



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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Baldrs draumar

Baldrs draumar (*BDr.*) ‘Baldr’s Dreams’ survives in *A*, fol. 1v–2r, where it is found between *Hrbl.* and *FSk.* Its date of composition is unknown, but it perhaps postdates *Vsp.* Elements of the myth of Baldr and Høðr, which *BDr.* refers to, might be ancient, however, as aspects of their story are perhaps attached to differently named characters in the Indian *Mahabharata*.¹

BDr., which is in *fornyrðislag*, shares passages and themes with other Norse texts. The first stanza is similar to *Brk.* 14, but the basis of the correspondence is uncertain. Óðinn’s ride to Hel is closely paralleled by that of his son Hérmoðr (see below), and less obviously by Skírnir’s journey in *FSk.*, but it is normally only the dead who make this journey, as is apparently the case with Brynhildr in *Hlr.* The poem’s closest associations, though, are with *Hdl.* 29–44 (*Völuspá hin skamma* ‘The Short *Völuspá*’) and with *Vsp.*

In *Hdl.* the giantess Hyndla reveals information to the goddess Freyja. She tells of Baldr’s death and avenging by his brother Váli, and refers to Loki’s begetting of monstrous progeny and the doom of the gods—aspects paralleled in *BDr.* Furthermore, the seeress and ‘mother of three giants’ in *BDr.* is perhaps, if not Loki himself (disguised as the giantess *þökk?*), the giantess Angrboða, on whom Loki sired Fenrir according to *Hdl.* 40.

In *Vsp.* a seeress who was fostered by giants informs Óðinn, among much else, of Baldr’s death, Váli’s vengeance, Loki’s release from bondage and Ragnarok. The correspondences may go further, as *BDr.* 9 might be indebted to *Vsp.* 31–32, and *BDr.* 11 might derive from *Vsp.* 32–33.

Nonetheless, these seeress-poems take different approaches. Whereas *Vsp.* and *Völuspá hin skamma* each have a single speaker, *BDr.* is largely a question-and-answer dialogue. As such, it may also be compared to the Óðinnic dialogue-poems *Hrbl.* and *Vm.* In the latter, Óðinn similarly visits a wise giant, whom he questions under an assumed name and confounds with an unanswerable question about Baldr that reveals his true identity.

Although *BDr.* has left no obvious imprint on other medieval literature, its central concern—Baldr’s death—is, as we have seen, mentioned in other Eddic poems. The *R* text of *Vsp.* is the best Eddic source for this event. It devotes stanzas 31–34 to Baldr’s

1 See J. Puhvel, *Comparative Mythology* (Baltimore, MD: Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 215.

death and its immediate consequences, and another stanza (60) to Baldr's return in the post-Ragnarok age, when he will live happily beside his brother and killer, Hqðr. However, extant Old Norse poetry, despite mentioning Baldr often, provides little more information about his death. For that we must look to Old Norse prose and further afield.

The fullest source for Baldr's death and its aftermath is *SnEGylf* (49–50, pp. 45–49). Its sources include a stanza of *ljóðaháttir* (presumably from a lost Eddic poem) and the late tenth-century skaldic poem *Húsdr.* by Úlfr Uggason. The essentials of this version of the story are as follows:

Because Baldr was having bad dreams, the gods decided to protect him by requiring all created things to swear that they would not harm him. However, the malicious god Loki changed his appearance into that of a woman and learnt from Baldr's mother, Frigg, that the mistletoe had been exempted on account of its youth. He, seeing Baldr's blind brother, Hqðr, standing weaponless while the other gods amused themselves by throwing things at the inviolate Baldr, urged him to join in by throwing the mistletoe. Guided by Loki, he threw it and killed Baldr.

The grief-stricken gods determined to ransom Baldr from Hel. Óðinn's son Hermóðr volunteered and set out for Hel on the horse Sleipnir.² Meanwhile, Baldr's body was cremated on his ship beside his wife, Nanna, and in the presence of a great assembly of gods, valkyries and giants. Hermóðr eventually reached Hel and begged its eponymous queen for Baldr's return. This she would only grant if Baldr were proven to be as loved as Hermóðr claims: everything in the world must weep for him. When the gods heard this they sent messengers throughout the world to request that everything 'weep Baldr out of Hel'. Everything did, except for a giantess ironically called *þökk* 'Thanks', who was presumed to be Loki in disguise.

