

# ÞÓRR THE WAR GOD: POLEMICIZING MYTH IN EILÍFR GOÐRÚNARSON'S ÞÓRSDRÁPA

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Þórsdrápa, a *dróttkvætt* poem composed by Eilífr Goðrúnarson around the year 995, is justly considered ‘the most difficult of all skaldic poems’ (Clunies Ross 1981, 370). Indeed, much of the scholarship on Þórsdrápa in the last century has been concerned with untangling the poem’s complex textual problems (see Finnur Jónsson 1900 and 1912–13; Guðmundur Finnbogason 1924; Kock 1924; Reichardt 1948; Kiil 1956; Lie 1976). Þórsdrápa is quoted *in extenso* in the R, W, and T versions of *Snorra Edda*, where it is used to substantiate Snorri’s prose narration of the myth of Þórr’s visit to Geirrøðr, though it is improbable that the poem exists in its entirety here. In the most recent edition of Þórsdrápa, Edith Marold inserts three verses from elsewhere in *Skáldskaparmál* and one from the *Third Grammatical Treatise*, though to date there has been little editorial consensus on precisely which, if any, of these verses ought to belong to the poem. Likewise it is not certain that Eilífr’s poem originally began and ended

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**Abstract:** This article explores the ways in which the skald Eilífr Goðrúnarson shapes mythological material in Þórsdrápa to create a poetic encomium for Þórr. After discussing the textual and generic issues surrounding Þórsdrápa, I ground this difficult tenth-century composition within a wider poetic tradition. Following a close analysis of Eilífr’s presentation of Þórr and his treatment of the divine world in the poem, I suggest that he represents Þórr as a leader of troops in response to the increasing military threat posed by Christian kings to the south. It will become apparent that Þórsdrápa is best grouped with the other polemical pagan poems composed in the late conversion era.

**Keywords:** Þórsdrápa, Eilífr Goðrúnarson, Hákon Sigurðarson, skaldic poetry, Þórr, Geirrøðr.

in the way that Snorri quotes it, since as extant it does not exhibit the customary petition for silence at the beginning or for reward at the end.<sup>1</sup> These textual issues notwithstanding, we are left with an almost unbroken sequence of stanzas that have permitted an impressive range of interpretations in recent decades (see Clunies Ross 1981 and 1992; Motz 1992; McKinnell 1994, 57–86; Wanner 2001; and Lindow 2014). I will not be occupied here with the interpretation of the myth of Þórr's visit to Geirröðr itself. Rather, I will be exploring the ways in which Eilífr deals with his mythological material, arguing that he uses the Þórr-Geirröðr myth as a framework on which to build a panegyric poem for Þórr, which channels the wider poetico-religious agenda of Hákon jarl Sigurðarson of Hlaðir.

In order to shed light on this mysterious poem and explain why Eilífr used such a convoluted medium, a helpful strategy is to try to isolate a poetic tradition to which *Þórsdrápa* might have belonged. Ostensibly *Þórsdrápa* would seem to adhere most closely to the skaldic 'picture poem', a sub-genre which sourced its subject matter from mythological scenes depicted on objects. Representatives of this sub-genre include Bragi Boddason's *Ragnarsdrápa* and Þjóðólfr of Hvinir's *Haustlǫng*, which are ornate versifications of mythological art apparently depicted on shields. In spite of the stylistic similarity between *Þórsdrápa* and this poetry, however, this is ultimately an imperfect fit.<sup>2</sup> The relationship between poet and patron is crucial to the skaldic picture poems: indeed Clunies Ross once characterized the picture poems, including *Þórsdrápa* in her view at the time, as having their eye 'half on the poet's patron and half on the myths themselves' (1978, 279). But in reality *Þórsdrápa* cannot belong here, as Clunies Ross notes in a subsequent publication, since it 'gives no hint of a pictorial subject and does not mention a patron by name' (2005, 54). Indeed it is not clear that the poem mentions a patron *at all*; the idea that Hákon jarl sponsored the creation of this

<sup>1</sup> Snorri cites a verse in *Skáldskaparmál* which has Eilífr petition an unknown patron for wealth, and Marold (forthcoming) treats it as a constituent stanza in *Þórsdrápa*. The only feature which could link it to the poem, however, is the kenning *kon mærar* (descendant of the earth). Marold, like Lie (1976, 399), takes *mærr* as a synonym for *jörð*, interpreted as *Jörð*, Þórr's mother. This would make *kon mærar* a kenning for Þórr but any link with *Þórsdrápa* would remain tenuous at best. If instead taken as *kon Mærar* (man of Mærr) the kenning could refer to jarl Hákon, in which case the *lausavísa* could conceivably derive from a lost praise poem about the jarl.

<sup>2</sup> Russell Poole quite rightly suggests that *Þórsdrápa* has stylistic features in common with the skaldic picture poems, and with *Haustlǫng* in particular, but he notes that the lack of visual references in *Þórsdrápa* distinguishes it from this poetry (2007, 251). Since 'the genre of ekphrasis comprises verbal descriptions which seek to recreate visual impressions' (Horn Fuglesang 2007, 193) *Þórsdrápa* cannot be called ekphrastic with any certainty, nor can it be grouped with the other picture poems.

rich *drápa* must be inferred from *Skáldatal*, where a connection between Eilífr and Hákon is suggested (Heimir Pálsson 2012, 111).<sup>3</sup> The unusual omission of mention of a patron in *Þórsdrápa*, while possibly owing in part to the loss of constituent stanzas, is best seen in light of the poem's title, which would appear to imply that it was addressed or at least dedicated to Þórr rather than to a human subject. Alastair Fowler's comment that a work's title is 'often the only explicit commentary the reader is given' has particular pertinence here (1985, 92), where we all but lack the crucial voice of the poet. Whereas skalds are so often eager to exult in their own skill or to petition for reward, Eilífr enters *Þórsdrápa* only once, and fleetingly, when he refers to his recitation of the poem in the third stanza.

