



THE POETIC EDDA

A Dual-Language Edition

EDWARD PETTIT



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Back cover image: The god Heimdallr blowing his horn, from a seventeenth-century Icelandic manuscript (AM 738 4to, fol. 35v)

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Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta

This poem, entitled simply *Guðrúnarkviða* ‘Lay of Guðrún’ in **R** (fol. 33v–34v), is now generally known as *Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta* ‘The First Lay of Guðrún’ (*Gðr. I*) to distinguish it from the second and third lays of Guðrún found later in the manuscript. It is a fine composition in *fornyrðislag* in which the two dominant female characters of the *Völsung-Niflung* cycle, Guðrún and Brynhildr, each make a strong emotional and psychological impression.

First we meet Guðrún, Sigurðr’s widow, whose grief at her husband’s death is so extreme that, the poet says, she is preparing herself to die (or simply about to die). Her inner trauma is at first simply but forcefully conveyed through an inability to cry, despite her being impassioned to the point of bursting. This inability, together with her total silence for the first half of the poem, invites comment. Broadly speaking, in Old Norse literature, while men were admired for stoic impassiveness and brevity of speech in the face of death, women were meant to weep at it profusely and, where necessary, incite their close relatives to vengeance. Guðrún’s silence, which economically suggests not only extreme shock and grief but potentially also a combination of incomprehension at familial betrayal, rage, a realization of the wider implications of Sigurðr’s death, and perhaps a determined sense of purpose, is therefore not only unusual but unnerving. This may partly explain why the first people to approach her are noblemen—unnamed but perhaps including her brother, Gunnarr, and brothers-in-law—who try to dissuade her from an (implicitly masculine) hardness of heart. They appear not to fear (principally at least) that she will die, but that she will harden her heart and, by implication, pursue vengeance; the consequences of this would be terrible because her brothers Gunnarr and Högni, whom she might otherwise have incited to avenge Sigurðr’s death, were themselves implicated in his murder. But however wise they are to the danger of intrafamilial vengeance, these men fail to move Guðrún. So, too, do two obscure women (possibly invented by the poet), Gjaflaug and Herborg, whose catalogues of sorrow prefigure Guðrún’s *tregróf* ‘grief-chain’ in *Ghv.* 21—until Herborg’s foster-daughter, Gullrönd (also possibly the poet’s invention), taking a dramatically different approach, sweeps the shroud from Sigurðr’s corpse.

At the shocking sight of Sigurðr’s bloody body, the emotional dam breaks and Guðrún starts to weep. Only a single tear at first, one described with pathetic fallacy as a raindrop, but soon followed by a flood of tears and sympathetic honking from her geese. Given the setting of these events in a mythical time (*Ár var ...* ‘It was early/in

early days ...'), there is subtle resonance here with the weeping of the natural world at the death of Baldr, the god similarly slain treacherously by his brother.¹

Guðrún's weeping, her noble lament for her peerless husband and her admonishment of her brothers bring a strongly elegiac strain to *R*,² one that returns in *Gðr. II, Hlr., Od.* and *Ghv.*, and that also characterizes the skaldic poem *Sonatorrek* 'Wreck of Sons' by the Icelander Egill Skallagrímsson. It also merits comparison to Old English poetry with elegiac elements, such as the 'Finnsburh episode' of *Beowulf*, *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*.³

The well-meaning attempts of the men and women to help Guðrún by encouraging her to cry contrast starkly with the sudden malicious outburst of Brynhildr, whose presence at the scene itself comes as a shock. Obviously stung by Guðrún's description of her as a 'wretched creature', and an earlier indirect put-down in st. 19, while apparently having enough forbearance not to attack Guðrún, she nevertheless proceeds to justify this portrayal by deflecting the 'creature'-accusation onto Gullrönd, blaming everything on her brother, Atli, and snorting poison toward the dead Sigurðr. This last detail suggests a figurative echo of the venom-breathing snake Fáfnir, whose gold ('fire of the snake-bed' in st. 26) she and Atli had probably seen on Sigurðr when he visited their home. It serves as a counterpart to Guðrún's eating of some of Fáfnir's heart in the prose introduction; it also prefigures the snake-like killing of Gunnarr by the mother of Atli (and Brynhildr?) in *Od.* 32. By recalling Fáfnir and his cursed treasure in this way, the poet of *Gðr. I* creates a mythically resonant climax to a poem otherwise largely characterized by raw human emotion. This mythical dimension, which calls to mind Fáfnir's death on Sigurðr's sword, adds something to the grim turnaround of the prose conclusion, in which, contrary to the expectation created by the poem's opening stanza, it is not Guðrún who prepares to die but Brynhildr—she has thirteen of her household slain before stabbing herself to death with a sword.

