



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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Guðrúnarhvøt

Guðrúnarhvøt (*Ghv.*) ‘Guðrún’s Incitement’ (R fol. 44r–v) is a short but effective poem in *fornyrðislag*. It is prefaced by a prose passage about the main character, Guðrún, which records that, after killing Atli, she was driven over the sea to the land of King Jónakr, with whom she had three sons: Sǫrli, Erpr and Hamðir.

The preface is of considerable interest for its summary of the circumstances of the execution of Svanhildr, daughter of Guðrún and Sigurðr, by Jǫrmunrekkr (a reflex of the historical fourth-century Ostrogothic King Ermanaric). This preserves a variant memory of an event also recorded by Jordanes in his *De origine actibusque Getarum* ‘On the Origin and Deeds of the Getae [Goths]’ (c. 551), commonly known as the *Getica*. Jordanes records that:

When the Getae [i.e., Goths] beheld this active race [i.e., the Huns] that had invaded many nations, they took fright and consulted with their king how they might escape from such a foe. Now although Hermanaric [= *Ermanaric*, ON *Jǫrmunrekkr*], king of the Goths, was the conqueror of many tribes, as we have said above, yet while he was deliberating on this invasion of the Huns, the treacherous tribe of the Rosomoni, who at that time were among those who owed him their homage, took this chance to catch him unawares. For when the king had given orders that a certain woman of the tribe I have mentioned, Sunilda [= ON *Svanhildr*] by name, should be bound to wild horses and torn apart by driving them at full speed in opposite directions (for he was roused to fury by her husband’s treachery to him), her brothers Sarus [= ON *Sǫrli*] and Ammius [= ON *Hamðir*] came to avenge their sister’s death and plunged a sword into Hermanaric’s side. Enfeebled by this blow, he dragged out a miserable existence in bodily weakness.¹

It is to avenge the killing of Svanhildr by being trodden (rather than torn apart) by horses that Guðrún—whose involvement in the story is unique to Norse tradition—incites her sons in *Ghv.*, the vengeance being enacted in the next poem, *Hm*. Guðrún’s successful *hvøt* ‘whetting’ of Hamðir and Sǫrli initially prompts her to laugh (7), but then, in a dramatic contrast, soon after to weep (9), as, presumably prompted by the

¹ C. C. Mierow, *The Gothic History of Jordanes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1915), p. 87. For the original Latin, see T. Mommsen, *Jordanis: Romana et Getica*, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Auctores Antiquissimi 5 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1882), p. 91. Jordanes add that Hermanaricus eventually died at the age of one hundred and ten. How much of Jordanes’ account is fourth-century history and how much subsequent legend has been much debated. Earlier, the fourth-century Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus records that Ermanaric committed suicide and makes no mention of Sunilda, Sarus or Ammius.

realization that her sons are now doomed, she reflects on her past losses. Most grievous of these was Sigurðr, to whom she calls out, before ordering the creation of a pyre on which she will burn and thus make her way to him in Hel. Comparable are Brynhildr's preparations of a pyre in *Sg.*, a poem in which Brynhildr also prophesies Svanhildr's death. The two poems also share similar powerful imagery of an icy woman melting in the heat of funereal flames.

More details of the events described in the initial prose appear in chapters 41–42 of *VS*. Chapter 43 of *VS* is a prose paraphrase of a version of *Ghv*. See also *SnESkáld* 42 (I, p. 49). For other parallels, see the commentary to *Hm*.

Synopsis

Prose: After killing Atli, Guðrún tried to drown herself in the sea, but was unable to sink. She was swept over the water to King Jónakr, who married her. They had three sons: Sqrli, Erpr and Hamðir. Svanhildr, Guðrún's daughter by Sigurðr, also grew up there. She married Jǫrmunrekkr, but was accused of adultery with her stepson, Randvér, at the instigation of Bikki, the king's counsellor. Jǫrmunrekkr had Randvér hanged and Svanhildr trampled to death by horses. Upon hearing that, Guðrún spoke to her sons.