If we accept that the title of *Þórsdrápa* is an indication that the poem was intended as panegyric for Þórr himself, then we reach a more fruitful line of comparison. Praise poetry addressed to Þórr, or at least alluding to his greatness, enjoyed a degree of popularity in the atmosphere of religious tension that characterized the conversion period in Scandinavia. This should not surprise: Þórr was the most popularly acclaimed god in this period and was therefore adopted as the ideological 'face' of the pagan religion (see McKinnell 1995, 141–43). In addition, his traditional role as the defender of Ásgarðr and Miðgarðr against the forces of chaos was easily extended to the missionaries who were seen to be destabilizing religious and social order in Scandinavia.

To my mind, only four verses elsewhere in the corpus approximate the intensity and panegyric forcefulness of *Þórsdrápa*. I shall deal first with two verses (or fragments of verses) attributed respectively to Vetrliði Sumarliðason and Þorbjörn *dísarskáld* in *Skáldskaparmál*. Vetrliði's verse comprises only four relatively unornamented lines in *málaháttr*:

Leggi brauzt þú Leiknar,  
lamðir Þrívalda,  
steyptir Starkeði,  
stóttu of Gjalp dauða. (Faulkes 1998, I, 17)

(You broke Leikn's bones, you pounded Thrivaldi, you cast down Starkad, you stood over the dead Gjalp.) (Faulkes 1987, 74)

<sup>3</sup> A certain 'arfi Eiðsfjarðar' (heir of Eidsfjorden; Marold forthcoming) is briefly referred to in stanza 11 of *Þórsdrápa*, but it is unclear who this figure is, especially since there are several fjords of that name in Norway. Marold interprets the phrase as referring to Hákon jarl but notes that such a conclusion is 'tentative'. Even if this allusive reading were to be accepted, the role of the patron is still remarkably underplayed in the poem as extant, a significant point when considering the classification of *Þórsdrápa*.

Þorbjörn's verse comprises a full eight lines in *dróttkvætt*, though it also employs markedly simple diction:

Ball í Keilu kalli,  
 Kjallandi brauzt þú alla,  
 áðr draptu Lút ok Leiða,  
 léztu dreyra Búseyru,  
 heptir þú Hengjankjöptu,  
 Hyrrokkin dó fyrri,  
 þó var snemr hin sama  
 Svívqr numin lífi. (Faulkes 1998, I, 17)

(There was a clang on Keila's crown, you broke Kjallandi completely, before that you slew Lut and Leidi, you made Buseyra bleed, you halted Hengjankiapta, Hyrrokkin died previously, yet was the dusky Svivor's life taken earlier.) (Faulkes 1987, 74)

While one might be tempted to view these verses simply as innocuous enumerations of Þórr's giant-killing exploits or to identify them as unconventional *þulur*, in truth they probably mask a more ominous purpose. It should first be pointed out that Vetrliði Sumarliðason is mentioned in *Kristni saga* as a staunch opponent of missionary activity in Iceland. It is interesting for our purposes that his means of resisting the missionaries was to compose defamatory poetry about them; as the saga has it, 'Vetrliði skáld orti ok nið um Þangbrand ok margir aðrir' (Sigurgeir Steingrímsson and others 2003, 21) (Vetrliði the poet also composed libellous verse about Þangbrandr, as did many others; Grønlie 2006, 42). Vetrliði's *nið* has not been preserved, though the nature of its content may be inferred from surviving *nið* verses addressed to missionaries. *Kristni saga* records that a certain Heðinn frá Svalbarði directed a particularly scathing versified insult at the missionary Friðrekr, insinuating that he conceived children with his associate Þorvaldr: 'hefir börn borit byskup níu, þeira 's allra Þorvaldr faðir' (Sigurgeir Steingrímsson and others 2003, 12) (the bishop has borne nine children; Þorvaldr's father of them all; Grønlie 2006, 38).<sup>4</sup> In accusing the two missionaries of extreme sexual perversion, Heðinn's verse implies their capacity to incite social discord. This, then, was the tradition in which Vetrliði was composing. Þorbjörn *disarskáld*'s attitude to Christianity is decidedly less certain. Ohlmarks speculates that he was a *goði* to Þórr and brought a lawsuit against Hjalti Skeggjason after the latter composed blasphemous verses about the gods (1957, 40–46). This

<sup>4</sup> This may have been a formulaic insult, since Óðinn accuses Loki of conceiving children in a very similar fashion in stanza 23 of *Lokasenna*: 'hefir þú þar börn borit' (Neckel 1962, I, 101) (there you bore children; Larrington 2014, 84).

much cannot possibly be known, though the assumption that Þorbjörn was a supporter of Þórr and opposed missionary activity is a reasonable one to make.

