



# THE POETIC EDDA

A Dual-Language Edition

EDWARD PETTIT



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# Oddrúnargrátr

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*Oddrúnargrátr* (*Od.*) ‘Oddrún’s Lament’ is the customary modern editorial title for this poem, being taken from its last line. In **R** (fol. 38v–39v), the poem’s thirty-four stanzas of *fornyrðislag* are untitled but preceded by a short prose passage apparently headed *Frá Borgnýju ok Oddrúnu* ‘About Borgný and Oddrún’, which introduces the work’s two main characters, both human females.

Despite being of considerable interest for, among other things, introducing new characters, continuing **R**’s theme of female lamentation, and underlining the societal pressure faced by women who had, or were accused of having, extra-marital liaisons, *Od.* is one of the least known and least understood poems in the collection. Editors have long tended to change the order of some of its stanzas to produce, in their minds, a more appropriate flow, although, as the Eddic scholar Judy Quinn has since shown, these changes are unjustified.<sup>1</sup> In this edition, therefore, the stanzas are presented in the order in which they appear in **R**.<sup>2</sup>

The belief of many previous editors that *Od.* requires major textual surgery is understandable, however, as the poem is not easy to follow. An immediate hurdle is that although *Od.* mentions well-known figures from the *Völsung-Niflung* cycle, including Brynhildr, Sigurðr, Gunnarr, Högni, Atli and Guðrún, its two main characters and their stories are unfamiliar. It is possible that Borgný, a pregnant woman who could not give birth for years, and Oddrún, the woman who came to her aid, were once the subjects of other Old Norse poems, which were known to the initial audience of *Od.*, but, if so, none has survived. Borgný appears in no other extant text. Oddrún, whose loving relationship with Gunnarr is thwarted by her brother, Atli, and their mother, Grímlidr, is mentioned elsewhere only briefly, in *Sg.* 58, in a paraphrase of that stanza toward the end of *VS* 32, and in *Dr.* This unfamiliarity matters especially because of the poem’s dialogue-based, psychological sophistication, which results in the characters—participants in a complex, conflicted web of personal, familial and dynastic relationships—leaving much unsaid and often merely alluding to past events, sometimes out of chronological sequence.

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- 1 Students of this poem are referred especially to an important article that reveals more of the poem’s complexities and subtleties than can be explored here: J. Quinn, ‘The Endless Triangles of Eddic Tragedy: Reading *Oddrúnargrátr*’, in M. E. Ruggerini, ed., *Studi anglo-norreni in onore di John S. McKinnell* (Cagliari: CUEC, 2009), pp. 304–26.
  - 2 Bracketed stanza numbers are those of *NK* and von See *et al.*, *Kommentar*.

Of the poem's two main characters, there is less to say about Borgný. A princess who had been impregnated by a certain Vilmundr, she lay wracked by labour pains in the land of Atli, Oddrún's brother, but, for reasons unstated, could not give birth. Her predicament was acute, as no one had been able to help her. There exists the possibility that she had been cursed for having an illicit relationship with (or being raped by?) Vilmundr, with the result that she had been secretly in labour—with twins, it turns out—for most of the five years during which she had been in hiding. Understandably, therefore, Borgný says little during the poem, other than to thank Oddrún and express shock that Oddrún had not helped her out of affection, despite their prior closeness. Since Borgný is described as *fforsjúka* 'life-sick' immediately *after* giving birth, it appears that she then sat exhausted and dying (perhaps from haemorrhage), or at least on the threshold between life and death, having just produced two children the size of normal five-year-olds,<sup>3</sup> even as Oddrún proceeded to recount her own sorrows. Given the obscure grudge that Oddrún held for a prior upbraiding by Borgný, it appears significant that Oddrún induced her by strongly chanting only *bitra galdra* 'bitter/sharp/incisive incantations', not healing or soothing ones.

Borgný was possibly subject to a form of magical Caesarean section. Such a practice may also have been conducted in the most significant Old Norse parallel to her condition. In the second chapter of *VS*, the wife of Rerir Sigason falls pregnant, after supernatural help from Frigg, Óðinn and a valkyrie, but cannot give birth. After six years of pregnancy, realizing she did not have long to live, Rerir's wife ordered *at hana skyldi særa til barnsins* 'that she should be wounded/conjured to the child'.<sup>4</sup> This was done and she died shortly afterwards. The male child, who had presumably been removed by some type of Caesarean (unless he was simply conjured to burst out), *var mikill vexti þá er hann kom til, sem ván var at* 'was great in stature when he came forth, as was to be expected'. He was called *Vǫlsungr* and he became king of Húna-land, the land where Borgný languished in *Od*.

