Eddic Poetry', and Gísli Sigurðarson, 'On the Classification of Eddic Heroic Poetry in View of the Oral Theory', both in the volume *Poetry in the Scandinavian Middle Ages*, ed. by Teresa Pàroli, Spoleto 1990.

eddic poetry: what are the structural patterns between those of the language itself and the genres and subgenres? (1985:120)

In this essay I aim at much less than a complete theory of oral Eddic poetry. What I am going to do, however, is to follow the basic scheme which is realized in some of Lord's prominent examples, e.g. the examples which he presents in extenso in Appendix I of his book, and to outline how it can be applied to Hloðskviða, and to some extent also to another 3-4 heroic lays, which all belong to the genre, we call Eddic poetry. Although it is not much more than a purely descriptive approach, which I can offer here, it might be useful to think of some of these Old Norse poems as realizations of a special old scheme treated by Lord, in further discussions of Eddic poetry as oral poetry. As point of departure I choose the basic scheme of the South Slavic oral tradition emerging from Lord's headings in Appendix I of *The Singer of Tales*, an appendix consisting of summaries of the texts of *Be iragi Meho*, as they were told by two different singers. Common for the versions of Mumin and Avdo is, however, the arrangement of the different portions of the tale, which means - at least to a large extent - the arrangement of the same type scenes. And it is this underlying scheme of epic heroic poetry, which we also could define as a sequence of certain types of events, recurrent in a variety of heroic poems, on which I will focus.

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The very first words in Albert B. Lord's famous book - that is in his own Foreword - read: This book is about Homer. Therefore it cannot come as a surprise, that no mention is made of Hloðskviða⁴- The Lay of Hloth and Angantyr - or, as most people formerly put it in English:

⁴The text I refer to is printed in EDDA. Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern, ed. by Gustav Neckel/Hans Kuhn, Heidelberg 1962. Where I quote lines in current English, these are taken from the translation included in Christopher Tolkien's edition *Saga Heiðreks Konungs ins Vitra*, London/New York 1960.

The Battle of the Goths and the Huns. The song is not rendered in the main manuscript of the Eddic Poems and for that reason not included in all editions and translations of 'The Poetic Edda'.⁵ A remarkable translation into English was, nevertheless, provided as early as 1936 by Lee Hollander.⁶

Hloðskviða is a tale of two royal half-brothers who do not manage to conclude an agreement concerning their shares of inheritance after the death of king Heidrek, their father. There is a final battle, which brings death not only to Hloth, but also to thousands of people on either side. The grandeur of the poem not only as a literary product, but also and not least in our days, as an never-ending earnest request for peace, is underlined by its very last, rather quiet scene: Some hours after the battle Angantyr, victorious as he stands in the battlefield beside the corpse of Hloth, is not happy.

The lay shows all the marks discussed by Lord as marks of oral poetry. The surviving manuscripts of Hloðskviða also have slightly different renderings which may be regarded as remnants from different oral versions, but we can scarcely speak of different songs in the sense of Lord. All versions have the battle at the end and all have the Gothic tribe as the winning part. This, however, has perhaps not been so forever. As a matter of fact, notes and articles have been written on this victory of the Goths for a hundred years, mainly because many details in the lay point to places and a period, where the Goths would not have been the winning part. And it still seems impossible for scholars in the field to settle on one special historical event as underlying the legend. But as soon as we accept that Hloðskviða has been oral poetry for several centuries, with all the changes, every new performance brings about, there is a solution to the problem, the key being the witness of Majstorovic (born 1880), a blind old singer quoted by Lord (p. 19), a

⁵The title is also missing in many other places, where one would expect to find it, as in Liberman's *Word Heath* from 1994, which clearly is due to the fact, that Hloðskviða formerly not always has been accepted by scholars in the field as being a genuine Eddic poem.

⁶This translation is printed in *Old Norse Poems - the most important nonskaldic verse not included in the Poetic Edda*, New York: Columbia University Press.

singer who said in plain words, that in his songs the outcome of a battle would not be the same at every performance. He said, it would depend on whom he was singing for:

He sang his songs according to the company he was in, since he had to please his audience or else expect no reward. Thus when he was with Turks he sang Moslem songs, or his own songs in such a way that the Moslems won the battles. When he was with Serbs, whose company was more congenial to him, he sang their songs.

So, after all, it may be, that even the end of *Hloðskviða* in the remote past sometimes looked quite different from what we are used to read.

On the whole it is amazing to see, that in many respects the South Slavic oral poetry is better comparable to the heroic songs of the North than the huge texts by Homer. After all this is in all probability due to the different length of the texts: Only the Yugoslavian and the Old Norse songs could be performed in one evening.

Special attention deserves, however, what Lord presents in Appendix I of his book (pp. 223ff.) as typical examples in his material from the 20th century. These summaries of songs by Mumin and Avdo obviously are included in the book in order to demonstrate one of the basic schemes of oral poetry from more modern times, studied by himself, and by other people before him.