With the knowledge that an anti-missionary poetic tradition flourished in Iceland and that Vetrliði and possibly Þorbjörn composed within it, the meaning of the two verses above comes more sharply into focus. Doubtless the most remarkable feature of these verses is that they address Þórr in the second person, which makes the relationship between god and poet uniquely personal. Speaking of these verses, Turville-Petre remarks that ‘these fragments are slight, but they represent a long and rich tradition of religious poetry’ (1964, 86).<sup>5</sup> It has been long proposed that the verses of Vetrliði and Þorbjörn represent a residual survival of the Indo-European hymn, where deities were invoked directly and in the second person (see Chadwick and Chadwick 1932, I, 241). Lindow assigns these verses to the ancient genre that Schröder called *Aufreiblieder*, or ‘stringing together poems’ (see Schröder 1954, 179), where a god’s acts are listed in quick succession by a supplicant for the purposes of veneration (1988, 132). In another article, Lindow also characterizes the listing strategy found in these stanzas as an *agglutinative* narrative mode, which produces a frenzied ‘back and forth of dead giant or giantess after dead giant or giantess’ (2014, 7).

It would seem that in venerating Þórr’s gruesome mutilation of giants and particularly giantesses there lies a veiled injunction for him to do the same to the missionaries. One could even argue that the two are being conflated in these stanzas and that Vetrliði and Þorbjörn ‘symbolically classified the proponents of the new faith with the old enemies of order’ (Lindow 1988, 134). These two stanzas, though short, are important for a number of reasons. Firstly, they attest to the existence of a cult of Þórr, albeit in Iceland, that used the god as an ideological weapon to forestall the Christian mission. Secondly, they indicate that Þórr could be expected to defend the social and religious status quo against those who would change it. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, they indicate that the equation of missionaries with the traditional forces of disorder in the Norse cosmos was possible, or even natural. These conclusions affect how it may be possible to read the casting of the Þórr-Geirrøðr myth in *Þórsdrápa*, and I shall return to them in due course.

It seems entirely rational to connect these verses by Vetrliði and Þorbjörn, which aggressively praise Þórr for his giant-killings, with *níð* poetry which speaks of Þórr’s destruction of missionaries. The militant pagan Steinunn, known solely as the mother of Skáld-Refr, mocks the missionary Þangbrandr and attributes the destruction of his ship to Þórr:

<sup>5</sup> The possible cultic function of these verses is first mentioned by Vogt (1930, 171–75).

Þórr brá Þvinnils dýri  
 Þangbrands ór stað lǫngu,  
 hristi blakk ok beysti  
 barðs ok laust við jǫrðu.  
 Muna skíð of sæ síðan  
 sundfært Atals grundar,  
 hregg þvít hart tók leggja,  
 hánum kennt, í spánu. (Sigurgeir Steingrímsson and others 2003, 22)

(Þórr drew Þvinnill's beast [ship], Þangbrandr's long ship, from the spot, shook and smashed the horse of the prow [ship], and flung it against the land. The ski of the land of Atall [sea> ship] shall not be apt to float on the sea hereafter, since a harsh storm, guided by him, shattered it into pieces. My translation.)

Braut fyr bjǫllu gæti,  
 bǫnd ráku val strandar,  
 mǫgfellandi mellu  
 mástalls vísund allan.  
 Hlífðit Krístr, þás kneyfði  
 knǫrr, malmfeta varrar,  
 lítt hykk, at goð gætti  
 Gylfa hreins at einu. (Sigurgeir Steingrímsson and others 2003, 22)

(The destroyer of giant-kin [Þórr] entirely smashed the bison of the seagull's place [sea> ship] in the presence of the keeper of the bell [priest = Þangbrandr] — the gods drove out the falcon of the strand [ship]. Christ offered no protection when he [= Þórr] wrecked the ship, the arrow-treader of the sea [horse> ship]. Hardly, I think, did God watch over the reindeer of Gylfi [ship]. My translation.)

Steinunn, like Vetrliði and Þorbjǫrn, stresses Þórr's adeptness at pounding and smashing his enemies above all else. The immense brutality of all four verses and their exaltation of Þórr's physical strength resonate strongly with *Þórsdrápa*, and this is a point to which I shall return.

It should not surprise that the great defender Þórr also achieved high regard at the court of Hákon jarl of Hlaðir, a place which formed a centre of intense pagan resistance in the late conversion era.<sup>6</sup> Stefan Brink notes that Þórr place names are entirely absent from the region, and it is likely therefore that the god's cult arose here at a late stage. (2007, 113). That it did so with great speed and forcefulness is suggested by *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, where by Hákon's time Þórr

<sup>6</sup> Ström outlines the political and religious circumstances of Hákon's reign in 'Poetry as an Instrument of Propaganda' (1981, 441–44).

had already gained prominence. In describing the temple at Mœrin near Hlaðir, Oddr Snorrason writes that ‘Þorr var imiðio husinu ok hafði mest yfirlat’ (Finnur Jónsson 1932, 163) (Þorr was in the centre of the hall, and held the greatest honour). It is possible that Þorr’s cult was first popularized under Hákon when, as in Iceland, the god was seen to be the optimal ideological defence against Christ. This much can be inferred from the poetry produced for the jarl, which must have formed something of a pagan propaganda machine to combat the promulgation of Christian ritual.

