



THE POETIC EDDA

A Dual-Language Edition

EDWARD PETTIT



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Edward Pettit, *The Poetic Edda: A Dual-Language Edition*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0308>

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Digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0308#resources>

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80064-772-5

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80064-773-2

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80064-774-9

ISBN Digital ebook (EPUB): 978-1-80064-775-6

ISBN Digital ebook (AZW3): 978-1-80064-776-3

ISBN XML: 978-1-80064-777-0

ISBN HTML: 978-1-80064-778-7

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0308

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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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Helreið Brynhildar

Helreið Brynhildar (*Hlr.*) ‘Brynhildr’s Hel-Ride [i.e., Ride to Hel]’ is a short, though not certainly complete, poem in *fornyrðislag*. It survives in both **R** (fol. 36r–v) and, without st. 7, in chapter 9 of *Norna-Gests þáttr* ‘The Tale of Norna-Gestr’.¹ The latter work, probably composed in the early fourteenth century, has a somewhat different and fuller prose introduction, as well as many variant readings to the stanzas, the most significant of which are quoted and translated in the notes to the translation.²

Hlr. is thought to be one of the more recent poems in **R** relating to the death of Sigurðr. It is a dialogue between Brynhildr, who instigated his killing, and an unnamed giantess (*gýgr*) whom Brynhildr encounters while travelling in a funeral carriage on the road to Hel.³ The meeting is antagonistic, in common with other encounters between a visitor to this land of the dead and a guardian of the way or entrance thereto. It broadly parallels, for example, Óðinn’s meeting with a barking hellhound in *BDr.*; the hostile encounter between Skírnir and a herdsman in *FSk.*; the challenging of Hermóðr by a maiden called Móðguðr in *SnEGylf* (49, p. 47); and the hero’s violent encounter with Grendel’s mother in the Old English *Beowulf*. In those cases, however, the visitor is alive and therefore unwelcome, whereas the Brynhildr of *Hlr.* appears, judging from the prose preface, to be dead.⁴ In this case, the hostility may arise because Brynhildr’s carriage trespassed across the giantess’s home field, or less trivially because (according to *Norna-Gests þáttr*) the giantess herself had affection for Sigurðr.

In the aforementioned parallels each short-stay visitor to the Otherworld seeks entry alone. Groups of people seeking permanent residence could, however, apparently enter Hel together, as Móðguðr, guardian of a bridge on the road to Hel, informs Hermóðr of five battalions of dead men who had recently passed by (*SnEGylf* 49, p.

1 *FSN* I, 332–39.

2 In lieu of a modern critical edition of *Norna-Gests þáttr*, for further details, see NK and K. von See, B. La Farge, E. Picard, K. Schulz and M. Teichert, *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, Bd. 6: *Heldenlieder* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2009).

3 In Germanic tradition, the concept of ‘riding’ to the afterlife is also implicit in the ‘riding’ of a gallows by the hanged, and by Óðinn’s eight-legged horse, Sleipnir. In *Vsp.* 51, people also take the Hel-Way, but on foot.

4 Although in *Norna-Gests þáttr* she has yet to be cremated. One scholar considers that ‘the words of the *gýgr* in the poem suggest that Brynhildr is still alive on her journey, still with the option of turning back to re-enter the world of the living’; see J. Quinn, ‘Scenes of Vindication: Three Icelandic Heroic Poems in Relation to the Continental Traditions of *Þiðreks saga af Bern* and the *Nibelungenlied*’, in E. Mundal, ed., *Medieval Nordic Literature in Its European Context* (Oslo: Dreyer, 2015), pp. 78–125 at 94.