Gðr. I is also of interest for underlining the heterogeneity of Norse traditions about the events surrounding Sigurðr's death, a diversity explicit in the prose epilogue to *Br.* Thus, no other text records the attempts of the noblemen and three women to induce Guðrún to weep, or Brynhildr's response, although this text, or something like it, presumably lies behind the opening scenes of *VS* 34. There Guðrún laments Sigurðr, before taking to the woods and arriving in Denmark at the hall of King Hálfr and staying with Þóra, daughter of Hákon. There is no corroboration in the saga, or anywhere else, however, of the claim in the prose introduction to *Gðr. I* that Guðrún's

1 Cf. Sigurðr's description as *her-Baldr* 'army-Baldr' in *Sg.* 18.

2 It is described as 'perhaps the most characteristic "Eddic elegy" of all' in D. Sävborg, 'Elegy in Eddic Poetry: Its Origin and Context', in P. Acker and C. Larrington, ed., *Revisiting the Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Heroic Legend* (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 81–106 at 102, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203098608-14>

3 For example, in the last of these, a women separated from her husband or lover laments: *þonne hit wæs renig weder, ond ic reotugu sæt* 'then it was rainy weather, and I sat tearful'. Cf. the pathetic fallacy of *Gðr. I* 15.

eating of part of Fáfnir's heart enabled her to understand the language of birds (like Sigurðr).⁴ With regard to this claim, the prose writer's distancing observation ('It is the report of people that ...') suggests that it also appeared non-standard to him.

Synopsis

Prose: An introductory passage records Guðrún's extreme but tear-free grief and how, having eaten of Fáfnir's heart, she understood bird-talk.

Verse: Guðrún sat sorrowfully by Sigurðr's corpse, preparing herself for (or on the point of) death but without expressing her grief (1). Noblemen tried vainly to prevent her hardening her heart (2). Three women, two of them Guðrún's sisters, tried to do the same by telling of their own sorrows (3). First was Gjaflaug (4), whose words were of no avail (5). Next was Herborg (6-10), but she also failed (11). Third was Gullrönd, who, instead of lamenting her sorrows, whisked the shroud from Sigurðr's corpse (12-13).

Guðrún looked at Sigurðr's bloody body once (14), whereupon the first outward signs of her emotion showed and a tear ran down her knees (15). She then wept (16), and Gullrönd acknowledged the preeminence of her sister's love for Sigurðr (17).

Guðrún then extolled Sigurðr's superiority to her brothers in metaphorical terms (18), reflected on how small she now felt (19), acknowledged how she missed Sigurðr, and blamed her brothers (20), who had sworn oaths to Sigurðr and who would die for having broken them (21). Next she recalled how in happier times her brothers had gone to ask for the hand of the cursed Brynhildr (22).

Brynhildr then cursed whoever had moved Guðrún to speak (23), only to be told to be silent by Gullrönd, who declared her the worst ruiner of men (24). Brynhildr responded by blaming her brother Atli (25), and recalling the time when they both saw Sigurðr wearing gold (probably Fáfnir's), a sight she never forgot (26). She gazed with blazing eyes and snorted poison at Sigurðr's wounds (27).

Prose: Guðrún then went away to a wood and on to Denmark, where she stayed with a certain Þóra, daughter of a man called Hákon. Brynhildr no longer wished to live. She had some of her slaves and serving-women killed and then took her own life with a sword.

4 VS 28 records that her eating of some of Fáfnir's heart made her grimmer and wiser, but not that it conferred understanding of birdsong.