The clearest sign of the popularity of Þorr’s cult at Hákon’s court can be found in stanza 14 of Einarr *skálaglamm’s* *Vellekla*. This poem recounts Hákon’s restoration of pagan cult sites after their destruction by the Christian sons of Eiríkr *blóðox*. Mention of Þorr is made at the apex of this campaign, when the glory of Hákon’s regenerative efforts is at its height. Hákon is praised for preserving ‘Einriða hof’, and in this protective capacity he is even referred to by means of a Þorr *heiti*, ‘Hlórriði garðs geira’ (‘the temple of Einriði <Þorr>’; ‘the Hlórriði <Þorr> of the wall of spears [shield> Hákon]’) (Marold 2011, I, 301). With this ingenious strategy, Einarr ‘draws the jarl into Þorr’s sphere of activity as protector of the world of gods and men’ (Clunies Ross 1978, 286). Though primarily intended as ‘a medium of propaganda for [...] [Hákon’s] person and exploits’ (Ström 1981, 445), stanza 14 of *Vellekla* reveals that, at Hákon’s court as in Iceland, Þorr was chiefly praised for his protective role. In the next stanza Einarr places the significance of Hákon’s acts as an embodiment of Þorr into relief, as we learn that ‘herþarfir ásmegir hverfa til blóta’ (the sons of the Æsir, beneficial to the people, turn to the sacrifices; Marold 2011, I, 303). A triangular dynamic is thus delineated between the humans who benefit from the Æsir; the gods themselves who distribute favour at sacrifices; and Þorr-Hákon, who acts as the preserver of this relationship. The salient point thus far is that, in whatever way he is invoked, Þorr is seen both in Iceland and at Hlaðir as the primary line of defence against aggressive Christian proselytization.

*Þórdrápa* is the most triumphant flowering of this tradition of poetic resistance, and Hlaðir evidently provided a fertile environment for its creation. Eilífr casts the myth of Þorr’s journey to Geirrøðr in such a way as to emphasize Þorr’s ability to destroy physical and social threats to the divine and human worlds, something that should be read in light of the pressure exerted by proselytizing kings from the south. In this effort, Eilífr clearly drew heavily on the poetry of his time, since the narrative mode of *Þórdrápa* bears a strong similarity to that used in the verses of Vetrlíði and Þorbjörn. It is worthwhile remembering Lindow’s *agglutinative* narrative mode here, which he describes as ‘a textual strategy that focuses more on listing than narrative detail, one that achieves its effect strictly by

cumulative means' (2014, 7). While Snorri's prose account of the Þórr-Geirrøðr myth focuses on Þórr's destruction of Geirrøðr and his two daughters alone, Eilífr casts Þórr as a 'serial killer of giants' (Lindow 2014, 7). *Þórsdrápa* is a whirlwind of conflict, and the impressive density of Þórr's giant-victims can be seen from Table 3.<sup>7</sup>

Based on these data, giants are mentioned at an average rate of 1.7 times per stanza.<sup>8</sup> This strategy gives the impression that Þórr meets countless named and unnamed assailants on his journey to Geirrøðargarðar and triumphs victoriously over them all. The world of giants is full of *dróttir* (courts), *kindar* (races), and *þjóðar* (nations), and all are arrayed against Þórr.<sup>9</sup> What is more, although Lindow is quite correct in noting that '*Þórsdrápa* does not name most of the giants whom Þórr eliminates' (2014, 9) the poem *is* marked for the frequency with which it alludes to named giants and giantesses. We hear of Þorn, Ymsi, Sefgrímnir, Hrekkmímir, Hrímnir, and Glaumr, and along with them even the dwarfs Suðri and Þrasir. Bearing in mind that 'many oral texts reveal only the tips of narrative icebergs [...] and assume the audience's knowledge of the main part of the story below the surface' (Clunies Ross 1994, 1, 25), it is possible that each of these names would have acted metonymically, drawing the audience's mind to an array of Þórr-myths unknown to us. In this respect, it could be argued that *Þórsdrápa* should be seen as a kind of 'index' of Þórr's giant-killing exploits and that Eilífr used the Þórr-Geirrøðr myth as a framework on which to hang a much more complex exposition of the god's abilities. Eilífr's agglutinative strategy, by which he embeds thirty-eight giants or groups of giants into only twenty-two stanzas, expands what is a narratologically simple myth into a much grander encomium for Þórr.

As I mentioned, this is clearly in the interests of emphasizing Þórr's suitability both as a venerable deity and as an unconquerable defender against the agents

<sup>7</sup> Text and translation adapted from Marold (forthcoming).

<sup>8</sup> Here I diverge from Marold (forthcoming) in excluding from *Þórsdrápa* the *lausavísa* attributed to Eilífr in which he petitions an unnamed patron for reward. See note 2 above.

<sup>9</sup> It has been argued that allusions to polities such as these, along with the use of specific regional demonyms like *Danir*, *Rygjar*, and *Hjörðar* to characterize the giants, should be seen as a veiled glorification of Hákon's military successes and a 'Norwegianization' of the Þórr-Geirrøðr myth (see Clunies Ross 1978, 288 and Frank 1986, 101–03). This is a convincing argument, and one that aligns Þórr's might in the poem with Hákon's own. One might also recall the reference in stanza 11 to *arfi Eidsfjarðar* (the heir of Eidsfjorden), who is said to have exhibited greater courage in his military exploits than Þórr and Þjálfi. As Einarr *skálaglamr* does in stanzas 14 and 15 of *Vellekla*, Eilífr could be linking Hákon to Þórr so as to equate their protective roles.