47). Brynhildr similarly seeks permanent residence in Hel, but appears to journey alone, except presumably for the horses (never mentioned) that draw her wagon. Her apparent solitude is striking, but not wholly unprepared for. In *Sg.*, the women of her household, whom she had invited to join her on the pyre, had all made the same awkward excuse for not doing so (*Sg.* 50), and others of her servants seem, according to her stipulations, associated rather with Sigurðr in death (*Sg.* 67, 70). Nevertheless, Brynhildr had clearly intended that she, they and he would be cremated within the same ‘stronghold’ and would thus journey to the afterlife together. It does, however, appear from the giantess’s assertion that Brynhildr should not be visiting another’s husband (i.e., Sigurðr, husband of Guðrún) that Sigurðr—despite avenging himself in *Sg.* 22–23 and being ‘chosen’ by a valkyrie (Brynhildr herself)—does await her in Hel. From the perspective of all except Brynhildr and the enemies of the gods, this is a tragic end for the North’s greatest warrior, whom Óðinn would surely have wanted to receive in Valhøll as the foremost of his *einherjar*.

Depending on one’s viewpoint, the verses of *Hlr.* (none of which are quoted or paraphrased in *VS*), either supply further evidence of Brynhildr’s arrogance, egotism and determination to cast herself as the victim of events, or give a grievously wronged woman an opportunity to voice her mitigations. Either way, they also provide brief and obscure details—perhaps invented by this poet—of her childhood as a likely swan-maiden. These are combined with an account, possibly influenced by the valkyrie Sigrdrífa in *Sd.*, of how she had disobeyed Óðinn by killing an old warrior called Hjálm-Gunnarr, rather than the young brother of a certain Auða, perhaps because she had sworn oaths (of betrothal?) to the latter.

Synopsis (Codex Regius)

Prose: As she drove in her carriage on the way to Hel, the dead Brynhildr came to where a certain giantess lived. They exchanged hostile words, which are recorded in the following poem.

Verse: The giantess denies Brynhildr passage and declares it unfitting for her to visit another woman’s husband (i.e., Sigurðr, Guðrún’s spouse). She adds that Brynhildr is fickle and has washed blood from her hands (1–2). Brynhildr retorts that, even if she once lived the life of a viking, she will always appear the better of the two of them, based on her lineage (3). The giantess declares that Brynhildr was ill-starred and the ruin of Gjúki’s children (4). Brynhildr responds by telling how Gjúki’s heirs made her a loveless oath-breaker (5). A courageous king (identity uncertain) once took her skin-garment (which possibly transformed her into a swan) and those of her sisters and put them under an oak. She adds that she was twelve when she swore oaths to a young prince (identity uncertain) (6). She states that she was formerly known as *Hildir* ‘Battle’, a valkyrie-name, (7), and that (as presumably one of Óðinn’s valkyries) she once killed an old man called Hjálm-Gunnarr, rather than the young brother of Auða.

She did so in defiance of Óðinn, who became extremely angry with her (8). He shut her up in a shield-enclosed fortress surrounded by fire, put her to sleep, and stipulated that only one man would ride over the flames and break her slumber—the fearless man who brought her gold from the hoard of the snake Fáfnir (9–10). That man (Sigurðr), she says, appeared better than all others (11), and they slept together chastely for eight nights (12). Nevertheless, Guðrún upbraided her for that, and Brynhildr learned that Sigurðr and Gunnarr had tricked her (presumably by exchanging shapes) (13). She concludes by asserting that women and men keep themselves alive too long in the face of great adversity, but that she and Sigurðr will be together (in the afterlife). With that, she rudely commands the giantess to sink (14).

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Helreið Brynhildar

Eptir dauða Brynhildar váru gøt bál tvau, annat Sigurði, ok brann þat fyrr, en Brynhildr var á øðru brend, ok var hon í reið, þeiri er guðvefjum var tjoðduð. Svá er sagt at Brynhildr ók með reiðinni á Helveg ok fór um tún, þar er gýgr nøkkur bjó. Gýgrin kvað:

Brynhildr reið Helveg

1. 'Skaltu í gognum ganga eigi
grjóti studda garða mína!
Betr semði þér borða at rekja,
heldr en vitja vers annarrar!
2. 'Hvat skaltu vitja af Vallandi,
hvarfúst hofuð, húsa minna?
Þú hefir, Vár gulls, ef þik vita lystir,
mild, af hondum manns blóð þvegit!'
3. 'Bregðu eigi mér, brúðr ór steini,
þótt ek værak í víkingu!
Ek mun okkar æðri þikkja,
hvars menn eðli okkart kunnu!'
4. 'Þú vart, Brynhildr, Buðla dóttir,
heilli verstu í heim borin:
þú hefir Gjúka um glatat börnum
ok búi þeira brugðit góðu!'
5. 'Ek mun segja þér, svinn ór reiðu,
vitlaussi mjök, ef þik vita lystir,
hvé gørðu mik Gjúka arfar
ástalausá ok eiðrofa!'
6. 'Lét hami vára hugfullr konungr,
átta systra, undir eik borit;
var ek vetra tólf, ef þik vita lystir,
er ek ungum gram eiða seldak.
7. 'Hétu mik allir í Hlymdqlum
Hildi undir hjálmi — hverr er kunni.
8. 'Þá lét ek gamlan á Goðþjóðu
Hjálm-Gunnar næst Heljar ganga;
gaf ek ungum sigr Auðu bróður —
þar varð mér Óðinn ofreiðr um þat.

Brynhildr's Hel-Ride

After Brynhildr's death two pyres were built, one for Sigurðr, and it burnt first, and Brynhildr was burnt on the other, and she was in a wagon which was hung with valuable cloths. It is said that Brynhildr drove with the wagon on the Hel-way¹ and passed across a home-meadow,² where a certain giantess lived. The giantess said:³

Brynhildr Rode the Hel-Way

1. 'You shall not pass through
 my courts supported by stone!⁴
It would befit you better to weave braid-trimmings,⁵
 rather than to visit another's husband!⁶

- 2.⁷ 'Why must you visit, from Valland,⁸
 fickle-head,⁹ my houses?
You have, generous¹⁰ Vár of gold,¹¹ if you wish to know,
 washed man's blood from your hands!'

3. 'Don't you upbraid me, bride from the stone,¹²
 even if I was¹³ on a viking voyage!¹⁴
 I will seem the better of us both,
 wherever people know about our origins!'

4. 'You, Brynhildr, daughter of Buðli,
 were born to the worst luck in the world:
 you have ruined Gjúki's children
 and destroyed their good dwellings!¹⁵

5. 'I, wise, from the wagon,¹⁶ will tell you,
 very witless one, if you wish to know,¹⁷
 how Gjúki's heirs made me
 loveless and an oath-breaker!¹⁸

- 6.¹⁹ 'A courageous king²⁰ had our skin-garments,²¹
 [those of] eight sisters, borne beneath an oak;
 I was twelve years old, if you wish to know,
 when I gave oaths to the young prince.²²

- 7.²³ 'They all called me in Hlymdalir²⁴
 "Hildr under helm"²⁵ — each who knew me.

- 8.²⁶ 'Then, in Goðþjóð,²⁷ I let²⁸ the old Hjálm-Gunnarr²⁹
 go to Hel next;
 I gave victory to Auða's young brother³⁰ —
 there Óðinn became extremely angry with me about that.

9. 'Lauk hann mik skjöldum í Skatalundi,
rauðum ok hvítum — randir snurtu;
þann bað hann slíta svefni mínum,
er hvergi lands hræðask kynni.
10. 'Lét um sal minn sunnanverðan
hávan brenna her alls viðar;
þar bað hann einn þegn yfir at ríða,
þanns mér færði gull, þats und Fáfni lá.
11. 'Reið góðr Grana, gullmiðlandi,
þars fóstri minn fletjum stýrði;
einn þótti hann þar öllum betri,
víkingr Dana, í verðungu.
12. 'Svafu vit ok unðum í sæing einni,
sem hann minn bróðir um borinn væri;
hvártki knátti hönd yfir annat
átta nóttum okkart leggja.
13. 'Því brá mér Guðrún, Gjúka dóttir,
at ek Sigurði svæfak á armi;
þár varð ek þess vís, er ek vildigak,
at þau véltu mik í verfangi!
14. 'Munu við ofstríð alls til lengi
konur ok karlar kvikvir fæðask!
Vit skulum okkrum aldri slíta,
Sigurðr, saman! Sökkstu, gýgjarkyn!'