Verse: The poet introduces Guðrún's incitement of her sons to avenge Svanhildr (1). Guðrún asks why they are inactive when their sister has been trampled to death (2). She castigates them for lacking the spirit of Gunnarr and Hunnish kings (3). Hamðir replies that she would not have praised Hǫgni (and implicitly Gunnarr) for killing Sigurðr (4), and that she brought more misery on herself, and weakened their capacity to avenge Svanhildr, by killing her sons by Atli (5). Nevertheless, he commands precious war-gear to be brought in—she has successfully incited them to kill Jǫrmunrekkr (6). Guðrún, laughing, brings their equipment, and the two brothers mount their horses (7).

Hamðir intimates that they will not return alive (8). Guðrún goes to sit on the threshold to recount her sorrows (9).

Guðrún declares that she has had three husbands, of whom the best by far was Sigurðr, whom her brothers killed (10). Still, she says, they heaped more pain on her by marrying her to Atli (11). In response she beheaded her sons by Atli (12), before failing to drown herself (13). She recalls that she bore children to Jónakr (14), but that the best of her children was the sun-like Svanhildr (15). She dressed her in finery, but Jǫrmunrekkr had her fair hair trampled in the mud by horses (16). She recalls Sigurðr's killing again, and those of Gunnarr and Hǫgni (17). She commands Sigurðr (who is dead) to ride to her (18), and asks whether he recalls his promise to visit her from Hel (19). She commands a huge pyre to be made, so that her sorrows may melt (20). She (or the poet?) then expresses a wish that the recitation of this poem may improve the lot of noblemen and alleviate women's sorrows (21).

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Frá Guðrúnu

Guðrún gekk þá til sævar, er hon hafði drepit Atla. Gekk út á sæinn ok vildi fara sér. Hon mátti eigi sökkva. Rak hana yfir fjörðinn á land Jónakrs konungs. Hann fekk hennar. Þeira synir váru þeir Sörli ok Erpr ok Hamðir. Þar fœddisk upp Svanhildr, Sigurðar dóttir. Hon var gipt Jormunrekk inum ríkja. Með honum var Bikki. Hann réð þat, at Randvér, konungs sonr, skyldi taka hana. Þat sagði Bikki konungi. Konungr lét hengja Randvé, en troða Svanhildi undir hrossa fótum. En er þat spurði Guðrún, þá kvaddi sonu sína.

Guðrúnarhvöt

1. Þá frá ek sennu slíðrfengligsta,
trauð mál, talið af trega stórum,
er harðhuguð hvatti at vígi
grimmum orðum Guðrún sonu.
2. “Hví sitið? Hví sofið lífi?
Hví tregrat ykkur teiti at mæla,
er Jormunrekkur yðra systur,
unga at aldri, jóm of traddi,
hvítum ok svörtum, á hervegi,
grám, gangtómum Gotna hrossum?
3. “Urðu it glíkir þeim Gunnari,
né in heldr hugðir, sem var Hogni;
hennar mynduð it hefna leita,
ef it móð ættið minna brœðra
eða harðan hug Húnkonunga!”
4. Þá kvað þat Hamðir inn hugumstóri:
“Lítt mundir þú leyfa dáð Hogni,
þá er Sigurð vökðu svefni ór;
bækr váru þínar, inar bláhvítu,
roðnar í vers dreyra, fólgnar í valblóði!
5. “Urðu þér brœðra hefndir
slíðrar ok sárar er þú sonu myrðir;
knættim *allir* Jormunrekki,
samhyggjendr, systur hefna!
6. “Berið hnossir fram Húnkonunga!
Hefir þú okkr hvatta at hjörþingi!”

About Guðrún

Guðrún went then to the sea, when she had killed Atli. She went out into the sea and wanted to do away with herself. She could not sink. She was driven over the fjord to the land of King Jónakr. He married her. Their sons were Sqrli¹ and Erpr² and Hamðir.³ Svanhildr,⁴ Sigurðr's daughter, was raised there. She was married to Jormunrekkr the mighty. With him was Bikki. He advised this, that Randvér,⁵ the king's son, should take her. Bikki told that⁶ to the king.⁷ The king had Randvér hanged, and Svanhildr trodden under horses' hooves. And when Guðrún heard that, then she addressed her sons.