If Borgný understandably remains a largely passive figure in *Od*, she is nevertheless significant as an extreme, legendary reminder of the difficulty and dangers of childbirth, of medieval women's use of incantations and prayers to assist therewith,<sup>5</sup> and of the disgrace associated with extra-marital pregnancy.

3 Borgný's twins seem also to have been born able to walk and therefore to have been well-developed, as might be expected of five-year-olds. Cf. Baldr's avenging brother in *Vsp*. 32–33; also Helgi Hundingsbani in *HH*. I 6.

4 There are two Old Norse verbs spelt *særa*, one meaning 'to wound' (related to *sár* 'sore', 'wound'), one meaning 'to conjure' (related to *sverja* 'to swear').

5 Although we do not learn what words Oddrún sang, for other instances, and discussion, of some of the many surviving medieval European charms, prayers and ritual procedures to aid childbirth, see, for example, E. Pettit, ed. and trans., *Anglo-Saxon Remedies, Charms, and Prayers from British Library Ms Harley 585: 'The Lacnunga'* (Lewiston, 2001), I, 106–07 (entry CLVI), 112–13 (entry CLXI), II, 301, 316–31; S. Flowers, *The Galdrabók: An Icelandic Grimoire* (York Beach, ME: S. Weiser, 1989), p. 60 (no. 3); P. M. Jones and L. Olsan, 'Performative Rituals for Conception and Childbirth in England, 900–1500', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 89 (2015), 406–33.

Oddrún had also had an illicit relationship—the two women’s concealed liaisons with men are central concerns of *Od.*—but she, by contrast, is a childless, independent, active character who dominates the poem. At least to a modern audience, it comes as something of a shock to realize that, as the sister of Atli, Oddrún is also sister to the imperious Brynhildr, although her forceful characterization befits this status. Unlike her deceased sibling, Oddrún was not destined to be a valkyrie—instead, her role as emergency midwife appears akin to that of the Nornir in *Fm.* 12—but many of her attributes and actions make it is easy to imagine her as one. Her name, meaning ‘Point Rune’, may associate her with the spheres of warfare and rune-magic, and her serving of drinks to men and knowledge of childbirth-enabling spells would suit a valkyrie.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, like a mounted valkyrie, she rode a black steed, on which she lacked no confidence; in one of the poem’s more memorable images, she rides alone into the hall in Húnaland where Borgný lies suffering, dismounting only when she reaches the further end.

In riding forth like a questing hero,<sup>7</sup> Oddrún was driven by the force of a promise she had made to help everyone in need. What prompted this commitment is not revealed—atonement for some dreadful crime perhaps?—but her return to the land of the Huns, where she was presumably raised with her brother, shows courage. For whereas Atli, angered by Brynhildr’s death, had rejected the Gjúkungar, Oddrún had—in another surprise for a modern audience—secretly loved (and been loved by) Gunnarr, Brynhildr’s husband,<sup>8</sup> in pursuit of her dying father’s desire that they should marry. Oddrún’s rescue mission to Húnaland, therefore, called up memories of her conflicted past. But it also added a painful new complication in that, by helping Borgný, she brought into the world two children of the man who had killed Högni, Gunnarr’s brother, and who was therefore also allied with those who had killed Gunnarr himself.<sup>9</sup>

At the end of the poem, the grief-stricken Oddrún herself, like Guðrún in *Gðr. I*, wavers on the boundary between life and death, an empty, transitory woman (*Bil*). The poem’s final words not only mark the conclusion of her lament but also the passing (*genginn*) of her sad life, lived long ago.

6 Cf. *Sd.* 5, 9.

7 Cf. *Skírnir* in *FSk.*, for example. Note also that, in chapter 15 of the fourteenth-century Icelandic *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, it is the eponymous male hero who travels to end the nineteen-day labour of the daughter of an elf-woman cursed by being unable to give birth until a man had laid his hand upon her; *FSN*, III, 276–77; Hermann Pálsson and P. Edwards, trans., *Göngu-Hrólfs Saga* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1980), pp. 58–59.

8 The timing of this affair is another of the poem’s uncertainties; in *Sg.* 58 the dying Brynhildr merely states that Gunnarr will want to have (i.e., marry) Oddrún.