9. 'He³¹ enclosed me with shields in Skatalundr,³²
red and white ones — the rims touched;³³
that man he commanded to break my sleep
who knew how to fear nowhere on land.³⁴
- 10.³⁵ 'About my hall, situated in the south,³⁶
he³⁷ let burn the high harrier of all wood,³⁸
there he ordered one thane only to ride over it,³⁹
the one who fetched me gold, that which lay under Fáfñir.
- 11.⁴⁰ 'The good one, the gold distributor,⁴¹ rode Grani
to where my foster-father governed benches,⁴²
he alone⁴³ appeared better than all [others] there,
a viking of the Danir,⁴⁴ in the entourage.⁴⁵
12. 'We two⁴⁶ slept and were content in one bed,
as if he'd been born my brother;
neither of us laid arm over the other
for eight nights.⁴⁷
13. 'For that, Guðrún, daughter of Gjúki, upbraided me,
[said] that I had slept in Sigurðr's arms;
there I became wise to that which I didn't want [to know],
that they tricked me in husband-taking!⁴⁸
14. 'Against extreme adversity, all too long
will women and men keep themselves alive!⁴⁹
We two shall tear up *our* lives together,⁵⁰
Sigurðr! Sink,⁵¹ giantess-spawn!⁵²

Textual Apparatus to *Helreið Brynhildar*

Helreið Brynhildar] This title is not in **R**; it is supplied editorially, following modern convention

Brynhildr reið Helveg] These rubricated words are illegible in the photograph in the facsimile volume of **R**; this reading is therefore reliant on the transcription therein

11/1 *Reið*] **R** *Reiþr*

Notes to the Translation

- 1 The road to Hel, land of the dead.
- 2 Or ‘enclosed field’, ‘courtyard’.
- 3 In chapter 9 of *Norna-Gests þáttur* (FSN I, 332–39) the prose introduction to this poem reads: *Þá spurðu menn Gest, hvert Brynhildr hefði nokkut kveðit dauð; hann kvað þat satt vera; þeir báðu hann kveða, ef hann kynni. Þá mælti Gestr: ‘Þá er Brynhildi var ekit til brennunnar á Helveg, ok var farit með hana nær hömrum nokkurum, þar bjó ein gýgr; hún var úti fyrir hellis dyrum, ok var í skinnkirtli, and svört yfirlits; hún hefir í hendi sér skógarvönd lánan, ok mælti: “Þessu vil ek beina til brennu þinnar, Brynhildr!” Segir gýgr “ok væri betr, at þú værir lifandi brend fyrir ódaðir þínar þær, at þú lézt drepa Sigurð Fofnisbana, svá ágætan mann, ok opt var ek honum sinnuð, ok fyri þat skal ek hljóða á þik með hefðar orðum þeim, at öllum sér þú at leiðari, er slíkt heyra frá þér sagt.” Eptir þat hljóðast þær á, Brynhildr ok gýgr. Gýgr kvað: ...’* ‘Then people asked Gestr [the tale’s protagonist] whether Brynhildr had said anything when she was dead; he said that it was true; they asked him to recite it, if he knew it. Then Gestr said: “When Brynhildr was driven to the burning on the Hel-Way, and it [i.e., the wagon] had come with her near to some cliffs, a giantess was living there; she was outside in front of the cave’s doors, and she was in a skin-kirtle, and she was black in appearance; she has in her hand a long forest’s wand [i.e., a long wooden stick], and she said: ‘I want to contribute this to your burning, Brynhildr!’ The giantess says ‘and it would have been better that you were burnt while living before those misdeeds of yours, in which you had Sigurðr Fáfnisbani slain—such a famous man, and I was often favourably disposed to him, and for that reason I shall sound off at you with vengeful words, so that you may be the more loathed by all who hear such things said about you.’ After that they sounded off at each other, Brynhildr and the giantess. The giantess said:”
- 4 Giants live in rocks.
- 5 For a tapestry.
- 6 I.e., Sigurðr, Guðrún’s husband. In place of *vers annarrar* ‘another’s husband’, the corresponding stanza in *Norna-Gests þáttur* 9 (cited by chapter) has *vorra ranna* ‘our halls’.
- 7 *Norna-Gests þáttur* 9’s variant version of this stanza reads: *‘Hvat skaltu vitja af Vallandi, / hverflyndt höfuð húsa minna? / Þú hefir vörgum, / ef þik vita lystir, / mörgum til matar manns hold gefit’* ‘“Why must you visit, from Valland, fickle-head, my houses? You have, if you [want] to know, given man’s flesh as food to many wolves.”’
- 8 ‘Land of the Slain’ (where valkyries such as Brynhildr may be found) or ‘Foreign Land’. Often the term specifically denotes France, though that meaning seems unlikely here.
- 9 A dig at Brynhildr’s links with multiple suitors.
- 10 The giantess is presumably being sarcastic.