Guðrún's Incitement

1. 'Then I heard invective most encompassingly virulent,⁸
 reluctant speech, spoken out of great grief,
 when hard-hearted Guðrún incited her sons
 to killing with grim words.

2. "‘Why do you sit? Why do you sleep your life [away]?
Why doesn't it grieve you two⁹ to speak of glad things,
 when Jormunrekkr had your¹⁰ sister,¹¹
 young in years, trodden by steeds,
 white and black, on the army-way,¹²
 by the grey, gait-tamed horses of the Gotar?’¹³

3. "‘You haven't grown like Gunnarr and his men,
nor any the more shown the same cast of mind as Hogni;
 you'd have sought to avenge her,
 if you had the spirit of my brothers
 or the hard heart of the Hún-kings!’"¹⁴

4. "Then Hamðir the great-hearted said this:
 "Little would you have lauded Hogni's deed,
 when they woke Sigurðr from sleep;
 your embroidered coverlets, the blue-white ones,¹⁵
were reddened in your husband's gore, steeped in slaughter-blood!"¹⁶

5. "‘Deeds of vengeance for your brothers became¹⁷
dire and sorrowful for you when you murdered your sons;
 we could all,¹⁸ with one mind,
 have avenged our sister upon Jormunrekkr!

6. "‘Bring forth the treasures of the Hún-kings!
You have incited us two to a sword-assembly!’"¹⁹

7. 'Hlæjandi Guðrún hvarf til skemmu,
kumbl konunga ór kerum valði,
síðar brynjur, ok sonum færði;
hlóðusk móðgir á mara bógu.
8. 'Þá kvað þat Hamðir inn hugumstóri:
"Svá komak meirr aptr, móður at vitja,
geir-Njörðr, hniginn á Goðþjóðu,
at þú erfi at ǫll oss drykkir,
at Svanhildi ok sonu þína!"
9. 'Guðrún grátandi, Gjúka dóttir,
gekk hon tregliga á tái sitja,
ok at telja, tárughlýra,
móðug spjöll á margan veg:
10. "'Þrjá vissa ek elda, þrjá vissa ek arna,
var ek þrimr verum vegin at húsi;
einn var mér Sigurðr ǫllum betri,
er bræðr mínir at bana urðu!
11. "'Svárra sára sákat ek, né kunnu,
meirr þóttusk mér um stríða,
er mik ǫðlingar Atla gáfu!
12. "'Húna hvassa hét ek mér at rúnum;
máttigak þolva bætr um vinna,
áðr ek hnóf hǫfuð af Hniflungum!
13. "'Gekk ek til strandar, grǫm vark Nornum,
vilda ek hrinda stríð grið þeira;
hófu mik, né drekðu, hávar bárur,
því ek land um sték, at lifa skyldak.
14. "'Gekk ek á beð — hugðak mér fyr betra! —
þriðja sinni þjóðkonungi;
ól ek mér jóð, erfivörðu,
Jónakrs sonum.
15. "'En um Svanhildi sátu þýjar,
en ek minna barna bazt fullhugðak;
svá var Svanhildr í sal mínum,
sem væri scemleitr sólar geisli!

7. Laughing, Guðrún turned to the storehouse,
chose helmet-crests²⁰ of kings from chests,
broad mail-coats, and brought them to her sons;²¹
the brave ones loaded themselves onto horses' backs.²²
8. "Then Hamðir the great-hearted said this:
"Thus may I come back again, to visit my mother,
[as] a spear-Njörðr,²³ having sunk [to the ground]²⁴ in Goðþjóð,²⁵
[at the time] when(?) you would hold²⁶ a funeral feast for all of us,
for Svanhildr and your sons!"²⁷
9. Weeping, Guðrún, Gjúki's daughter,
went, sorrowful, to sit on the threshold,²⁸
and to tell, teary-cheeked,
emotional tales in many a way:
10. "I knew three fires, I knew three hearths,
I was conveyed to a house for three husbands;²⁹
to me, Sigurðr alone was better than all [others],
[he] whom my brothers did to death!
11. "More grievous wounds I didn't see, nor did they³⁰ know,
[yet] they thought to hurt me more,
when the noblemen gave me to Atli!
12. "My keen cubs³¹ I called to me for a secret conversation;
I couldn't work a remedy for my ills,
until I cut the heads off the Hniflungar!³²
13. "I went to the shore, I was angry with the Nornir,
I wanted to thrust aside their severe mercies(?),³³
high breakers lifted me up, didn't drown me,
in that I stepped onto land, so that I should live.
14. "I went to the bed — I had better in mind for myself!³⁴ —
of a people-king for a third time;
I bore myself offspring, inheritance-wardens,
in the sons of Jónakr.³⁵
15. "And around Svanhildr sat serving-women,
and I gave my whole heart [to her] as the best of my children;
thus was Svanhildr in my hall,
as would be an honourable-looking beam of the sun!³⁶