Regarding the arrangement of the different portions of the tale, nobody seems to have noticed so far, that the overall structure of *Hloðskviða* corresponds to the scheme outlined by Lord's small summaries of these portions, and that it does so to an astounding extent. In order to make this correspondence visible I will now give a survey of the type scenes of the tale as described by Lord, and the corresponding portions of *Hloðskviða*, including notes on some special motifs mentioned by Lord in other places, and used by him in building up the theory in part I of his book.

According to Lord's presentation the first scene in the texts of *Be_ iragi_ Meho* - traditionally - is "*The scene of the assembly : description of assembly*" - which in the case of the lay of Hloth clearly is the funeral feast, celebrated at the court of the young king of the Goths, Angantyr. The scene is outlined as follows:

Hlöd rode from the east,
 heir of Heidrek,
 he came to the court
 claiming his birthright
 to Arheimar
 the homes of the Goths;
 there drank Angantyr
 arval for Heidrek. (Transl. Tolkien 1960)

"Clamour woke in the court" we read later, in stanza 5, so this was no doubt a big assembly.

The next heading in Lord's summary is: *2. Description of Be_ iragi_ Meho* - that is the young hero in these texts. In both versions he is clearly not welcome. Nobody offered him tobacco or a glass or anything else.

In Hloðskviða the description of the intruder, Hloth, is given by a warrior or watchman, sent into the king's hall in order to announce Hloth's arrival. Thus, in a most natural way, the question of offering him something is postponed to a later portion of the tale. The warrior says:

Hlöd is come here,
 Heidrek's offspring,
 your own brother,
 for battle eager;
 mighty this youth is
 mounted on horseback;
 king, he claims now
 converse with you.

In Lord's summaries the heading of scene no. 3 is: *3. Arrival of the messenger*. In Hloðskviða the main protagonist speaks himself to Angantyr. So in the Old Norse poem no letter is involved, and that is only what we could expect: After all it was not usual to exchange letters between Hunnish and Germanic tribes in the 5th century. - Hloth enters the hall and Angantyr offers him a seat and a drink, but to no avail.

The next heading is: *4. Delivery of the letter*. Hloth makes it clear for Angantyr, that the reason for his visit is not to take part in the celebration. Apart from this remark we have to state, that this portion nr. 4 and the next one, *5. Payment and departure of the messenger*, are in Hloðskviða empty places, since we started out regarding the more developed south-slavic scheme as the normal one. But after all this is only, what is quite parallel to the functions in Propp's fairytales: As pointed out by himself, we do not find all the functions realized in every single fairytale.

So regarding number 4-5, there is no proper parallel in Hloðskviða to either of them, at least not to number 5. These are, however, type scenes, which occur in other lays of the Edda, although it may be in reduced form as in *Atlakviða*, just to mention one.

We proceed to scene no. 6 which goes under the heading: *6. The letter, Meho's request, Mustajbey's answer*. Although these people do not quarrel about matters of inheritance, Meho requests from Mustajbey clothing, armor and weapons, or - in the other version - clothes, weapons and a horse. The answer is 'no'. This portion is clearly paralleled by Hloth's request for extradition of his inheritance and by Angantyr's answer.

7. Meho's reply - the tale-within-a-tale. In his tale Meho speaks of the past, mainly of terrible memories from his own life. There is no clearcut equivalent in Hloðskviða, as far as Hloth is regarded. But there is another person speaking of the past at that point of the tale: It is here we find Gizur's offending remarks about the past, which arouse Hloth's hatred.

8. Offers of assistance. In Hloðskviða this portion is realized as offers given to Hloth by his grandfather, and to Angantyr by Gizur.

For details I can here only refer to the Old Norse text, stanzas 15-16 and stanza 24.

9. *The preparations.* In *Hloðskviða* the preparations for the war are described including an interlude as soon as the Huns have crossed the border. It is at that point, some days before the great battle that we find the famous paragraph, giving the first glimpse of the Huns, as observed by Hervör. I quote it here, since it has clear parallels in songs treated by Parry and Lord (although these are not the two songs in Appendix I):

One morning at sunrise Hervör stood on a tower above the fortress-gate, and she saw a great cloud of dust from horses' hooves rising southwards towards the forest, which for a long time hid the sun.

Regarding the cloud of dust I would like to quote some sentences from Lord's book: "Osman sees a cloud on the horizon" (p. 81), "Osman looks out over the plain and sees the usual cloud, from which emerges a rider" (p. 81), "Avdo described how Mustabey looked out the window and saw a cloud of dust from which emerged a rider" (p. 81).

Some few pages later the cloud of dust in the distance, from which emerged a rider is mentioned by Lord once more, and on that occasion he adds: This is Avdo's normal way of describing the arrival of messengers.⁷ We also learn from Lord's comment that for the singer of tales there is something more linked to that picture than just the arrival of messengers: In the arrival catalogue the singer learns to describe horses and heroes as they are seen emerging unto the plain (p. 96).