- 11 A kenning for '(wealthy) woman'. Vár was a goddess of oaths, private contracts between men and women, and marriage; cf. *Þrk.* 30.
- 12 A likely kenning for 'giantess'. 'Bride' may be sarcastic.
- 13 I.e., was formerly.
- 14 People tended to be killed on such expeditions, but Brynhildr's response appears evasive, given that she has just instigated the murder of Sigurðr.
- 15 In *Norna-Gests þáttr* 9 the second half of this stanza reads: '*þú hefir of glatat börnum ok búi, / ok þeirra brugðit góðu gamni*' "'you have ruined children and dwellings, and destroyed their goods for sport.'"
- 16 Brynhildr's failure to descend from her wagon to address the giantess appears insulting, and *ór reiðu* 'from the wagon' might also pun on *ór reiði* 'out of wrath'. The translation somewhat obscures the contrast between *svinn ór reiðu* 'wise [one] from the wagon' here and *brúðr ór steini* 'bride from the stone' in *Hlr.* 3.
- 17 In *Norna-Gests þáttr* 9 the first half of this stanza reads: '*Ek mun segja þér sanna ræðu, / vélgjarnt höfuð, ef þik vita lystir*' "'I will say to you true speech, trick-eager head, if you want to know.'"
- 18 In the next stanza Brynhildr mentions oaths she made to a young prince, but the passage is obscure. Brynhildr also broke her oath to marry the man (Sigurðr) who crossed the flames surrounding her chamber.
- 19 The first half of the corresponding stanza in *Norna-Gests þáttr* 9 reads: '*Lét mik af harmi hugfullr konungr / Atla systur undir eyk búa*' "'A courageous king, because of sorrow/harm, had me, Atli's sister, dwell under an oak.'"' Similarly, a woman is isolated in confinement *under actreo* 'under an oak-tree' at the request of her lord in 'The Wife's Lament', an obscure Old English poem.
- 20 The king's identity is unknown.
- 21 Probably magical clothes that transformed the wearers into swans, Brynhildr and her sisters most likely having been swan-maidens, a nature closely related to that of valkyrie. Removal of these garments probably enabled a man to win Brynhildr; cf. the introductory prose to *Vkv.*
- 22 The identity of the 'young prince', who may or may not be the same as the 'courageous king', is uncertain. Possibilities include Agnarr, brother of Auða (see *Hlr.* 8), and Sigurðr. This episode is otherwise unknown.
- 23 There is no equivalent to this half-stanza in *Norna-Gests þáttr*. Its shortness might indicate textual damage.
- 24 'Resounding Dales' is the home of Heimir, Brynhildr's foster-father, according to *VS*.
- 25 *Hildir* 'Battle' is a valkyrie-name, and the helmet she wore also suggests a valkyrie. Cf. *SnESkald* I (41, p. 47): *Þá vaknaði hon ok nefndisk Hildir. Hon er kplluð Brynhildir ok var valkyrja* 'Then she woke and named herself Hildir. She is called Brynhildir and she was a valkyrie.'
- 26 For the events in this stanza, see also the prose after *Sd.* 4, which concerns a valkyrie who names herself *Sigrdrífa*, and *VS* 21 where she is called *Brynhildr*. The corresponding stanza in *Norna-Gests þáttr* 9 reads: '*Ek let gamlan gygjar bróður, / Hjalmgunnar, nest Heljar gánga; / gaf ek úngum sigr Auðar bróður; / þar var mér Óðinn ofgreypur fyrir*' "'I let the old brother of a giantess, Hjalmgunnar, go to Hel next; I gave victory to the young brother of Auða; then Óðinn was extremely fierce to me about that.'"

