



# THE POETIC EDDA

A Dual-Language Edition

EDWARD PETTIT



<https://www.openbookpublishers.com>

© 2023 Edward Pettit



This work is licensed under an Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0). This license allows you to share, copy, distribute and transmit the text, and to adapt the text for non-commercial purposes, providing attribution is made to the authors (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work). Attribution should include the following information:

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

Further details about the CC BY-NC license are available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

All external links were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated and have been archived via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at <https://archive.org/web>

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

Front cover image: 'The Two Corbies' by Arthur Rackham, from *Some British Ballads* (London, [1919])

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

Images on pp. 27 and 861: 'Two Ravens' (CC-BY 4.0) by M. Barran, <https://www.etsy.com/uk/shop/MarleenaBarranDesign>

Cover design by Katy Saunders.

# Guðrúnarkviða in þriðja

---

*Guðrúnarkviða in þriðja* (*Gðr. III*) ‘The Third Lay of Guðrún’ is a short poem in *fornyrðislag* with a brief prose introduction (**R** fol. 38r–v). Although it is probably one of the youngest poems in **R**, it serves as one of the clearest reminders of how different medieval thinking and practices could be from those of the modern world, in ways both horrifying and fascinating. For it concerns the public trial, and exoneration, by means of ordeal by boiling water, of a woman accused of adultery.

Ordeal by boiling water, first mentioned in the Frankish *Lex Salica* ‘Salic Law’ (c. 507–11), was a reality in Europe for hundreds of years and reached Norway during the time of Olaf II Haraldsson (995–1030). Essentially, a Catholic priest required the accused to immerse his or her hand(s) or arm(s) in a cauldron of seething water, so as to retrieve an object, often a stone or ring, from the vessel’s bottom. If the accused succeeded, and the flesh was found to be healing cleanly after having been bandaged for three days, he or she was deemed innocent, and vice versa. In the legendary world of *Gðr. III* and some medieval saints’ lives, the immersed flesh of the innocent emerges miraculously unscathed, requiring no bandage or delayed inspection. In the Christian Middle Ages, the guiltless undergoing this ordeal were supposedly protected by God’s judicial and healing power, but the poet of *Gðr. III* understandably says nothing about what force preserved the heathen Guðrún.

*Gðr. III*’s other key point of interest is its mention of Guðrún’s covert, but non-sexual, relationship with Þjóðrekr. This further contextualizes *Gðr. II*, which, according to *Dr.*, was among the words Guðrún spoke to Þjóðrekr. It also emphasizes her otherwise complete emotional isolation at Atli’s court, now that her brothers are dead. Additionally, Þjóðrekr’s role in this poem merits attention because his counterpart in German tradition is enlisted by its counterpart of Guðrún to kill her brothers in vengeance for her husband. If such a tradition lies immediately behind the fifth stanza of *Gðr. III*—the interpretation of which is unfortunately in considerable doubt—there may be tension between Guðrún’s intimacy with Þjóðrekr and her longing for her dead brothers. If it does not, and Þjóðrekr plays no part in the killing of Gunnarr and Högni in *Gðr. III*, the poem attests to the potential for narrative innovation in Old Norse storytelling.

If Guðrún emerges well from *Gðr. III*, as a grieving, passionate and forthright woman who is innocent of adultery, Atli does not. Although he is brave enough to risk potential humiliation in public as a cuckold, he shows a lack of wisdom in giving

credence to the unsubstantiated claim of a former lover (probably spurned and now jealous), and he fails to respect his queen enough even to consider her offer of swearing her innocence on a holy stone. Instead, he immediately proceeds with trial by ordeal. And when his wife is proved innocent, he makes no statement in support of her—she declares her own exculpation before the assembled masses—and issues no apology, public or private. Instead, with nasty, internalized glee, he immediately orders a (strictly unnecessary) second ordeal for Guðrún's accuser, his former lover, whom he drowns in a swamp when she is found guilty. Here is a portrayal of an unwise, violent, promiscuous and disrespectful king.