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Guðrún sat yfir Sigurði dauðum. Hon grét eigi sem aðrar konur, en hon var búin til at springa af harmi. Til gengu bæði konur ok karlar at hugga hana, en þat var eigi auðvelt. Þat er sögn manna at Guðrún hefði etit af Fáfnis hjarta ok hon skilði því fugls rödd.

Þetta er enn kveðit um Guðrúnu:

Guðrúnarkviða *in fyrsta*

1. Ár var, þats Guðrún gөрðisk at deyja,
er hon sat sorgfull yfir Sigurði;
gөрðit hon hjúfra né hөndum slá,
né kveina um sem konur aðrar.
2. Gengu jarlar alsnotrir fram,
þeir er harðs hugar hana lөttu;
þeygi Guðrún gráta mátti —
svá var hon móðug, mundi hon springa.
3. Sátu ítrar jarla brúðir,
gulli búnar, fyr Guðrúnu;
hver sagði þeira sinn oftrega,
þann er bitrastan um beðit hafði.
4. Þá kvað Gjaflaug, Gjúka systir:
'Mik veit ek á moldu munar lausasta:
hefi ek fimm vera forspell beðit,
tveggja dөetra, þriggja systra,
átta brөðra — þó ek ein lifi!'
5. Þeygi Guðrún gráta mátti:
svá var hon móðug at mөг dauðan
ok harðhuguð um hrөр fylkis.
6. Þá kvað þat Herborg, Húnalands dróttning:
'Hefi ek harðara harm at segja:
mínir sjau synir sunnan lands,
verr inn átti, í val fellu;
7. 'faðir ok móðir, fjörir brөðr,
þau á vági vindr of lék,
barði bára við borðþili.
8. 'Sjálíf skylda ek gөfga, sjálíf skylda ek gөtva,
sjálíf skylda ek hөndla Helfögr þeira;
þat ek allt um beið ein misseri,
svá at mér maðr engi munar leitaði.

This is also spoken about Guðrún:

1. Early it was,² when Guðrún got herself ready to die,³
when she sat sorrowful over Sigurðr;⁴
she did not howl or strike with her hands,⁵
or wail about it like other women.⁶

2. Very wise earls⁷ came forward,
they who tried to dissuade her from hardness of heart;
yet Guðrún could not cry at all —
so impassioned was she, she might have burst apart.

3. Stately brides of earls⁸ sat,
adorned with gold, before Guðrún;
each of them spoke of her⁹ extreme sorrow,
the severest that she had suffered.

4. Then Gjaflaug¹⁰ spoke, Gjúki's sister:
'I know myself [to be] the most bereft of love on earth:
I have experienced the loss of five husbands,
two daughters, three sisters,
eight brothers — yet I live [on], alone!'

5. Yet Guðrún could not cry at all:
so impassioned was she at the young man's death
and hard-hearted over the marshal's corpse.

6. Then Herborg¹¹ said this, queen of Húaland:¹²
'I have a harsher harm to speak of:
my seven sons, in a southern land,
[and my] husband the eighth, fell in battle;

7. '[my] father and mother, [and] four brothers,
the wind played with them on the wave,
a billow struck the board-wall.¹³

8. 'I myself had to adorn them,¹⁴ I myself had to bury them,
I myself had to handle their Hel-journey;¹⁵
all that I experienced in one season,¹⁶
so that no one made me happy.