9 The identities and fates of Borgný’s offspring are unknown, but children born by Caesarean often prove significant figures in myth and legend; see, for example, S. Lurie, ‘Caesarean Section in Ancient Greek Mythology’, *Acta Medico-Historica Adriatica* 13 (2015), 209–16.

## Synopsis

*Prose:* Borgný, daughter of King Heiðrekr, had a lover called Vilmundr. She could not give birth, until Oddrún, Atli's sister, came to her. Oddrún had been Gunnarr's lover.

*Verse:* The unnamed poet-speaker tells how, according to ancient tales, a maiden (probably Borgný) came to Mornaland (in the land of the Huns); no one, it was thought, could help her (1). Oddrún, however, rode there (2–3). She requested news and was asked to help with Borgný's labour pains (4). She asked who had caused Borgný's shameful suffering (5), and was told that it was Vilmundr, and that Borgný had hidden herself from her father for five years (6). Oddrún then chanted incantations (7), whereupon Borgný gave birth to a boy and a girl (8). Borgný thanked Oddrún (9), who, however, declared that she had helped only to keep a promise she had made, not out of goodwill (10).

Oddrún then sat down and began to recount her misfortunes (11 [13]).<sup>10</sup> She recalled how she had lived happily in her father's home for only five years, until he died (12 [14]). Before he died, he had declared that Oddrún should be given in marriage to Gunnar (probably) (13 [15]), and that no nobler maiden would be born—unless fate dictated otherwise (14 [16]).

Borgný then interrupted Oddrún and expressed shock at her hostility, as they had formerly been so close (15 [11]). Oddrún replied that she remembers Borgný once having condemned a time when she had served a drink to Gunnarr (16 [12]).

Oddrún then recalled Brynhildr, who was tricked by Gunnarr and Sigurðr, and who wreaked vengeance and committed suicide as a result (17–19). Oddrún herself got to love Gunnarr, as Brynhildr should have (20), but her father had declared that Brynhildr should become a valkyrie (20 [16]).

The Gjúkungar had offered Atli generous compensation for Brynhildr's death, and yet more wealth for Oddrún's hand in marriage (21). Atli refused, but the lovers could not deny their feelings (22). Atli had refused to believe those who told him of their affair (23). Oddrún then advised against underestimating the power of love to drive people to affairs (24), and recalled how Atli had sent messengers to test her, and that they had found her with Gunnarr (25). The pair had tried to buy the messengers' silence, but the messengers had soon told Atli (26), while sparing Guðrún (now Atli's wife) knowledge of these matters (27). Oddrún then recalled how Atli had captured Gunnarr and Hogni, and had had the latter's heart cut out and the former placed in a yard full of snakes (28). She had been away at the house of a certain Geirmundr when Gunnarr began to play his harp loudly in the belief that she would come to help him (29). She had arrived on the scene (30–31), but not soon enough to prevent Atli's mother killing Gunnarr in snake-like fashion (32).

Finally, Oddrún wondered how she still lived, given how much she loved Gunnarr (33), and asserted that everyone lives according to their desires (34).

<sup>10</sup> Bracketed stanza numbers are those of NK and von See *et al.*, *Kommentar*.

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## Frá Borgnýju ok Oddrúnu

Heiðrekr hét konungr. Dóttir hans hét Borgný. Vilmundr hét, sá er var friðill hennar. Hon mátti eigi fæða börn áðr til kom Oddrún, Atla systir. Hon hafði verit unnusta Gunnars, Gjúka sonar. Um þessa sögu er hér kveðit.

### *Oddrúnargrátr*

1. 'Heyrða ek segja í sögum fornum,  
hvé mæ'r um kom til Mornalands;  
engi mátti fyr jörð ofan  
Heiðreks dóttur hjálpir vinna.
2. 'Þat frá Oddrún, Atla systir,  
at sú mæ'r hafði miklar sóttir;  
brá hon af stalli stjórnbítluðum,  
ok á svartan sǫðul of lagði.
3. 'Lét hon mar fara moldveg sléttan,  
unz at hári kom hǫll standandi,  
ok hon inn um gekk endlangan sal;  
svipti hon sǫðli af svongum jó,  
ok hon þat orða alls fyrst um kvað:
4. "Hvat er frægst á foldu,  
eða hvat er hlézt Húnalands?"  
"Hér liggr Borgný, of borin verkjum,  
vina þín, Oddrún — vittu, ef þú hjálpir!"
5. "Hverr hefir vísir vammis um leitat?  
Hví eru Borgnýjar bráðar sóttir?"
6. "Vilmundr heitir, vinr haukstalda;  
hann varði mey varmri blæju,  
fimm vetr alla, svá hon sinn fǫður leyndi."
7. 'Þær, hykk, mæltu þvígit fleira;  
gekk mild fyr kné meyju at sitja;  
ríkt gól Oddrún, ramt gól Oddrún,  
bitra galdra, at Borgnýju.
8. 'Knátti mæ'r ok mǫgr moldveg sporna,  
börn þau in blíðu við bana Hǫgna;  
þat nam at mæla mæ'r fjǫrsjúka,  
svá at hon ekki kvað orð it fyrra:



## About Borgný and Oddrún

There was a king called Heiðrekr.<sup>1</sup> His daughter was called Borgný.<sup>2</sup> Vilmundr<sup>3</sup> was the name of the one who was her lover. She could not give birth to children until Oddrún,<sup>4</sup> Atli's sister, came to her.<sup>5</sup> She<sup>6</sup> had been the sweetheart of Gunnarr, Gjúki's son. About this tale it is here told.

### Oddrún's Lament

1.                                I heard tell in ancient tales,  
                                  how a maiden<sup>8</sup> came to Mornaland;<sup>9</sup>  
                                  no one on earth was able  
                                  to help the daughter of Heiðrekr.<sup>10</sup>
  
2.                                'Oddrún, sister of Atli, heard about it,  
                                  how that maiden had great maladies;  
she swiftly took from the stall a steering-bitted one,<sup>11</sup>  
                                  and laid a saddle on the black one.<sup>12</sup>
  
3.                                'She let the steed journey over the smooth earth-way,<sup>13</sup>  
                                  until she came to a hall standing high,  
                                  and she went inside along the hall's length;  
                                  she whipped the saddle off the lean steed,  
                                  and she spoke these words first of all:<sup>14</sup>
  
4.                                ""What is most worth mentioning on earth,  
                                  or what is most heard about in Húnaland?"<sup>15</sup>  
                                  "Here lies Borgný, overborne by pains,<sup>16</sup>  
                                  your friend, Oddrún — see if you can help!"<sup>17</sup>
  
5.                                ""Which prince has caused this disgrace?<sup>18</sup>  
                                  Why are Borgný's sufferings sudden?"<sup>19</sup>
  
6.                                ""He's called Vilmundr, the friend of a warrior;<sup>20</sup>  
                                  he wrapped the maiden<sup>21</sup> in a warm bed-covering,  
                                  for all of five winters, so that she hid it from her father."
  
7.                                'They spoke little more than that, I think;<sup>22</sup>  
                                  the generous one<sup>23</sup> went to sit at the girl's knee;  
Oddrún chanted powerfully, Oddrún chanted strongly,  
                                  bitter incantations, for Borgný.<sup>24</sup>
  
8.                                'A girl and a boy were able to tread the earth-way,<sup>25</sup>  
                                  those [were] the happy<sup>26</sup> children of Högni's slayer;<sup>27</sup>  
                                  the life-sick<sup>28</sup> girl began to say this,  
                                  when she hadn't said a word before that:

9.                   “Svá hjálpi þér hollar vættir,  
Frigg ok Freyja ok fleiri goð,  
sem þú feldir mér fár af höndum!”
10.                   “Hnékat ek af því til hjálpar þér,  
at þú værir þess verð aldregi;  
hét ek ok efndak, er ek hinig mæлта,  
at ek hvívetna hjálpa skyldak,  
þá er oðlingar arfi skiptu.”
- 11 [13].           ‘Þá nam at setjask sorgmóð kona,  
at telja bøl af trega stórum:
- 12 [14].           “Var ek upp alin í jofra sal —  
flestr fagnaði — at fira ráði;  
unða ek aldri ok eign fõður  
fimm vetr eina, svá at minn faðir lifði.
- 13 [15].           “Þat nam at mæla mál it efsta,  
sjá móðr konungr, áðr hann sylti:  
mik bað hann gœða gulli rauðu  
ok suðr gefa syni Grímildar.
- 14 [16].           “Kvaða hann ina æðri alna myndu  
mey í heimi, nema mjötuðr spilti.”
- 15 [11].           “Ær ertu, Oddrún, ok ørvita,  
er þú mér af fári flest orð of kvað!  
En ek fylgðak þér á fjörgynju,  
sem vit bræðrum tveim of bornar værim!”
- 16 [12].           “Man ek hvat þú mæltir enn um aptan,  
þá er ek Gunnari gerðak drekku;  
slíks dæmi kvaðattu síðan mundu  
meyju verða, nema mér einni!
17.                   “Brynhildr í búri borða rakði;  
hafði hon lýði ok lönd um sik;  
jörð dúsaði ok upphiminn,  
þá er bani Fáfnis borg um þátti.
18.                   “Þá var víg vegit völsku sverði,  
ok borg brotin, sú er Brynhildr átti;  
vara langt af því, heldr válítit,  
unz þær vélar vissi allar.