- 27 The nation of the Gotar, the Goths.
- 28 I.e., made.
- 29 'Helmet-Gunnarr'.
- 30 His brother is called *Agnarr* in the prose after *Sd.* 4 (and in *VS* 21), which refers to *Hauða* (or *Hrða*) instead of *Auða*.
- 31 Óðinn.
- 32 'Warrior's Grove'. In *Sd.* (initial prose) and *VS* 20–21 the location is *Hindarfjall* 'Hind's Fell'.
- 33 Instead of *randir snurtu* 'the rims touched', the corresponding stanza in *Norna-Gests þáttur* 9 has *reyndar svæfði* 'he put experiences to sleep(?)'.
- 34 Óðinn stipulated that only a man who never knew fear would wake her. That man is *Sigurðr*. Cf. prose before *Sd.* 5 and *VS* 21.
- 35 The corresponding stanza in *Norna-Gests þáttur* 9 reads: '*Lét hann um sal minn sunnanverðan / háfan brenna hrottgram [v.l. hrottgarm] viðar; / þar bað hann þegar einn yfir um ríða, / þann er færði mér Fofnis dýnu*' "'About my hall situated in the south [or 'south-facing'] he let burn the high howling(?)-wrath/dog of the wood [i.e., fire]; there he bade one man immediately ride over [the fire], the one who brought me Fáfnir's pillow [i.e., gold].'"
- 36 Or 'south-facing'.
- 37 Óðinn.
- 38 A kenning for 'fire'.
- 39 I.e., over the fire.
- 40 For another account of the events of this stanza and the next, see *Sg.* 3–4.
- 41 I.e., lord, prince — here *Sigurðr*.
- 42 Literally, the raised platforms along the walls of a hall, where the benches were placed.
- 43 *Sigurðr*.
- 44 Danes.
- 45 Instead of *í verðungu* 'in the entourage', the corresponding stanza in *Norna-Gests þáttur* 9 has *í virðingu* 'in esteem'.
- 46 Brynhildr and *Sigurðr*, the latter presumably disguised as *Gunnarr*.
- 47 The number eight, rather than nine, may suggest incompleteness, the couple's union remaining unconsummated during this period.
- 48 *Sigurðr* had presumably assumed *Gunnarr*'s appearance before entering Brynhildr's chamber.
- 49 The meaning of the first half of this stanza is disputed.
- 50 Cf. *Fj.* 50.
- 51 I.e., sink into the ground.
- 52 The corresponding stanza in *Norna-Gests þáttur* 9 concludes slightly differently with the words *Sökztu nú, gýgr!* 'Sink now, giantess!' and the following prose sentence completes the episode: *Þá æpti gýgr ógriligri röddu, ok hliðar inni bjargit* 'Then the giantess screamed with a terrible voice, and she recedes inside the rock.'