9. Þá varð ek hapta ok hernuma
sams misseris síðan verða;
skylda ek skreyta ok skúa binda
hersis kván hverjan morgin.
10. 'Hon ægði mér af afbrýði,
ok hørðum mik hoggum keyrði;
fann ek húsgruma hvergi in betra,
en húsfreyju hvergi verri!'
11. Þeygi Guðrún gráta mátti;
svá var hon móðug at mæg dauðan
ok harðhuguð um hrør fylkis.
12. Þá kvað þat Gullrönd, Gjúka dóttir:
'Fá kanntu, fóstara, þótt þú fróð sér,
ungu vífi andspjöll bera!'
Varaði hon at hylja um hrør fylkis.
13. Svípti hon blæju af Sigurði
ok vatt vengi fyr vífs knjám:
'Líttu á ljúfan, leggðu munn við grön,
sem þú hálsaðir heilan stilli!'
14. Á leit Guðrún einu sinni;
sá hon doglings skör dreyra runna,
fránar sjónir fylkis liðnar,
hugborg jöfurs hjörvi skorna.
15. Þá hné Guðrún, höll við bólstri;
haddr losnaði, hlýr roðnaði,
en regns dropi rann niðr um kné.
16. Þá grét Guðrún, Gjúka dóttir,
svá at tár flugu tresk í gognum,
ok gullu við gæss í túni,
mærir fuglar er mær átti.
17. Þá kvað þat Gullrönd, Gjúka dóttir:
'Ykkar vissa ek ástir mestar
manna allra fyr mold ofan;
unðir þú hvárki, úti né inni,
systir mín, nema hjá Sigurði!'
18. 'Svá var minn Sigurðr hjá sonum Gjúka,
sem væri geirlaukr ór grasi vaxinn,
eða væri bjartr steinn á band dreginn,
jarknasteinn yfir öðlingum!

9. ‘Then I was compelled to become a captive and a prisoner of war
 in the same season thereafter;
 I had to adorn¹⁷ and to bind the shoes of
 a chieftain’s wife each morning.
10. ‘She intimidated me out of envy,
 and hit me with hard blows;
 I found a better house-man nowhere,
 but a worse house-lady nowhere!’
11. Yet Guðrún could not cry at all:
 so impassioned was she at the young man’s death
 and hard-hearted over the marshal’s corpse.
12. Then Gullrönd¹⁸ said this, Gjúki’s daughter:
 ‘Little do you know, foster-mother,¹⁹ even though you are wise,
 how to broach conversation with a young wife!’
 She advised against covering the marshal’s corpse.
13. She swept the shroud from Sigurðr
 and placed a pillow²⁰ before the wife’s knees:
 ‘Look at your loved one, lay your mouth against his moustache,
 as you used to embrace the leader while he was whole!’
14. Guðrún looked at him one time [only];
 she saw Dagr’s descendant’s²¹ hair streaming with blood,
 the sparkling eyes of the marshal [that had] passed away,²²
 the boar’s²³ heart-stronghold²⁴ cut open by a sword.
15. Then Guðrún sank, leant against the bolster;
 her hair came loose, her cheek reddened,
 and a drop of rain²⁵ ran down over her knees.
16. Then Guðrún wept, Gjúki’s daughter,
 so that tears flew through her tresses,²⁶
 and at that geese honked²⁷ in the home-meadow,²⁸
 excellent birds which the young woman owned.
17. Then Gullrönd said this, Gjúki’s daughter:²⁹
 ‘I know your love³⁰ was the greatest
 of all people upon earth;
 you were happy nowhere, [neither] outside nor inside,
 my sister, unless beside Sigurðr!’
- 18.³¹ ‘So was my Sigurðr beside the sons of Gjúki,
 as if he were a spear-leek³² grown higher than the grass,
 or a bright stone³³ strung on a band,³⁴
 a noble stone over noblemen!’

19. 'Ek þóttak ok þjóðans rekkum
hverri hærri Herjans dísi;
nú em ek svá lítil sem lauf sé
opt í jölstrum, at jöfur dauðan!
20. 'Sakna ek í sessi ok í sæingu
míns málvinar — valda megir Gjúka!
Valda megir Gjúka mínu *bólvi*
ok systir sinnar sárum gráti!
21. 'Svá ér um lýða landi eyðið,
sem ér um unnuð eiða svarða;
mana þú, Gunnarr, gulls um njóta;
þeir munu þér baugar at bana verða,
er þú Sigurði svarðir eiða.
22. 'Opt var í túni teiti meiri,
þá er minn Sigurðr sǫðlaði Grana,
ok þeir Brynhildar biðja fóru,
armrar vættar, illu heilli!
23. Þá kvað þat Brynhildr, Buðla dóttir:
'Vǫn sé sú vættir vers ok barna
er þik, Guðrún, gráts um beiddi
ok þér í morgun málrúnar gaf!
24. Þá kvað þat Gullrǫnd, Gjúka dóttir:
'Þegi þú, þjóðleið, þeira orða!
Urðr ǫðlinga hefir þú æ verit!
Rekr þik alda hverr illrar skepnu —
sorg sára sjau konunga
ok vinspell vífa mest!
25. Þá kvað þat Brynhildr, Buðla dóttir:
'Veldr einn Atli ǫllu bólví,
of borinn Buðla, bróðir minn!
26. 'Þá er vit í hǫll húnskrar þjóðar,
eld á jǫfri ormbeðs litum;
þess hefi ek gangs goldit síðan,
þeirar sýnar — sámk ey!
27. Stóð hon und stoð, strengði hon *efli*;
brann Brynhildi, Buðla dóttur,
eldr ór augum, eitri fnæsti,
er hon sár um leit á Sigurði.