9.                    ““So may kindly female creatures<sup>29</sup> help you,  
                          Frigg and Freyja and more gods,  
                          as you made danger fall from my hands!”<sup>30</sup>
10.                   ““I wasn’t inclined to help you because of this,  
                          that you were ever worthy<sup>31</sup> of it;  
I made a promise, and I kept to what I said here,<sup>32</sup>  
                          that I should help everyone,  
as long as<sup>33</sup> noblemen distributed inheritances.”<sup>34</sup>
- 11 [13].<sup>35</sup>           “Then the sad-hearted woman<sup>36</sup> sat herself down,  
to recount her misfortunes, out of great misery.”<sup>37</sup>
- 12 [14].             ““I was brought up in a hall of boars<sup>38</sup> —  
most welcomed me<sup>39</sup> — according to men’s counsel;  
I enjoyed life and my father’s belongings  
for five winters only, as long as my father lived.
- 13 [15].             ““He spoke this speech at the last,<sup>40</sup>  
                          that exhausted king,<sup>41</sup> before he expired:  
he ordered that I be endowed with red gold  
and given to a son of Grímildr<sup>42</sup> in the south.
- 14 [16].             ““He said that no maiden would be born nobler  
in the world, unless fate should spoil [matters].”
- 15 [11].             ““You’re mad, Oddrún, and out of your mind,<sup>43</sup>  
since you addressed most [of those] words to me out of hostility!<sup>44</sup>  
                          But I accompanied you on earth,<sup>45</sup>  
                          as if we two were born of two brothers!”<sup>46</sup>
- 16 [12].             ““I remember what you also said one evening,  
when I was getting a drink<sup>47</sup> ready for Gunnarr;  
you said such an example wouldn’t be forthcoming thereafter  
from a maiden, except from me alone!<sup>48</sup>
17.                   ““Brynhildr wove tapestry-borders<sup>49</sup> in her bower;  
                          she had people and lands about her;  
                          earth and sky above resounded(?),<sup>50</sup>  
when Fáfnir’s slayer<sup>51</sup> perceived the stronghold.
18.                   ““Then war was waged with a foreign sword,<sup>52</sup>  
and the stronghold broken [into], that which Brynhildr owned;  
it wasn’t long after that — rather, a woefully little time —  
                          until she was aware of all those tricks.”<sup>53</sup>

19.                   “Þess lét hon harðar hefndir verða,  
svá at vér ǫll hǫfum ornar raunir;  
þat mun á hǫlða hvert land fara,  
er hon lét sveltask at Sigurði!
20.                   “En ek Gunnari gatk at unna,  
bauga deili, sem Brynhildr skyldi;  
[16.] en hann Brynhildi bað hjálm geta;  
hana kvað hann óskmey verða skyldu.
21.                   “Buðu þeir árla bauga rauða,  
ok bræðr mínum bætr ósmár;  
bauð hann enn við mér bú fimmtán,  
hliðfarm Grana, ef hann hafa vildi.
22.                   “En Atli kvazk eigi vilja  
mund aldregi at megi Gjúka;  
þeygi vit máttum við munum vinna,  
nema ek helt hǫfði við hringbrota.
23.                   “Mæltu margir mínir niðjar,  
kvóðusk okkr hafa orðit bæði;  
en mik Atli kvað eigi myndu  
lýti ráða né lǫst gora.
24.                   “En slíks skyli synja aldri  
maðr fyr annan, þar er munuð deilir!
25.                   “Sendi Atli áru sína  
um myrkvan við mín at freista;  
ok þeir kvómu, þar er þeir koma né skyldut,  
þá er breiddu vit blæju eina.
26.                   “Buðu vit þegnum bauga rauða,  
at þeir eigi til Atla segði;  
en þeir óliga Atla sǫgðu  
ok hvatliga heim skunduðu.
27.                   “En þeir Guðrúnu gǫrta leyndu,  
þvíat hon heldr vita hálfu skyldi.
28.                   “Hlymr var at heyra hófgullinna,  
þá er í garð riðu Gjúka arfar;  
þeir ór Hǫgna hjarta skáru,  
en í ormgarð annan lǫgðu.