In their anger at this treachery, the gods caught Loki and bound him on three stones with the guts of his son. They suspended a snake above him, so that its venom dripped onto his face. His wife, Sigyn, attends him, catching some of the venom in a bowl. But when she leaves to empty it, the venom falls on Loki and he writhes in agony. There he lies bound—until Ragnarok.

The story of Baldr and Hqðr also survives—albeit in markedly different and non-eschatological form—in the third book of the thirteenth-century *GD* by Saxo Grammaticus. Another, also highly different, version of the tale may appear in the Old English heroic poem *Beowulf*. Neither version mentions Loki.

The most pertinent details of Saxo's account are as follows:

Balderus (Baldr) is a despicable demigod, a son of the god Othinus (Óðinn). His body can be pierced only by a sword belonging to the satyr Mimmingus. Hotherus (Hqðr) is a fine, sighted warrior-king, unrelated to Balderus. The two clash over the love of Nanna, Hotherus' foster-sister, and over power. After several battles, they meet for a final time and Hotherus, having obtained Mimmingus' sword, some of Balder's magic food and a magic girdle, stabs Balderus. The goddess of death appears to Balderus in a

2 In *BDr.* it is Óðinn who rides Sleipnir to Hel.

dream, telling him that has only three days to live. He is mourned and buried royally in a mound. Othinus then seeks to avenge his son's death. To fulfil a prophecy by the Finn Rostiophus (cf. Hrossbjófr in *Hdl.* 32) which stated that Rinda (Rindr) would bear him an avenging son, Othinus, disguised as a female nurse, rapes her. She bears him a child, Bo, who kills Hotherus, but who dies of his wounds the next day.

Beowulf's account is of men. Lines 2434–71 concern Beowulf's Geatish uncles Herebeald and Hæðcynn—whose respective name-elements *-beald* and *Hæð-* are cognate with ON *Baldr* and *Hǫðr*—and the grief of their father, Hreðel, whose typification as an old man might recall Norse descriptions of Óðinn. Hæðcynn missed his mark and mistakenly shot Herebeald, his elder brother, with a bloody dart from a horn-tipped bow. Hrethel mourned Herebeald, but could not avenge his death.

Synopsis

BDr. tells of the gods' response to the worrying question of why the god Baldr was having bad dreams (1). His father, Óðinn, rides the horse Sleipnir down to the land of the dead, and, once past a barking hellhound (2–3), magically raises a seeress from her grave (4–5). He conceals his identity by using the pseudonym Vegtamr and demands to know for whom Hel's hall is so extravagantly prepared (6). She tells him it is for Baldr (7). Óðinn interrogates her further and learns the identities of his son's killer, Hǫðr, and avenger, Váli (8–11). Óðinn's final question she does not (or cannot) answer, but it reveals his identity to her. He, in turn, identifies her as the mother of three giants and provokes an ironic riposte that reminds him of the impending Ragnarök (12–14).

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Baldrs draumar

1. Senn váru Æsir allir á þingi,
ok Ásynjur allar á máli,
ok um þat réðu ríkir tívar,
hví væri Baldri ballir draumar.
2. Upp reis Óðinn, alda Gautr,
ok hann á Sleipni sǫðul um lagði;
reið hann niðr þaðan Niflheljar til,
mœtti hann hvelpi, þeim er ór Helju kom.
3. Sá var blóðugr um brjóst framan,
ok galdrs fǫður gól um lengi;
fram reið Óðinn, foldvegr dunði,
hann kom at hávu Heljar ranni.
4. Þá reið Óðinn fyr austan dyrr,
þar er hann vissi vǫlu leiði;
nam hann vittugri valgaldr kveða,
unz nauðig reis, nás orð um kvað:
5. ‘Hvat er manna þat, mér ókunnra,
er mér hefir aukit erfitt sinni?
Var ek snivin snjóvi ok slegin regni
ok drifin döggu — dauð var ek lengi!’
6. ‘Vegtamr ek heiti, sonr em ek Valtams;
segðu mér ór Helju — ek man ór heimi —
hveim eru bekkir baugum sánir,
flet fagrliga flóuð gulli?’
7. ‘Hér stendr Baldri of brugginn mjǫðr,
skírar veigar, liggr skjöldr yfir,
en ásmegir í ofvæni.
Nauðug sagðak, nú mun ek þegja!’
8. ‘Þegjattu, vǫlva! Þik vil ek fregna!
Unz alkunna vil ek enn vita!
Hverr man Baldri at bana verða
ok Óðins son aldri ræna?’
9. ‘Hǫðr berr hávan hróðrbarm þinig,
hann man Baldri at bana verða
ok Óðins son aldri ræna.
Nauðug sagðak, nú mun ek þegja!’