19. ‘I also seemed to the king’s men
 higher than any woman of Herjann,³⁵
 now I am as little as a leaf often is
 on(?) bay willows,³⁶ after the dead boar!³⁷
20. ‘I miss in his seat and in his bed
my friendly confidant³⁸ — the sons of Gjúki are the cause!
 The sons of Gjúki are the cause of my suffering
 and their sister’s sorrowful crying!
21. ‘Thus you³⁹ will empty the land of its inhabitants,
 as you did swear oaths,⁴⁰
 you won’t, Gunnarr, profit from the gold;
 those arm-rings will bring about your death,
 since you⁴¹ swore oaths to Sigurðr.
22. ‘There was often more merriment in the home-meadow,
 when my Sigurðr saddled Grani,
 and they went to ask for Brynhildr,
 [that] wretched creature, with bad luck!’
23. Then Brynhildr said this, Buðli’s daughter:
‘May that creature be in want of husband and children
 who brought you to tears, Guðrún,
 and gave you speech-runes⁴² this morning!’
24. Then Gullrond said this, Gjúki’s daughter:
‘Be silent, widely loathed one — [enough] of those words!
 You’ve always been the undoing⁴³ of noblemen!
 Every evil fate of men drives you on —
 [you’re] the sore sorrow of seven kings⁴⁴
 and the worst⁴⁵ friend-ruiner of women!’⁴⁶
25. Then Brynhildr said this, Buðli’s daughter:
‘Atli alone is the cause of all [this] evil,
 [the man] born of Buðli, my brother!’⁴⁷
26. ‘When we two [were] in the hall of the Hunnish people,
 we saw fire of the snake-bed⁴⁸ on the boar;⁴⁹
 I’ve since paid for [that] expedition,⁵⁰
 for that sight — I was always uneasy about it!’
27. She stood by a post, she summoned her strength;
 fire burnt from the eyes of Brynhildr,
 Buðli’s daughter, [and] she snorted poison,
 when she looked at the wounds on Sigurðr.

Guðrún gekk þaðan á braut til skógar á eyðimerkr ok fór allt til Danmarkar ok var þar með Þóru, Hákonar dóttur, sjau misseri.

Brynhildr vildi eigi lifa eptir Sigurð. Hon lét drepa þræla sína átta ok fimm ambóttir. Þá lagði hon sik sverði til bana, svá sem segir í 'Sigurðarkviðu inni skömmu.'

Guðrún went away from there to a wood in a wasteland and went all the way to Danmørk⁵¹ and there stayed with Þóra, daughter of Hákon, for seven seasons.⁵²

Brynhildr did not want to live after Sigurðr. She had her eight slaves killed and five serving-women. Then she stabbed herself to death with a sword, as it says in *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* ['The Short Lay of Sigurðr'].⁵³

Textual Apparatus to *Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta*

Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta] **R** *Guðrúnarkviða*, a rubricated but faded heading, illegible in the facsimile volume of **R**; the reading *Guðrúnarkviða* is reliant on the transcription therein. The words *in fyrsta* are supplied editorially.