*Gðr. III* appears to have had no influence on other Old Norse texts. It is neither quoted nor paraphrased in *VS*, which says nothing about Guðrún's ordeal.

## Synopsis

*Prose:* Herkja, who was one of Atli's handmaidens and formerly his lover, told him that she had seen Þjóðrekr and Guðrún together. Atli was unhappy about that.

*Verse:* Guðrún asks Atli why he is so sad (1). He tells her of Herkja's accusation (2). She says she will swear oaths by 'the white, holy stone' that she and Þjóðrekr did not have sexual intercourse (3), but merely embraced once and had private conversations (4). She reflects that all thirty of Þjóðrekr's men are now dead, and perhaps calls despairingly for her brothers and nearest kin (5 [interpretation uncertain]).

A prince called Saxi is summoned to consecrate the cauldron for Guðrún's ordeal by boiling water (6), which takes place before seven hundred people (7). Guðrún expresses anguish at her brothers' absence (they are dead), and how she must refute the allegation herself (8).

Having picked up precious stones from the bottom of the cauldron without scalding her hands, Guðrún declares her innocence evident to all those present (9). Atli laughs and commands that Herkja undergo the ordeal next (10). Her hands are scalded by the water, whereupon she is led away to be drowned in a bog, Guðrún having been vindicated (11).

## Further Reading

Andersson, T. M., *The Legend of Brynhild* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980).

Curschmann, M., 'Eddic Poetry and the Continental Heroic Legend: The Case of the Third Lay of Guðrún (*Guðrúnarqviða*)', in D. G. Calder and T. C. Christy, ed., *Germania: Comparative Studies in the Old Germanic Languages and Literatures* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1988), pp. 143–60.

Glendinning, R. J., 'Guðrúnarqviða Forná: A Reconstruction and Interpretation', in R. J. Glendinning and Haraldur Bessason, ed., *Edda: A Collection of Essays* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1983), pp. 258–82.

Leeson, P. T., 'Ordeals', *Journal of Law & Economics* 55 (2012), 691–714.

Miller, W. I., 'Ordeal In Iceland', *SS* 60 (1988), 189–218.

Quinn, J., '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.

Von See, K., B. La Farge, E. Picard, K. Schulz and M. Teichert, *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, Bd. 6: *Heldenlieder* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2009).

## Capitulum

Herkja hét ambótt Atla. Hon hafði verit frilla hans. Hon sagði Atla at hon hefði sét Þjóðrek ok Guðrúnu bæði saman. Atli var þá allókátr. Þá kvað Guðrún:

### *Guðrúnarkviða in þriðja*

#### Kviða Guðrúnar

1. 'Hvat er þér, Atli? Æ, Buðla sonr,  
er þér hryggt í hug — hví hlær þú æva?  
Hitt myndi æðra jörlum þikkja  
at við menn mæltir ok mik sæir!'
2. 'Tregr mik þat, Guðrún, Gjúka dóttir:  
mér í hǫllu Herkja sagði  
at þit Þjóðrekr undir þaki svæfið  
ok léttliga líni verðizk!'
3. 'Þér mun ek alls þess eiða vinna,  
at inum hvíta helga steini,  
at ek við Þjóðmars son þatki áttak,  
er vorð né verr vinna knátti!
4. 'Nema ek hálsaða herja stilli,  
jöfur óneisinn, einu sinni;  
aðrar váru okkrar spekjur,  
er vit hörmug tvau hnígum at rúnum.
5. 'Hér kom Þjóðrekr með þrjá tǫgu —  
lifa þeir né einir, þriggja tega manna!  
Hrinktu mik at bræðrum ok at brynjuðum,  
hrinktu mik at ǫllum haufuðniðjum!'
6. 'Sentu at Saxa, sunnmanna gram!  
Hann kann helga hver vellanda!'
7. Sjau hundruð manna í sal gengu,  
áðr kvæn konungs í ketil teeki.
8. 'Kemra nú Gunnarr, kalliga ek Hǫgna,  
sékka ek síðan svása bræðr!  
Sverði myndi Hǫgni slíks harms reka,  
nú verð ek sjálf fyr mik synja lýta!'