16. “‘I endowed her with gold and costly clothes,
 before I gave her to the Goðbjóð,³⁷
 to me the hardest of my harms
 concerns the fair hair of Svanhildr:
 they trod it in the mud under horses’ hooves.
17. “‘But the most grievous [was] when my Sigurðr,
 robbed of victory, they slew in bed;
 and the grimmest when those shining snakes
 slithered to [take] Gunnarr’s life;
 but the sharpest when to the heart they flayed(?)
 the uncowardly king, cut open the living [man].³⁸
18. “‘I remember a multitude of evils . . . ³⁹
 Bridle, Sigurðr, the black steed,
 the swift-moving horse, let it run hither!
There sits here neither daughter-in-law nor daughter,
 she who would give treasures to Guðrún!
19. “‘Do you recall, Sigurðr, what we two said,
 when we both sat in bed,
 that you would visit me, spirited one,
 hero, from Hel, and I you from [this] world?
20. “‘Pile up, earls, the oak-pyre,
 let it be highest beneath the king(?)⁴⁰
 May fire burn the breast full of grief,
 . . . may sorrows⁴¹ melt around the heart!⁴²
21. “‘For all earls, may their lot improve,
 for all women, may [their] sorrow diminish,
 in that this grief-chain⁴³ was recounted!⁴⁴

Textual Apparatus to *Guðrúnarhvöt*

Frá Guðrúnu] Rubricated, but faded, in **R**

Guðrún] The first letter is large, half-inset, slightly ornamented and rubricated, but faded, in **R**

Guðrúnarhvöt] This rubricated title is illegible in the photograph in the facsimile volume of **R**; the reading is therefore reliant on the transcription therein

1/1 *bá*] The first letter is large, half-inset, slightly ornamented and rubricated in **R**

5/5 *allir*] **R** absent

7/1 *Guðrún*] **R** *gundrv*

8/3 *komak*] **R** *comaz*

11/1 *svárra*] **R** *svara*

12/6 *Hniflungum*] **R** *niflvngom*

16/6 *harðast*] **R** *hardaz*

17/5 *grimmastr*] **R** *grim / astr*

17/10 *flógu*] **R** *fló*

18/2] Some text might have been lost at this point, but there is no indication of loss in **R**

18/3 *Sigurðr*] **R** *sigvrþ*

19/5 *þú*] **R** *þy*

19/5 *mín*] **R** *miN*

20/7 . . . *um hjarta*] An initial word beginning with *þ*- has probably dropped out of this half-line, though there is no indication of loss in **R**

Notes to the Translation

- 1 'Small Armoured One'. He corresponds to *Sarus* in Jordanes' account of the death of *Sunilda* (ON *Svanhildir*) and the revenge attack on the Ostrogothic king (*H*)ermanaricus (ON *Jǫrmunrekkr*) in chapter 24 of his *c.* 551 *Getica* 'History of the Goths'.
- 2 'Reddish-Brown One'. He is not, by contrast, the full brother of Hamðir and Sǫrli in *Hm.*, and it seems that only two brothers are addressed in the present poem, most likely Hamðir and Sǫrli.
- 3 'Covering/Garment Servant'. He corresponds to *Ammius* in Jordanes' account.
- 4 'Swan Battle'. She corresponds to *Sunilda* in Jordanes' account.
- 5 'Shield-Edge Fighter/Consecrator'.
- 6 Randvér's taking of *Svanhildir* (real or imagined).
- 7 *Jǫrmunrekkr*.
- 8 The speaker is the poet.
- 9 Probably Hamðir and Sǫrli.
- 10 Here *yðra* should perhaps be emended to the dual form *ykkra*.