1/1 *Ár*] The first letter is large, inset and red, but faded, in **R**

8/4 *helfor*] **R** *her for* (i.e., *herfor* ‘army/war-journey’)

17/1 *Gullrond*] **R** absent

19/7 *i*] **R** absent

20/6 *bplvi*] **R** absent

21/5 *mana*] **R** *manna*

27/2 *efli*] **R** *elvi*

27 pr. *Guðrún*] **R** *Gunnarr*

27 pr. *Sigurðarkviðu*] **R** *sigurðar qvði*

Notes to the Translation

- 1 I.e., by and leaning over.
- 2 I.e., it was long ago.
- 3 Or ‘... was about to die’. Cf. *Gðr. II* 11.
- 4 The action of *sitja yfir* ‘sitting over’ (i.e., presumably, sitting beside and leaning over) a dead relative was probably an old Germanic custom.
- 5 I.e., strike her hands together, an old Germanic gesture of grief. Cf. *Gðr. II* 11, *Sg.* 25.
- 6 Cf. *Gðr. II* 11.
- 7 They might include Gunnarr, whom Guðrún addresses directly in st. 21.
- 8 Possibly three of the ‘earls’ of the preceding stanza.
- 9 I.e., her own, not Guðrún’s.
- 10 *Gjaf-* probably means ‘gift’, but the sense of *-laug* is uncertain.
- 11 ‘Army Stronghold’.
- 12 Land of the Huns.
- 13 The side of their ship.
- 14 Literally, ‘make them noble’, presumably by adorning their dead bodies.
- 15 What preparation this involved is unknown, but perhaps it entailed the provision of goods for the journey to Hel.
- 16 I.e., one half-year.
- 17 Or ‘dress (in finery)’.
- 18 ‘Gold-Edge/Shield’.
- 19 Herborg.
- 20 Or cushion.

- 21 For *doglingr* as 'descendant of Dagr ['Day']', see *HH. I* 7; alternatively, 'the prince's'.
- 22 I.e., grown dim.
- 23 Sigurðr's.
- 24 Or 'courage-fortress', i.e., his chest.
- 25 Both an instance of pathetic fallacy and a metaphor for one of Guðrún's tears.
- 26 The interpretation of *tresk*, here translated 'tresses', is disputed.
- 27 Literally, 'yelled'.
- 28 Cf. *Sg.* 29.
- 29 Gullrönd is an otherwise almost unknown character.
- 30 I.e., that of Guðrún and Sigurðr.
- 31 Guðrún speaks at last.
- 32 Garlic.
- 33 I.e., a gemstone.
- 34 I.e., a cord.
- 35 'Army Leader', an alias of Óðinn. His women are valkyries, the most famous of whom, Brynhildr, is watching and listening.
- 36 The precise sense of this passage is unclear.
- 37 Sigurðr.
- 38 Literally, 'my conversation-friend'.
- 39 Pl., in reference to the sons of Gjúki, her brothers.
- 40 I.e., to Sigurðr.
- 41 *Sg.*
- 42 I.e., got Guðrún to speak, as if by magic. Cf. *Sd.* 12.
- 43 Literally, 'weird', '(evil) fate'; a nonce identification with the Norn called *Urðr* is conceivable.
- 44 If the number is to be interpreted literally, the seven may be Sigurðr, Sigurðr's son, Guthormr (Gothormr/Guttormr), Gunnarr, Högni and two other sons of Gjúki (Gernoz and Giselher); cf. *Br.* 8.
- 45 Literally, 'greatest'.
- 46 Or 'of wives'. The accusation is ambiguous as to whether it charges Brynhildr with being the worst example of a woman who ruins friendships or of a person who ruins women's friendships.
- 47 Brynhildr may be trying to exonerate herself by claiming that it was Atli's desire for the Burgundians' gold that gave rise to all the trouble.
- 48 A kenning for 'gold', here probably that which Sigurðr took from Fáfnir's lair.
- 49 Presumably Sigurðr.
- 50 Probably Sigurðr's visit to the Hunnish hall.
- 51 Denmark.
- 52 I.e., half-years. Cf. *Gðr.* II 14.
- 53 This specific detail is not recorded in the following poem, which is entitled *Kviða Sigurðar* 'Poem of Sigurðr' in **R**, but which has come to be known as *Sigurðarkviða in skamma*. However, Brynhildr does stab herself fatally with a sword in chapter 9 of *Norna-Gests þátt*.