19.           “‘For this, she had harsh deeds of vengeance brought about,  
                  of which we’ve all had enough experiences;<sup>54</sup>  
                  [word of] it will travel to every land of men,  
                  that she killed herself<sup>55</sup> on account of Sigurðr!
20.                         “‘But I got to cherish Gunnarr,  
                                dealer of arm-rings, as Brynhildr ought;  
                  [16.] but he<sup>56</sup> ordered that a helm be got for Brynhildr;  
                  he said that she should be a ‘wish-maiden.’<sup>57</sup>
21.                         “‘They<sup>58</sup> offered red arm-rings early,<sup>59</sup>  
                                and to my brother<sup>60</sup> no small recompense,<sup>61</sup>  
                                he<sup>62</sup> also offered fifteen farms for me,  
                  the side-burden of Grani,<sup>63</sup> if he<sup>64</sup> would have it.
22.                         “‘But Atli said he would never want<sup>65</sup>  
                                a bride-price<sup>66</sup> from Gjúki’s boys;  
                  not at all could we two<sup>67</sup> resist our desires,  
                  but [rather] I held<sup>68</sup> my head against the ring-breaker.<sup>69</sup>
23.                         “‘Many of my kinsmen talked,  
                  themselves said that we had both been [together];  
                                but Atli said that I would not  
                  countenance a crime or commit a wrong.
24.                         “‘But one should never dispute that another  
                  is capable of such,<sup>70</sup> where love plays a part!
25.                         “‘Atli sent his envoys  
                                through the murky wood<sup>71</sup> to test me;  
                  and they came to where they should not have come,  
                  when we<sup>72</sup> both spread a single bed-cover.
26.                         “‘We both offered the thanes<sup>73</sup> red rings,  
                                so that they might not speak to Atli;  
                                but they spoke excitedly to Atli  
                                and hastened swiftly home.
27.                         “‘But they concealed [matters] from Guðrún completely,  
                  because she should have been doubly hurt.<sup>74</sup>
28.                         “‘The din of golden-hoofed ones<sup>75</sup> was to be heard,  
                                when Gjúki’s heirs<sup>76</sup> rode into the courtyard;<sup>77</sup>  
                                they<sup>78</sup> cut the heart from Hǫgni,  
                                and laid the other<sup>79</sup> in a snake-yard.



29.                    *“I’d just gone that one time  
to Geirmundr,<sup>80</sup> to get a drink<sup>81</sup> ready;  
the wise king<sup>82</sup> began to pluck his harp,  
because the kin-powerful king thought  
I would come to help him.*
30.                    *“I began to hear from Hlésey,<sup>83</sup>  
how the strings<sup>84</sup> there yelled<sup>85</sup> from strifes;<sup>86</sup>  
I commanded my maidservants to get ready —  
I wanted to save the marshal’s life!*
31.                    *“We let the ship float over the sound,<sup>87</sup>  
until I saw all of Atli’s courts.*
32.                    *“Then the wretched one came darting out,  
Atli’s mother<sup>88</sup> — may she moulder away! —  
and she dug into Gunnarr, to the heart,  
so that I couldn’t save the glorious one!<sup>89</sup>*
33.                    *“I often wonder this — how, afterwards, I,  
Bil<sup>90</sup> of the snake-pillow,<sup>91</sup> can hold onto life,  
when it seemed to me that I loved the terrifyingly bold one,  
the dealer of swords,<sup>92</sup> as myself!*
34.                    *“You’ve sat and listened while I told you  
many an evil thing about my fate and theirs;  
Each person lives according to their longings!  
Now Oddrún’s lament has reached its end!”<sup>93</sup>*

## Textual Apparatus to *Oddrúnargrátr*

*Frá Borgnýju ok Oddrúnu*] This rubricated but faded heading is illegible in the photograph in the facsimile volume of **R**; it is therefore supplied from the transcription therein

*Oddrúnargrátr*] This title is not in **R**; it is supplied editorially

*Heiðrekr*] The first letter is large and green, but faded, in **R**

1/1 *Heyrða*] The first letter is large and rubricated in **R**

4/3 *hlézt*] **R** *hlez*

10/3 *verð*] Absent from **R**

30/4 *gullu*] **R** *gullo* but corrected in the margin to *mæltu* ‘they spoke’; *gullo* appears preferable, however