As a matter of fact, this is exactly how the Hunnish army is seen first by the sister of Angantyr, early in the morning, from the tower above the main entrance to her fortress: She saw so much dust southward toward the forest that it hid the sun for a long time.

Then saw she a glow under the dust, as though from gold, of gilded helmets and bright byrnies. Then understood she that this was

⁷Concerning the cloud of dust see Lord, *op.cit.*, pp. 81 and 93.

the army of the Huns, and a mighty host. She hurried down and called her trumpeter and bade him summon the host.

As I mentioned already, in Appendix I of Lord's book there is no dust from which emerges a rider. There is a woman, however, whom the hero visits on his way to his enemies. He had been advised to treat her as a sister. He does so and she helps him.

After no. 9 we get in Lord's exemplary songs four small sections, some of which have motivemes in common with Hloðskviða, while others are different. For instance in section 10 (Young Be_ir and Mustajbey) a feature from section 8 is reinforced: Old Mustabey hung his head / was drunk and knew not what to do - which reminds of Angantyr, as he sits mourning over the death of his sister.⁸ Consequently it is to another guy, in the case of the Yugoslavian songs young Be_ir, to tell the mighty person, that he should have his horse prepared and summon the army. This is in fact what Gizur does in Hloðskviða, although the context clearly is different.

The following sections: 11. Meho and Jela in Janok, 12. Meho and Andelija, 13. Meho accompanies Anda to the crossroads - they could all be treated in similar ways, but since the main goal for the hero here is to get back his beloved girl, most of the motivemes involved clearly have no counterpart in Hloðskviða. So we proceed immediately to no. 14.

14. The final battle. They fought for three days and three nights - that is what we read in Lord's Appendix I. In Hloðskviða the Huns and the Goths fight for eight days, before the decisive part of the battle takes place. But after the battle there is no wedding. There is only a vast number of dead men and horses, a king beside the corpse of his brother, victorious but not happy.

As I have pointed out already, it has always been difficult for scholars in the field to settle on one special historical event as underlying the legend. This was not least, because several of the real battles, which were proposed, were in fact not won by the Goths, but by the

⁸Cf. Christopher Tolkien, *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, 1960, p. 54.

Huns. Although Christopher Tolkien⁹ and even more Omeljan Pritsak¹⁰ have put forth strong arguments for, that it is high time to call off this discussion, it may well continue forever, unless people in Old Norse start to consider seriously what the old singer quoted above had to say about the battles in his songs: He would not hesitate to change the end to the opposite, in cases where he had to perform the same song for men of the opposite party.

Consequently, although Hloðskviða is preserved only with the Gothic tribe as the victorious part, this need not have been so from the very beginning or every time, the lay was performed. There is, by the way, another feature, which seems to be typical for battles in this kind of songs, attested in the Old Norse legend: We find it in the description of the battle in *Hervarar saga* (not preserved as a stanza), and in one of the two versions retold by Lord in Appendix I: After the battle has started, several new groups of soldiers appear, thus reinforcing the army of the hero.

The little, which is told at the end of section 14, after the final battle, is different in the two versions of the Yugoslavian song, both include, however, a wedding, which we do not find at the end of Hloðskviða.

One may wonder, why nobody so far felt tempted to discuss the realization of this scheme in Hloðskviða. I would think, it is simply because all notable contributions on Old Norse oral poetry in more recent times had as a restriction that scholars kept to the poems preserved in the Codex Regius, and consequently did not consider the lay of Hloth, where the scheme is recognized most easily. Looking over closely the heroic lays of this collection, we find, however, that the scheme is recurrent also in texts included in the Codex Regius (*Atlakviða* and distorted, but still discernable in *Hamðismál*, stanza 17ff.), and fairly well preserved in the *Second lay of Helgi Hundingsbani*, stanza 14 through 51, the lay which generally is supposed to be the oldest of the

⁹Christopher Tolkien, 'The Battle of the Goths and the Huns', *Saga-Book XIV* (1955-56), pp. 141-165.

¹⁰Omeljan Pritsak, *The Origin of Rus'*, Vol.I, Cambridge, Mass. 1981, (Chapter 10).

Helgi-poems. Yet, as with other aspects of oral poetry, we cannot expect the concept to be fully applicable in different traditions. Discussing details of this scheme, we must, certainly,

give the idiosyncratic aspects of each tradition their due, for only when we perceive sameness against the background of rigorously examined individualized traits can we claim a true comparison of oral traditions.

In conclusion I would say, that this statement put forth by John Foley in an article on tradition-dependent varieties of the formula¹¹ seems to be true also for the traditional, which Lord called 'theme' and which normally will reach beyond the level of the line, at least as far as Old Norse heroic poetry is regarded.

¹¹John Miles Foley, 'Tradition-dependent and -independent Features in Oral Literature: A Comparative View of the Formula'. *Oral Traditional Literature*. (=Festschrift Lord) Columbus, Ohio 1981, p. 275.