## Capitulum<sup>1</sup>

Herkja<sup>2</sup> was the name of a handmaiden of Atli. She had been his lover. She told Atli that she had seen Þjóðrekr and Guðrún together. Atli was then very unhappy. Then Guðrún said:

### The Third Lay of Guðrún

#### Lay of Guðrún

- 1.<sup>3</sup> 'What's the matter, Atli?<sup>4</sup> Always, Buðli's son,  
you're distressed in mind<sup>5</sup> — why do you never laugh?  
It would seem better to earls  
that you spoke with men and looked at me!'
2. 'This grieves me, Guðrún, daughter of Gjúki:  
in the hall Herkja said to me  
that you and Þjóðrekr slept under [the same] thatch<sup>6</sup>  
and lightly wrapped yourselves in bed-linen!'
3. 'I'll swear you oaths about all this,  
at the white, holy stone,<sup>7</sup>  
that I did not have [that] with Þjóðmarr's son<sup>8</sup>  
which a woman and a man could have had!<sup>9</sup>
4. 'Except I did embrace the prince of armies,  
the blameless boar,<sup>10</sup> on one occasion;  
our understandings<sup>11</sup> were otherwise,<sup>12</sup>  
when, sorrowful, we two inclined to each other in private conversations.<sup>13</sup>
5. 'Þjóðrekr came here with thirty —  
not one of them [still] lives, out of thirty men!<sup>14</sup>  
Surround(?)<sup>15</sup> me with(?) my brothers and mail-coated [men],  
surround(?) me with(?) all my closest kin!<sup>16</sup>
- 6.<sup>17</sup> 'Send for Saxi,<sup>18</sup> prince of southern men!  
He knows how to consecrate the boiling cauldron!<sup>19</sup>
7. Seven hundred people walked into the hall,  
before the king's wife<sup>20</sup> reached into the cauldron.
8. 'Gunnarr doesn't come now, I don't call for Hogni,  
I won't see my sweet brothers again!  
Hogni would avenge such affliction with a sword,  
[but] now I must deny the misdemeanour myself!<sup>21</sup>

9. Brá hon til botns björtum lófa,  
ok hon upp um tók jarknasteina:  
'Sé nú seggir — sykn em ek orðin,  
heilagliga — hvé sjá hverr velli!'
10. Hló þá Atla hugr í brjósti,  
er hann heilar sá hendir Guðrúnar:  
'Nú skal Herkja til hvers ganga,  
sú er Guðrúnu grandí vænti!'
11. Sáat maðr armlígt, hverr er þat sáat,  
hvé þar á Herkju hendir sviðnuðu!  
Leiddu þá mey í mýri fúla.  
Svá þá Guðrún sinna harma!



9. She reached to the bottom with bright palms,  
and she picked up the noble stones:  
'Now men may see — I am proven innocent,  
in a holy manner — how this cauldron boils!'
10. Atli's heart then laughed in his breast,  
when he saw Guðrún's hands unharmed:  
'Now Herkja shall go to the cauldron,  
she who expected injury to Guðrún!'
11. No one [ever] saw a wretched sight who didn't see that,  
how Herkja's hands were scalded there!<sup>22</sup>  
They led that maid into a foul mire.<sup>23</sup>  
Thus Guðrún received [vindication] for her harms!

## Textual Apparatus to *Guðrúnarkviða in þriðja*

*Capitulum*] A faded red capitulum (i.e., 'chapter') sign in **R**, marking the start of a new section.