Table 3: Expressions for ‘giant’ in *Þórsdrápa*.

Stanza	Kenning	Translation
1	goð flugstalla	the gods of precipice-altars [mountains > giants]
2	Þorns niðjar	the descendants of Þorn <giant> [giants]
	Gandvíkr Skotar	the Scots of Gandvík [giants]
	Ymsa kindar	the offspring of Ymsi <giant> [giants]
3	mann [...] halla gall-ópnis	the man of the halls of the shrill-crier [eagle > mountains > giant]
5	frumseyrir fljóða	the foremost harasser of women [giant]
	brúðr mága Sefgrímnis	the bride of the in-laws of Sefgrímnir <giant> [giants > giantess]
6	þrjótr urðar	the lout of the stone [giant]
8	börn Þorns	the children of Þorn <giant> [giants]
9	runkkykvar hauðrs skafs jarðar	the quickeners of the stream of the land of the snow-drift of the earth [ridge > mountain > river > giantesses]
10	ekkjur Hrekkmímis	the widows of Hrekkmímir <giant> [giantesses]
	stophnísa	the cliff-porpoise [giantess]
11	fírar vamma stöðvar glamma	the disgraceful men of the place of wolves [mountains > giants]
12	Hörðar barða	the Hörðar of precipices [giants]
	þjóð fjöru	the people of the shore [giants]
	skyld-Bretar skytju	the kin-Britons of the markswoman [=Skaði] [giants]
13	flesdrótt	the skerry-host [giants]
	dróttar kolgu dolg-Svíþjóðar	the host of the cold wave of the hostile Sweden [Gandvík > giants]
	ferð nesja	the troop of headlands [giants]
	Danir útvés flóðrifs	the Danes of the outlying sanctuary of the sea-rib [stone > coast > giants]
14	þróttarhersar Þornranns	the strength- <i>hersar</i> of the house of Þorn <giant> [cave > giants]
	Kumrar hellis	the Cumbrians of the cave [giants]
	hreinar gnípu	the reindeer of the peak [giants]
	kvánar risa	the wife of the giant [giantess]
15	sprundar hellis	the women of the cave [giantesses]

Table 3: Expressions for ‘giant’ in *Þórsdrápa* (cont.).

Stanza	Kenning	Translation
16	menn legs mærar fjarðeplis	the men of the lair of the land of the fjord-apple [stone > mountains > cave > giants]
	ægir almtaugar	the terrifier of the bow-string [Geirrøðr]
	átrruðr Suðra	the relative of Suðri <dwarf> [Geirrøðr]
17	kunnleggr kveldrunninna kvinna	the family line of evening-running women [troll-women < giants]
18	orþrasir drósar Hrímnis	the passionate lover of the lady of Hrímnir <giant> [giantess > Geirrøðr]
19	Heiðrekr veggjar Þrasis	the Heiðrekr <legendary king> of the wall of Þrasir <dwarf> [stone > Geirrøðr]
	þrjótr jótrsr vegtaugar	the defier of the molar of the way of the fishing-line [sea > stone > giant]
20	Glaums niðjar	the descendants of Glaumr <giant> [giants]
	salvaniðr Synjar arinbrautar	the hall-visitor of the Syn <goddess> of the hearth-stone-path [mountains > giantess > giant]
	týr tvíviðar	god of the bow [Geirrøðr]
21	kálfar undirfjalfrs bliku alfheims	the calves of the low hiding-place of the gleam of the elf-world [sun > cave > giants]
	Rygir Lista vallátrs	the Rygir of the Lista of the falcon-lair [rock > mountains > giants]
	aldar Ellu steins	the people of the Ælla <Northumbrian king> of the stone [giant > giants]

of the new faith. It can be argued that *Þórsdrápa* places a marked emphasis on Þórr’s vigour and efficacy at a time when this would have been being questioned by missionaries.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Eilífr is very clear that Þórr’s journey to Geirrøðr results from the god’s inherent desire to destroy the forces of chaos rather than from Loki’s deceitful urgings. Although it is true that Loki spurs Þórr and Þjálfi on to travel to Geirrøðr, we read that ‘þeir fýstusk at þrýsta niðjum Þorns’ (they were eager to crush the descendants of Þorn <giant> [giants]; Marold forthcoming) regardless. Loki’s treacherous intent reveals how dangerous the journey to

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, chapter 113 of *Óláfs saga helga*, where Óláfr Haraldsson says of an idol of Þórr after its destruction ‘en nú meguð þér sjá, hvat guð yðar mátti, er þér báruð á gull ok silfr, mat ok vistir’ (Bjarni Aðalbarnarson 1945, 189) (And now you can see what your god can do, on whom you bestow gold and silver, food and provisions: my translation).

Table 4: Incidence of agentive nouns in *Þórsdrápa*.

Stanza	Agentive noun	Translation
1	fellir	preparer
3	sviptir	mover
	tælendr	destroyer
5	bólkveitir	misfortune-destroyer
6	vegþverrir	path-diminisher
	stökkvir	banisher
8	njótr	user
	þverrir	diminisher
8	herðir	strengthenener
9	sinnir	helper
	steypir	overcomer
11	stríðkviðjandi	attack-prohibitor
12	liðhati	help-hater
	hylriði	pool-stepper
	hrjóðendr	destroyer
13	kneyfir	oppressor
	funhristir	blaze-wielder
14	hlöðr	vanquisher
15	hofstjóri	temple-steerer
17	þröngvir	oppressor
18	hraðskyndir	swift hastener
	þrámóðnir	the one longing
21	hneitir	vanquisher
	aldrminkandi	life-diminisher

Geirröðr is, making Þórr seem all the more heroic for undertaking it of his own accord. This sentiment is echoed in stanza 5, where we are reminded that Þórr *vildi* (desired) to open hostilities with the giants. Þórr's express desire to destroy his enemies is crucially important in understanding how Eilífr casts his subject; indeed indications of Þórr's activeness run throughout the poem in the form of agentive nouns, as can be seen in Table 4.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Text and translation adapted from Marold (forthcoming).