31/2 *sund*] **R** *lvnd* ‘grove’

33/3 *linnvengis*] **R** *lín vengiS*

## Notes to the Translation

- 1 ‘Bright/Honourable Powerful One’; he is unknown outside this poem, but a namesake appears in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*.
- 2 ‘Stronghold New’; she is unknown outside this poem.
- 3 ‘Will Protection/Hand’; he is unknown outside this poem.
- 4 ‘(Weapon-)Point Rune’.
- 5 Oddrún is mentioned briefly in *VS* 32: shortly before committing suicide, Brynhildr says that Gunnarr will want to marry Oddrún, but that Atli will forbid it.
- 6 Oddrún.
- 7 The anonymous speaker of the poem, not Oddrún.
- 8 Probably Borgný.
- 9 An obscure place-name, attested only here. *Mornaland* was apparently in, or synonymous with, *Húnaland*, the land of the Huns (see *Od.* 4). The name’s meaning is uncertain, but given Borgný’s condition and the use of the verb *morna* ‘to moulder, waste away’ in *Od.* 32, ‘Land of Wasting Away’ is a possibility. Others are ‘Land of Moors’, ‘Land of Mornings’, ‘Land of Mourning’ and ‘Land of Plagues’; identification with Moravia has also been proposed. Some ambiguity might be intentional. Cf. *FSk.* 31.
- 10 Borgný.
- 11 A bridled horse.
- 12 I.e., the black horse. Alternatively, ‘and laid a black saddle on it’.
- 13 I.e., the ground.
- 14 Cf. *Prk.* 2, 3, 9, 12, *Br.* 5 [6].
- 15 The land of the Huns. The translation of *hlézt* as ‘most heard about’ (or ‘most famous’) appears likely, but is uncertain.
- 16 I.e., labour pains.



- 17 Literally, 'do you know if you can help?' The speaker is presumably an anonymous attendant of Borgný.
- 18 I.e., has made the unmarried Borgný pregnant. Alternatively, but less likely, *Hverr hefir — vissir? — vamma um leitat?* 'Who has — did you know? — caused this shame?'
- 19 I.e., why does Borgný have sudden pains?
- 20 Or 'of warriors'. The literal sense might be 'of a hawk-bearer/hawk-bearers'.
- 21 I.e., Borgný.
- 22 'I think' is probably the narrator's expression of confidence, not uncertainty.
- 23 Or 'gracious one' or 'helpful one', i.e., Oddrún.
- 24 Cf. *Sd.* 9.
- 25 I.e., were born to Borgný and were able to walk on the ground.
- 26 Or 'friendly', 'pleasing'.
- 27 Vilmundr. Høgni was the brother of Gunnarr, Oddrún's lover.
- 28 Despite the thanks Borgný gives to Oddrún in the next stanza, this presumably means that, having at last given birth, Borgný is mortally ill or at least still in danger of losing her life.
- 29 Specifically, supernatural ones.
- 30 I.e., 'because you removed me from danger'.
- 31 The word *verð* 'worthy' is not in **R**, but is supplied editorially on grounds of sense and metre.
- 32 Or perhaps 'to what I said in that place'.
- 33 Literally 'then when/as'.
- 34 I.e., as long as aristocrat-governed society continued. Nothing more is known of this promise.
- 35 Bracketed stanza numbers are those of NK and von See *et al.*, *Kommentar*.
- 36 Oddrún.
- 37 Literally, 'sorrows'.
- 38 Warriors.
- 39 Or 'rejoiced (in me)'.
- 40 Or 'He spoke this, the most important speech'.
- 41 Buðli, father of Oddrún, Atli and Brynhildir.
- 42 Gunnarr or Høgni, but probably specifically the former.
- 43 Cf. *Ls.* 21, 29; *HH.* II 34.
- 44 With the *fár* 'hostility' with which Oddrún spoke, compare the *fár* 'danger' from which she delivered Borgný in *Od.* 9.
- 45 Or 'on Fjörgyn', Fjörgyn being a personification of (mother) earth.
- 46 After a slight delay, Borgný responds with shock to Oddrún's assertion in *Od.* 10 that she helped her only to keep a promise, not out of good will.
- 47 Or 'drinking feast'.
- 48 It is unclear precisely what aspect of Oddrún's behaviour Borgný took exception to. Possibly Oddrún's preparation of a drink for Gunnarr was, in Borgný's eyes, indicative

of undue intimacy; perhaps, given her knowledge of incantations, Oddrún even gave him a magical potion. Whatever the exact offence, Oddrún implicitly points out Borgný's hypocrisy, given her secret affair with Vilmundr. She also turns the tables on Borgný in a very personal way by becoming an exemplary midwife, the only one who could deliver her children. Cf. *Od.* 29.