Baldr's Dreams

1. At once the Æsir¹ were all in assembly,
 and the Ásynjur² all in consultation,
 and the powerful deities deliberated about it,
 why Baldr's dreams were baleful.³
2. Up rose Óðinn, Gautr of ages,⁴
 and on Sleipnir he laid a saddle;
 he rode from there down to Niflhel,⁵
 he met a whelp, the one which came from Hel.⁶
3. It was bloody across the front of its breast,⁷
 and it bayed long at the father of incantation;⁸
 forward rode Óðinn, the earth-way resounded,
 he came to the high hall of Hel.⁹
4. Then Óðinn rode east of the door,¹⁰
 to where he knew a seeress's grave [to be];
incantations for the slain he spoke to the one wise in witchcraft,¹¹
 until she rose under duress, spoke a dead body's words:
5. 'What kind of man is it, unknown to me,
 who has made me [undertake] an arduous journey?
 I was snowed-in with snow and lashed with rain
 and drenched with dew — long was I dead!'¹²
6. 'I am called Vegtamr,¹³ I am the son of Valtamr;¹⁴
tell me news from Hel — I remember [things] from home¹⁵ —
 for whom are the benches strewn with arm-rings,
 the floor beautifully flooded with gold?'
7. 'Here stands mead brewed for Baldr,
 shining drinks — a shield lies over them —
 and the sons of the Æsir¹⁶ [are] in great anxiety.
 I spoke under duress, now I shall be silent!'
8. 'Don't be silent, seeress! I want to question you!
 Until all is known,¹⁷ I'll want to know more!
 Who will be Baldr's slayer
 and rob Óðinn's son of life?'
9. 'Höðr will bear the high glory-tree¹⁸ there,¹⁹
 he will become Baldr's slayer
 and rob Óðinn's son of life.
 I spoke under duress, now I shall be silent!'

10. ‘Þegjattu, vǫlva! Þik vil ek fregna!
 Unz alkunna vil ek enn vita!
Hverr man heipt Heði hefnt of vinna
 eða Baldrs bana á bál vega?’
11. ‘Rindr berr *Vála* í vestrsǫlum,
 sá man Óðins sonr einnættir vega;
 hönd um þværa né höfuð kembir
 áðr á bál um berr Baldrs andskota.
 Nauðug sagðak, nú mun ek þegja!’
12. ‘Þegjattu, vǫlva! Þik *vil ek fregna!*
 Unz alkunna vil ek enn vita!
Hverjar ru þær meyjar er at muni gráta
 ok á himin verpa hálsa skautum?’
13. ‘Ertattu Vegtamr, sem ek hugða,
 heldr ertu Óðinn, aldinn Gautr!’
 ‘Ertattu vǫlva né vís kona,
 heldr ertu þriggja þursa móðir!’
14. ‘Heim ríð þú, Óðinn, ok ver hróðigr!
 Svá komit manna meirr aptr á vit
 er lauss Loki líðr ór þöndum
 ok ragna røk rjúfendr koma!’

10. ‘Don’t be silent, seeress! I want to question you!
 Until all is known, I’ll want to know more!
 Who will avenge Høðr’s hateful deed
 and bear Baldr’s slayer to the pyre?’
11. ‘Rindr will bear Váli²⁰ in western halls,²¹
 that son of Óðinn will slay when one night old;
 he won’t wash his hands or comb his hair
 before he bears Baldr’s enemy to the pyre.
 I spoke under duress, now I shall be silent!’
12. ‘Don’t be silent, seeress! I want to question you!
 Until all is known, I’ll want to know more!
Who are the maidens who will weep for their loved one²²
 and cast their neck’s corners²³ to the heavens?’²⁴
13. ‘You’re not Vegtamr, as I thought,
 rather you’re Óðinn, the old Gautr!’²⁵
‘You’re neither a seeress nor a wise woman,
 rather you’re the mother of three giants!’²⁶
14. ‘Ride home, Óðinn, and be proud!’²⁷
 May no one come back again to visit me thus
 when²⁸ Loki slips loose from his bonds²⁹
 and the doom of the powers comes tearing [down]!’