The two most prominent categories of agentive noun seen here are those that describe Þórr's rapid movement and those that characterize him as a vanquisher of giants. Aside from adding a great sense of urgency to the poem, these nouns serve to define and redefine Þórr as the mythic narrative progresses, and by this means Eilífr is able to subtly exhibit every facet of his character. The great majority of these nouns are physical in the extreme and show Þórr destroying giants in a range of imaginative ways. Indeed, even those agentive nouns which are ostensibly psychological in nature impart physical might: by calling Þórr *þrámóðnir Þrúðar* (the one longing for Þrúðr) Eilífr is alluding to the god's heroic destruction of Hrungrnir as a result of the latter's theft of Þrúðr, Þórr's daughter. As a *liðhati sverðs* (hater of the help of the sword), Þórr's brute strength and disdain for conventional weaponry are stressed. Much like the verses of Vetrliði, Þorbjörn, and Steinunn, *Þórsdrápa* depicts Þórr as a tireless force of physical retribution, though Eilífr's use of verbs and verbal nouns is arguably less visually rich. It is important for the delivery of *níð* in the Icelandic anti-missionary verses that Þórr's destruction of his victims is graphically and specifically described, but here Þórr is a vanquisher, diminisher, oppressor, and banisher in a general sense. While his physical prowess is strongly implied, there appears to be a more acute focus on the *results* of his actions: Þórr is seen to overcome and suppress his foes, and I would argue that this is consonant with his role in *Vellekla* as a restorer of the old order. In *Þórsdrápa*, then, Þórr is venerated for his ceaseless and varied eradication of giants and giantesses. In both cases this is a process that is strikingly immediate, and the casting of Þórr here 'evoke[s] the present, the tropological sphere, grounding the action and the moral prescriptions it embodies in the poet's own world and time' (Frank 1986, 101). Þórr's vigour as a physical defender is the ostensible focus of *Þórsdrápa*, and Eilífr expresses this by making him in all things a *doer*. In identifying Þórr chiefly by agentive nouns, Eilífr makes restless physical domination a part of the god's very being. This is consistent with his apparent panegyric strategy of depicting Þórr as a powerful and venerable defender.

Þórr's most universally acknowledged quality in the textual record is his ability to outmatch and destroy physical competitors, as the popular stories of his battles with Hrungrnir, the *miðgarðsormr*, and Geirröðr reveal. When Eilífr has him prevail over hordes of physically dangerous male giants in *Þórsdrápa*, this, as we have seen, serves panegyric purposes. It should be said that Þórr also faces and overcomes *social* threats — that is, agents whose chaotic actions threaten to destabilize the social or natural status quo. Tapping into forces of excessive femininity and breaking sexual taboos could be expected to unlock deviant power, and this was the case for males and females alike. Else Mundal provides the helpful example of *seiðr*, which had strong associations with femininity and thus

*ergi* (1998, 5). In *Þórsdrápa*, the social threat is posed by Geirrøðr's two daughters, Gjálp and Greip, who prevent Þórr's passage over the river Vimur by swelling it with their menstrual blood.<sup>12</sup> The humour with which this episode is treated in Snorri's prose version of the myth is nowhere to be seen in *Þórsdrápa*, where Eilífr describes the scene with the utmost seriousness. Indeed, 'although the apparent aim and end result of Thor's visit to Geirrøðr have to do with that giant, the entire myth seems to be as much about his struggles with females (Greip, Gjálp) as with the male Geirrøðr' (Lindow 1988, 127).

That Eilífr focuses to such a degree on Þórr's ability to counter socio-sexual deviance should be viewed alongside contemporary criticisms of missionaries as *argr*. We have already seen how Þorvaldr and Þangbrandr were accused of an impossibly disgraceful transgression of sexual norms by conceiving nine children together. *Kristni saga* also records a verse composed by a Þorvaldr *veili* about Þangbrandr, whom he calls an *argr goðvargr* (Sigurgeir Steingrímsson and others 2003, 20). This phrase is defamatory in the extreme, and its exact sense is difficult to capture in English. An approximation might be 'effeminate blasphemer', though *argr* and *vargr* impart a very special kind of dishonour that cannot now be emically construed.<sup>13</sup> Lindow connects this popular tradition, whereby missionaries were emasculated and said to exhibit deviant femininity, to the prominence of female victims in the verses of Vetrlíði and Þorbjörn. With this focus on female victims, he suggests, these verses can be read as incitements to Þórr to destroy effeminate missionaries (Lindow 1988, 134). I think that the same meaning is implicit in Eilífr's focus on Þórr's engagement with Gjálp and Greip in *Þórsdrápa*. Here, the Þórr-Geirrøðr myth is used as a means of expressing Þórr's aptitude as a defender against social and ideological change. Eilífr's depiction of Þórr's adeptness at dealing with social threats speaks of the resilience of the pagan cult against the new ideology preached by perceivably effeminate missionaries. Þórr is to be relied upon as the upholder of conventional social and moral constraints, a point articulated by means of an age-old and presumably symbolically transparent conflict: that between the god and socio-sexually deviant giantesses.