- 49 Possibly a synecdoche for whole tapestries.
- 50 Alternatively, 'stayed calm' (literally 'dozed').
- 51 Sigurðr.
- 52 Presumably by Sigurðr, against Brynhildr's stronghold.
- 53 Principally that Sigurðr and Gunnarr exchanged appearances so that Gunnarr might have her.
- 54 Brynhildr instigated the deaths of Sigurðr and his son, Sigmundr.
- 55 Literally, 'let herself die'.
- 56 Probably Oddrún's father as he lay dying (cf. *Od.* 13 [15]), rather than, as some have supposed, Gunnarr. It is interesting that Óðinn apparently did not choose this valkyrie, who would disobey him.
- 57 A maiden who carries out Óðinn's wishes, a valkyrie. Many commentators have thought that the second half of this stanza is misplaced.
- 58 Presumably Gunnarr and Hǫgni, possibly prompted by Grímildr.
- 59 Many editors emend *árla* 'early' to *Atla* 'to Atli', but this loses the sense of urgency behind the offer of compensation.
- 60 Atli.
- 61 I.e., compensation for the deceit that led to the death of Atli's sister, Brynhildr.
- 62 Gunnarr.
- 63 I.e., gold from Fáfnir's treasure, which Sigurðr had loaded into side-packs on his horse, Grani.
- 64 Atli.
- 65 I.e., accept.
- 66 The price that the groom paid for bride.
- 67 Oddrún and Gunnarr.
- 68 I.e., leant.
- 69 Gunnarr. Lords broke apart arm-rings to distribute as wealth to their retainers; cf. *Od.* 20.
- 70 I.e., secret, illicit liaison.
- 71 Presumably the *Myrkviðr* 'Murk Wood' of other texts.
- 72 Oddrún and Gunnarr.
- 73 Atli's messengers.
- 74 Literally, 'because she should have known it by half as much (again)'. Guðrún, now Atli's wife, would presumably have been hurt to learn both of Gunnarr's love for the sister of Atli and Brynhildr and of Atli's rejection of the compensation and a link to her birth family.
- 75 Horses, presumably shod with golden shoes.
- 76 Gunnarr and Hǫgni.

- 77 Atli had treacherously invited Gunnarr and Högni to his hall.
- 78 Atli's men, apparently led by Vilmundr, Borgný's lover.
- 79 Gunnarr.
- 80 Or 'to Geirmundr's'. Geirmundr, a man whose name means 'Spear Hand/Protection', is otherwise unknown. The visit was perhaps arranged by Atli or his mother.
- 81 Or 'drinking-feast'. Cf. *Od.* 16 [12].
- 82 Gunnarr in the snake-yard.
- 83 'Hlér's Island', *Hlér* 'Sea' being an alias of the sea-giant Ægir; now *Læsø* in the Kattegat.
- 84 I.e., harp-strings.
- 85 See the textual apparatus for the correction in **R** of *gullu* 'yelled' to *mæltu* 'spoke', a change not adopted in this text as it seems weaker and less appropriate to Gunnarr's plight.
- 86 I.e., in distress, a reflection of the strength of Gunnarr's plucking but also implicitly of the repeated attacks of snakes.
- 87 I.e., a narrow stretch of water.
- 88 It is unclear whether Atli's mother is also Oddrún's mother. Perhaps she is her stepmother, but Oddrún may simply be denying her blood-parent.
- 89 Atli's mother acts like a snake; cf. *Gðr.* I 27. In other versions of the story, Gunnarr dies from the bite of an adder in the snake-yard.
- 90 Oddrún identifies herself with the goddess *Bil* 'Empty Space' or '(Transitory) Moment'.
- 91 I.e., 'of gold', since dragons lie on gold. Alternatively, *línvengis* 'of the linen-pillow'. Either way, the kenning denotes 'woman'.
- 92 Gunnarr.
- 93 Literally, '... is gone/passed over'. This final line is either spoken by Oddrún and reported by the narrator or spoken by the latter in his or her own voice. The ambiguity may be deliberate; cf. *Ghv.* 21.