*Guðrúnarkviða in þriðja*] The rubricated heading to this poem is illegible in the photograph in the facsimile volume of **R**, but according to the transcription therein it reads *qviða G.*, i.e., *Kviða Guðrúnar* 'Lay of Guðrún'. The poem is now, however, customarily known as *Guðrúnarkviða in þriðja* 'The Third Lay of Guðrún' to distinguish it from the preceding two poems about Guðrún.

1/1 *Hvat*] The first letter is rubricated and half-inset, but faded, in **R**

2/8 *verðizk*] **R** *verþit*

3/5 *Þjóðmars son*] **R** *þioþmar*

3/7 *vorð*] **R** *vorþr*

4/6 *okkrar*] **R** *crar*

5/4 *tega*] **R** *tego*

## Notes to the Translation

- 1 The Latin word for 'chapter', here marking the start of a new section.
- 2 This name is perhaps related to *hark* 'noise' or *herkja* 'to drag oneself along'. It is otherwise unknown in Old Norse, except as the name of a giantess, but probably relates to *Helche*, first wife of Etzel (= Atli/Attila) in the *Nibelungenlied*.
- 3 The speaker is Guðrún, now Atli's wife.
- 4 Literally, 'What is it with you, Atli?'
- 5 Or 'in heart'.
- 6 I.e., either 'roof' or 'bed-covering'.
- 7 This procedure may have involved the swearer placing one foot on such a stone. White stones (potentially opaque quartz, rock-crystal, alabaster, marble or chalk) were considered sacred (cf. *Revelation* 2:17) and attributed special powers. Alfred the Great, the ninth-century Anglo-Saxon king who fought the vikings, was reportedly informed of the remarkable medicinal (and other) powers of *se hwita stan* 'the white stone' by Elias, patriarch of Jerusalem. Cf. also *HH. II* 31.
- 8 I.e., Þjóðrekr. His father's name means 'People/Great Famous One' or 'People/Great Horse'; he is a reflex of the historical Ostrogothic King Thiudimer (d. 474).
- 9 Alternatively, if the manuscript reading *vorðr* is interpreted as *vørðr* 'warden, guard' and not emended to *vorð* 'woman', the sense might be '... that I did not have that [kind of liaison] with Þjóðmarr's son, [something] which neither (my) guard nor (my) husband could [counter-swear]'.
- 10 Þjóðrekr.
- 11 Or perhaps 'speeches', 'conversations'.
- 12 I.e., not inclined towards sex.
- 13 See *Dr.* and *Gðr. II*.

- 14 The circumstances of their deaths are obscure, but they were perhaps killed at the command of Atli.
- 15 The meaning of the otherwise unknown verb *hrinktu*, which may be corrupt, is highly uncertain. Among other suggestions is that it is a preterite meaning 'they robbed' or 'you robbed'. If it is an imperative, as translated here, it is a despairing utterance as Guðrún knows her brothers are dead.
- 16 Her brothers (Gunnarr and Hǫgni) have probably already been killed by Atli.
- 17 This half-stanza is presumably spoken by Atli or one of his leading men. It could be combined with the next half-stanza to form a full stanza of *fornyrðislag*.
- 18 This man's identity is uncertain. His name might identify him as a Saxon, or as the '(Man) with a *Sax*' (ON *sax* 'long knife'); alternatively, given the use of stones in the ordeal he helps prepare, perhaps he is the '(Man) of (the) Stone', *saxi* being the gen. sg. of Latin *saxum* 'stone'.
- 19 Guðrún is about to undergo ordeal by boiling water to establish whether she has been faithful to Atli. This practice was introduced to Norway from Germany in the early eleventh century.
- 20 Guðrún.
- 21 It appears that Guðrún's brothers are dead, having been killed at the command of Atli.
- 22 This was taken to be a sign of guilt.
- 23 I.e., they drowned her in a bog, an ancient, pre-Christian way of disposing of wrong-doers in Scandinavia.