Thus far we have seen how Eilífr used the Þórr-Geirrøðr myth as a means to convey Þórr's ability to destroy physical and social threats. It will be useful

<sup>12</sup> Motz has attempted to argue against this interpretation (1993, 469), though the presence of menstrual blood in this episode has been largely accepted since Kiil suggested it (1956, 106).

<sup>13</sup> On *ergi* and its adjectival form *argr*, see Ármann Jakobsson 2008. A wider treatment of verbal emasculation is given in Meulengracht Sørensen 1983. *Vargr* is treated in Gerstein 1974.

now to consider the position of the world for which Þórr fights in *Þórsdrápa*. I mentioned earlier that stanzas 14 and 15 of Einarinn *skálaglammi's Vellekla* delineate a triangular relationship between Þórr, the world of gods, and the world of men. This may have been a popular way to conceive of the pagan religion at Hlaðir, since this dynamic is also central to *Þórsdrápa*. Eilífr is at pains to establish the remoteness and thus the treacherousness of Geirröðargarðar, which lies at an indeterminate distance from Ásgarðr. Loki turns back in stanza 3 while Þórr and Þjálfi press on, crossing the river Vimur into a world that is culturally alien and densely populated with giants, as we saw above.<sup>14</sup> In spite of this remoteness, a sense of the protagonists' connection with the community of Ásgarðr is never lost. In stanza 2, Þórr sets out 'frá Þriðja til kindar Ymsa' (from Þriði <=Óðinn> for the offspring of Ymsi <giant>; Marold forthcoming) and in stanza 9 he and Þjálfi are called 'eiðsvara víkingar setrs Gauta' (the oath-bound vikings of the seat of Gauti <=Óðinn> [Ásgarðr]; Marold forthcoming). Finally, in stanza 13, Þórr and Þjálfi are called 'Jólnis funhristis ættir' (the group of the shaker of the flame of Jólnir <=Óðinn> [sword> warrior> warriors]; Marold forthcoming). Eilífr does not allow his audience to forget the world of the gods, even in the whirlwind of combat in which Þórr is perpetually engaged. One might go so far as to argue that the vital cultural and symbolic value of Ásgarðr becomes Þórr's standard as he enters battle with the giants. Eilífr places a particular stress on Óðinn when he refers back to the world of the gods, fittingly since in him the culture and wisdom of the divine world are accumulated. We have seen how Þórr sets out for Jötunheimar of his own accord but at no point are we led to believe that it is a personal adventure. Þórr's endeavour is always seen as a strictly communal one; throughout *Þórsdrápa* we are reminded to view Þórr's achievements in the wider context of the divine world.

In *Vellekla* Hákon acts as a hypostasis of Þórr, safeguarding the cult of the gods and ensuring the continued spiritual and therefore material prosperity of his pagan subjects. Þórr's relationship with humankind is also articulated in *Þórsdrápa*, though it takes a less familiar form than in *Vellekla*. Quite unlike Óðinn, Þórr was traditionally viewed as a god of the common people, a fact which we are famously reminded of in stanza 24 of *Hárbarðsljóð*: 'Óðinn á iarla, þá er í val falla, enn Þórr á þræla kyn' (Neckel 1962, I, 82) (Odin owns the nobles

<sup>14</sup> Clunies Ross suggests that Jötunheimar 'is a distant but not impossibly remote territory somewhere in the east' (1994, 52) but there was clearly a great deal of fluidity here. Stanza 4 of *Þórsdrápa* mentions the *votn* (lakes), *mýrar* (marshes), and *hallar* (cliffs) that Þórr and Þjálfi have to cross on their way to Geirröðr, but the fact remains that Jötunheimar could be at any remove from Ásgarðr. This indeterminacy creates a special sense of remoteness.

who fall in battle and Thor owns the race of thralls; Larrington 2014, 69). Under the increased martial and ideological pressure exerted by the Christian sons of Eiríkr *blóðox*, it can be argued that Þórr was moulded into a symbol of military might at Hákon's court.<sup>15</sup> Uniquely, Eilífr channels Þórr's traditional affinity with humankind into a martial relationship, making him a leader of troops in much the same way as Óðinn. He is called 'Gautr herþrumu' (the Gautr <=Óðinn> of host-thunder [battle> warrior]; Marold forthcoming) in stanza 1; 'sviptir sagna' (mover of troops [leader]; Marold forthcoming) in stanza 3; 'sinnir ýta skaunar' (the helper of the launchers of the shield [warriors> leader]; Marold forthcoming) in stanza 10; and finally, 'hraðskyndir gunnar' (swift hastener of battle [warrior]; Marold forthcoming) in stanza 18. These are striking and unusual kennings indeed, and they indicate that, at least at Hlaðir, Þórr had absorbed the military role of Óðinn and his valkyries in order that he might provide a unified opposition to the looming threat of the Christian kings to the south.<sup>16</sup> Bearing in mind Þórr's increasingly militant defence of the pagan cult as revealed by *Vellekla* and the verses of Vetrliði, Þorbjörn, and Steinunn, and his traditionally amiable relationship with humanity, the extension of his role to that of a war leader should not surprise. In a period where Þórr's hammer was adopted as the symbolic foil for the crucifix (see Nordeide 2001, 287–318 and Staecker 2003), it is fitting that he should become the inciter of war and the rallying point of Hákon's troops.