Textual Apparatus to *Baldrs draumar*

Baldrs draumar] The title is extremely faint in photographs of **A**; this edition therefore relies on the reading in Finnur Jónsson, *Håndskriftet Nr. 748, 4^{to}, bl. 1-6 i den Arna-magnæanske samling (Brudstykke af den ældre Edda) i fototypisk og diplomatisk gengivelse* (Copenhagen: Møller, 1896), p. 2

3/4 *gól um*] **A** *golu*

5/4 *erfitt*] **A** *ærfitt*

6/7 *fagrliga*] **A** abbreviates *fagrl'*

6/8 *flóuð*] **A** *flop'*

9/8 *ek*] **A** omits in an abbreviation of these repeated words

11/1 *Vála*] **A** absent

11/5 *þværa*] **A** *þvær*

12/2–3 *vil ek fregna ... vita*] **A** omits in an abbreviation of these repeated words

13/4 *aldinn*] **A** *allda*, corrected to *alldin*

14/1 *Óðinn*] **A** *oðin*

Notes to the Translation

- 1 Gods.
- 2 Goddesses.
- 3 Cf. *Þrk.* 14.
- 4 Or 'Gautr of men', *Gautr* being an alias of Óðinn. *Gautr* could also be a common noun meaning 'sacrificial victim (from whom blood has poured)' (cf. OE *geotan* 'to pour, shed') in reference to Óðinn's sacrifice of himself (*Háv.* 138–39) or of his eye (*Vsp.* 28) to gain knowledge. Cf. *aldinn Gautr* 'the old Gautr' in *BDr.* 13.
- 5 'Mist/Darkness Hel'.
- 6 With this hellhound, cf. Garmr in *Vsp.* 43, the dogs in *Fsk.* 11 (and preceding prose) and *Fj.* 19–24, and Kerberos, the dog which guards the entrance to Hades in Greek mythology. Hel is here the Norse underworld of the dead.
- 7 The blood is presumably that of dead people whom the dog has devoured for trying to leave Hel, or of living people who have attempted to enter Hel.
- 8 Óðinn. Cf. Garmr's howling in *Vsp.* The initial prose to *Grm.* says that no dog will attack Óðinn.
- 9 Here Hel is either the underworld or the goddess who presides over it.
- 10 Presumably the door to Hel's hall.
- 11 Cf. *Háv.* 157.
- 12 Cf. *HH.* II 44.
- 13 'Way Ready (One)'.
- 14 'Slaughtered/Slain Accustomed (One)'.

- 15 I.e., the world of the living.
- 16 The gods themselves.
- 17 Or perhaps 'Until I'm all-knowing'.
- 18 *Hróðrbarmr* is an obscure term. Possibly it describes the mistletoe with which Hqðr kills Baldr in Icelandic tradition, or Baldr himself. The adjective *hávan* 'high' might reflect either mistletoe's elevated position in a tree or Baldr's stature. Cf. *Vsp.* 31–32.
- 19 Or 'here' (i.e., to Hel).
- 20 This word is absent from A. The emendation raises the possibility of alliteration with an East Norse, or pre-literary West Norse, form of *Rindr*, namely **Vrindr*. For the story of Váli's birth and avenging of Baldr, see *Vsp.* 32–3.
- 21 The gods' halls were usually located in the west.
- 22 I.e., perhaps, for Baldr. Alternatively, *at muni* might mean 'to their hearts' content'.
- 23 Possibly a term for the lower parts of women's head-dresses or for ships' sails, here used *pars pro toto*.
- 24 Óðinn's question is obscure. The answer might be 'waves'—elsewhere personified as daughters of Ægir—which will toss their white (metaphorical) hoods or Baldr's funeral ship. Or perhaps, as with another question asked by Óðinn in *Vm.* 54, the question is unanswerable, and it is this that betrays his identity. Óðinn asks a similar riddling question, to which the answer is 'waves', in the *Gátur Gestumblindi* 'Riddles of Gestumblindi', part of *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*. Cf. Óðinn's question about the identity of 'maidens who travel over the sea' in *Vm.* 48.
- 25 Or *gautr* 'sacrifice'. Cf. *BDr.* 2.
- 26 Perhaps the giantess Angrboða, mother by Loki of three monstrous children: Hel, Fenrir and Jormungandr. But Loki himself has also been suggested, perhaps disguised as the giantess Þökk.
- 27 Or perhaps 'victorious'. Either way, the tone is sardonic.
- 28 Perhaps emend *er* 'when' to *unz* 'until'.
- 29 Loki, whom the gods bound as punishment for instigating Baldr's death, will escape his bonds at Ragnarok. Cf. *Vsp.* 34, 49.