- 11 Svanhildr.
- 12 Or 'common highway'.
- 13 Goths. Cf. *Hm.* 3.
- 14 Kings of the Húnar (Huns). This could denote kings of either Atli's dynasty (the historical Huns) or Sigurðr's; cf. note to Sg. 4.
- 15 I.e., ones with blue and white stripes.
- 16 Cf. *Hm.* 6–7.
- 17 The Old Norse line lacks alliteration and is probably corrupt.
- 18 By supplying *allir* 'all', the faulty metre is remedied and the sense improved. In *VS* 43 Hamðir says '*betr mættim vér allir saman drepa Jormunrek konung*' "'we could slay King Jormunrekkr better if we were all together"'.
- 19 I.e., to battle.
- 20 I.e., crested helmets.
- 21 Neither *Ghv.* nor *Hm.* records that Guðrún had made her sons' armour invulnerable to iron weapons, as stated in *VS* 44, or, as in *SnESkáld* (I, 42, p. 49), that she had given them mail-coats and helmets so strong that iron could not penetrate them.
- 22 Literally, 'shoulders'.
- 23 I.e., a warrior, here Hamðir. Njörðr was a god, one of the Vanir.
- 24 I.e., fallen in battle.
- 25 The nation of the gods; alternatively, perhaps *Gotþjóð*, the Gothic nation; cf. *Ghv.* 16.
- 26 Literally, 'drink'.
- 27 The precise sense of Hamðir's words is uncertain, but he is probably being ironic and does not expect to return home alive. He perhaps alludes to the power, which he lacks, of the Vanir gods, led by Njörðr, to resurrect themselves from the dead (see *Vsp.* 24). The corresponding passage in *VS* 43 reads: '*Her munu vér skilja efsta sinni, ok spyrja muntu tíðendin, ok muntu þá em drekka eptir okkr ok Svanhildi*' "'Here we will part for the last time, and you will hear the tidings, and you will then hold a funeral feast for us two [i.e., Hamðir and Sqrli] and for Svanhildr"'.
- 28 Cf. *Hm.* 1.
- 29 Sigurðr, Atli and Jónakr.
- 30 Guðrún's brothers.
- 31 Her sons by Atli. There is probably a pun on *Húna* 'Huns'.
- 32 Her sons by Atli. *Hniflungar*, a variant of *Niflungar* 'Nibelungs', was originally a name for members of the Burgundian royalty.
- 33 The Old Norse line lacks alliteration and is probably corrupt; the translation of this line is uncertain. Emendation of *stríð grið* 'severe mercies(?)' to *hríðgrið* 'stormy vehemence' is a potential fix. The Nornir are the Northern Fates.
- 34 I.e., death.
- 35 Half the final line of this stanza may well be missing. If so, the omission might simply be of a repetition of *erfiðrðu* 'inheritance-wardens'.
- 36 Cf. Svanhildr's description in *VS* 41.
- 37 The Gothic people. *R*'s *Gotþjóðar* should perhaps be emended to *Gotþjóðar*. Cf. *Ghv.* 8.

- 38 Hǫgni.
- 39 It is likely that at least one half-line, probably more, has been lost at this point. It is doubtful whether the surviving half-line and the following four full lines were originally part of the same stanza.
- 40 Here *und hilmr* 'under (the) king' may well be a mistake for *und himni* 'under sky/heaven', as the *pyre* is probably for Guðrún alone.
- 41 By implication, icy.
- 42 The last line of this stanza appears corrupt. It is probably missing an initial word beginning with *þ-* (perhaps *þungar* 'heavy', whence 'May heavy sorrows ...').
- 43 Literally, 'grief-series', 'grief-enumeration'.
- 44 This stanza may be spoken either by Guðrún or by the poet in his or her own voice; cf. the last line of *Od.* 34.