Remarkably, *Þórsdrápa* even indicates that cultic practice may have shifted to accommodate Þórr's new status as a war chief at Hákon's court. In stanza 21, towards the end of the poem, Þórr is accorded the remarkable epithet *herblótinn* (army-worshipped).<sup>17</sup> This is the only unequivocal evidence in the poem of an

<sup>15</sup> Hákon jarl's battles with the sons of Eiríkr *blóðox* and his apparently desperate military situation are related at length in *Haralds saga gráfeldar*.

<sup>16</sup> The uniqueness of these kennings might be judged by Riti Kroesen's erroneous comment that 'there is no kenning that relates Þórr to battle' (2001, 97).

<sup>17</sup> Taking *her-* poetically, Marold translates *herblótinn* as 'people-worshipped' (forthcoming). While this is a reasonable rendering the base meaning of *herr* is undoubtedly 'army' (see Finnur Jónsson and Sveinbjörn Egilsson 1931, 246). Given Þórr's identification in the poem as a leader of troops, *herblótinn* can and arguably should bear a military sense. Admittedly, the manuscripts containing *Þórsdrápa* all read *helblótinn* rather than *herblótinn* but this is presumably a misreading, since it 'cannot be connected with Þórr in any meaningful way' (Marold forthcoming). *Herblótinn* has been accepted as the most convincing emendation by the vast majority of editors since it was proposed by Sveinbjörn Egilsson (1851, 10, 19; see also Marold forthcoming). An illustrative parallel to the error posited here can be found in *Grímnismál* stanza 46, where Codex Regius GKS 2365 4to has the name 'Helblindr' and AM 748 I a 4to

operational cult of Þórr, and it strongly suggests a specific sacral connection between the god and *herjar*, human troops. As though in apposition, the word *liðfastr* (army-strong) appears in almost exactly the same position in the second *helmingr*, apparently confirming this association.<sup>18</sup> It is testament to Eilífr's supreme poetic skill that *herblótinn* appears in *Þórsdrápa* as the narrative action concludes, at the very apex of Þórr's protective might. After a rousing display of the defensive power and leadership that Þórr can offer the world of men, this adjective takes Þórr's venerability for granted and implicitly enjoins listeners — and particularly warriors — to observe his cult. Its use is a confident assertion of the value system of the pagan religion: it asserts Þórr's power, his mass appeal, and the system of pagan ritual as a foil for militant Christianity. The mention of Þórr's military cult at this point in the poem ties together the divine and human worlds which have been running parallel in *Þórsdrápa*, so that by the poem's dramatic conclusion we get a neatly packaged exhibition of the pagan religion. Because Eilífr makes us ever conscious of the divine and human worlds as he unfolds the Þórr-Geirrøðr myth, Þórr's achievements are set in a wider theological and cultic context respectively.

*Þórsdrápa* shares with the verses of Vetrliði and Þorbjörn a palpable spiritual forcefulness. Eilífr does not address Þórr directly as these two Icelandic skalds do: instead, by constructing his encomium through the traditional form of the courtly *drápa* he is able to mould Þórr into the ideal representative and defender of the pagan religion. Eilífr uses the Þórr-Geirrøðr myth as a platform from which to explore and glorify every facet of Þórr's character: his physical prowess, his aptitude for defending against socio-sexual deviance, and even his sacred status as a war leader. The panegyric forcefulness of Eilífr's strategy is heightened by his consideration of Þórr's achievements within the wider context of the god's mythological and cultic importance. *Þórsdrápa* should be regarded as the centrepiece of a fragmentary but very real encomiastic tradition for Þórr, and the

'Herblindr' (see the apparatus in Neckel 1962, I, 66). Scribal confusion of the similar letterforms *l* and *r* is likely the cause of this variation and equally may underlie the inexplicable reading *helblótinn* in *Þórsdrápa*. The only commentator to argue for the retention of the manuscript reading is Roberta Frank, who writes that '*helblótinn* [...] is surely what the poet intended: Geirrøðr's sunless kingdom [...] has offered up its calves on the altar of the conquering Thor' (1986, 98–99). This perspective seems far-fetched and has not garnered significant support.

<sup>18</sup> Marold (forthcoming) renders *liðfastr* as 'support-strong' but, as in the above note, the dominant sense here is likely a military one. Finnur Jónsson and Sveinbjörn Egilsson give the primary meaning of *lið* as 'mandskab, krigerskare' (crew, host) (1931, 371). Translating this compound as 'army-strong' would make it consonant with the other military epithets that accrue to Þórr throughout *Þórsdrápa*.



appreciation of this poetry is, to my mind, dependent on an understanding of its context of production. The verses of Vetrliði, Þorbjörn, and Steinunn might be viewed as inflammatory expressions of personal belief, whereas *Þórsdrápa* represents a more refined exposition of the religious position that prevailed at Hlaðir. In spite of these obvious differences, the Icelandic anti-missionary verses provide crucial clues to the way in which *Þórsdrápa* can be read: it is a unified and highly sophisticated work that takes the form of an aggressive *defensio* for the pagan religion and its chief protector at a time when the military might and ritual of a new faith threatened the old ways.

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