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# Mythical and Metaphorical Landscapes in Skaldic Poetry

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**Abstract:** It is in vain that one looks for realistic descriptions of landscapes in skaldic poetry. There is no interest in the landscapes where the actions which are the only concerns of this genre take place. However, landscape features such as mountains, the sea, trees, caves or the sky are perceptible in the system of the kennings, yet only as more or less abstract ideas. They mostly lack congruence within their semantic and situational contexts as is shown by the examples of kennings for ‘earth’ and ‘sea’. However, a more inclusive research shows that there are images of landscapes that may be called metaphorical or mythical. These may be conceptualized as different types: (1) The emotional state of individual characters can be projected on to landscapes (e.g. Hallfreðr, *Óláfs Erfidrápa* 19). (2) The inner space of a human being can be depicted as a landscape. This is the case in countless kennings for ‚breast‘ used as metaphors for the insides of a human being, found most frequently in various kennings for ‘poetry’. (3) Descriptions of sea-voyages on the turbulent sea are situated at the border of real and mythical landscapes in as much as the sea may be depicted as a threatening monster ready to devour the ship (e.g. Refr Gestsson, *Ferðavísur*). Alternatively, the storm that generates the churning sea may be personified as a giant (Egill Skallagrímsson, *Lausavísa* 23). (4) *Þórsdrápa* presents a special case in its depiction of Þórr’s journey to Geirrøðr and the land of giants. In this instance there appears to be some kind of interchangeable relation between the landscape – especially rivers – and demonic or mythical beings.

Landscapes in skaldic poetry? Everyone one who is acquainted with this genre will know that it does not contain realistic descriptions of landscapes. The spotlight is on persons – kings, warriors and their weapons, sometimes also on women and their precious jewellery; on actions like wars, battles and seafaring. The poems give us little information about the scenes of these actions, the battle fields are not described as an area of hills or woods; instead, we are rather confronted with ugly sights of corpses lying on the ground and of animals that are eating them.

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Place names where these actions take place are rare, and there is practically no description of these places.

Yet, details of landscapes like trees, the sea, mountains, caves or heaven etc. are present in the system of kennings,<sup>1</sup> but only as more or less abstract terms; they don't refer to a real, concrete landscape, and not to the content represented in a stanza. This is not astonishing, as kennings are typical patterns of circumlocutions which mostly lack congruence within their semantic and situational contexts. Some examples may illustrate this:

## Kennings for 'earth' and 'sea'

There are several types of kennings for 'earth' or 'land': Besides mythological circumlocutions such as 'wife of Óðinn' or 'mother of Þórr', earth can be depicted as ground under the dome of sky, or as domicile of men or animals. The choice of the kenning pattern does not necessarily correspond to the content of a stanza, but rather stands in contrast with it.

E.g. 'Earth' can refer to the whole of the world, and for this concept the type 'bottom of the vessel of storm' is used. 'Vessel of storm' means 'sky' and the earth is the bottom of it. Markús Skeggjason e.g. says in his *Eiríksdrápa* 32: *Fjarri hefr at dýrri vörðr flotna fæðisk á gjalfri kringðum botni élkers* 'It is unlikely that a more precious guardian of sea-warriors [RULER] might be born **on the surge-encircled bottom of the storm-vessel** [SKY\HEAVEN > EARTH]. (*SKP* II.1, 460) Even though the earth kenning in this example has a special adjectival element – 'surge encircled' – this nevertheless has nothing to do with the content of the stanza.

The same is true for another frequently used earth kenning, namely the circumlocution as 'sea of a quadruped animal' i.e. not of a fish, but an animal living on the ground. The use of 'sea' in this pattern is based on an exchange of sea and land, which was highly valued among the skalds. One example is Þjóðolfur Árnórsson's kenning *elgver* 'elk-sea': *Gløðuðr hersa bindr far gotna útan við enda hreins elgvers við botni hafs, rónum húfi*. 'The gladdener of *hersar* [RULER] ties up the vessel of men out at the edge **of the pure elk-sea** [LAND], by the inlet of the ocean, rowed by the hull.' (Fragments 5; *SKP* II.1, 163). Neither the elk nor the sea has anything to do with the situation – a ruler tying his vessel at the end of the inhabited earth.

<sup>1</sup> Examples can be found in Meissner 1921, e.g. 'Erde, Land, einzelne Länder' (pp. 87–88); 'Stein, Berg, Gebirge' (pp. 89–91); 'Meer' (pp. 89–92); 'Wasser (Fluß, Wasserfall)' (pp. 98–99).

However, there are cases where the paraphrasing of earth, or more precisely an area inhabited by animals, reveals something about the special landscape of a stanza: Circumlocutions using ‘wolf’ or ‘lynx’ like *glamma trøð* ‘path of the wolves’ or *ver gauðu* ‘sea of the lynx’ indeed denote wilderness or mountain area where these animals are living. Þorbjörn hornklofi (*Glymdrápa* 2; *SKP* 1.1, 78) speaks of a battle taking place ‘on the path of the wolves’ (*glamma trøð*), which means in the wilderness. In Eilífr Goðrúnarson’s Þórsdrápa 6 (*SKP* III.1, 87) Þórr is wading through dangerous rivers up to the ‘sea of the lynx’ (*gauðu ver*) i.e. the mountains. In both cases the animals indicate a special type of landscape without describing it. A similar effect can be detected in kennings for mountains using names of birds of these regions as in *gallópnis holl* ‘hall of the shrill-crier’ (Þórsdrápa 3, *SKP* III.1, 80) or *val-látr* ‘falcon-lair’ (Þórsdrápa 21, *SKP* III.1, 121). Yet, even if the naming of animals characterizes an area, these kennings cannot be regarded as a depiction of the landscape.

The results are similar when one investigates the kennings for ‘sea’. Besides a great number of kenning patterns characterizing the sea as an abode of sea-kings or as a ring around the earth, there are some kenning patterns paraphrasing the sea as a place of the waves or of the surf, as a place of skerries, fishes or sea birds. Kennings like these could be employed to denote a special type of landscape matching the content of the stanza. But in skaldic poetry, no such instance can be found; rather we find a certain metaphorical use of the base word of these kennings together with a fitting verb as is shown in the following examples:

*Emk kominn langan ...veg qldu á jó Íva* ‘I have **come a long ...way** of the wave [SEA] **on a steed** of Ívi <sea-king> [SHIP]’ (Egill Lv 24 (*SKJ* B.I, 47). Here, the base-words of the sea-kenning (*veg*) and the ship-kenning (*jó*) form a metaphor (riding) for the use of a ship: ‘I have come a long way on a steed.’

As a result, we can conclude that skaldic poetry, even if it uses words or circumlocutions for landscape, does not depict landscapes according to the content of the singular stanza. However, further research shows that skaldic poetry contains images of landscapes that may be called metaphorical or mythical.

## Projection of emotional states to the landscape

One of the functions of landscapes in poetry can be their usage as a projection space for emotional states of individual characters. There is a very famous example for this phenomenon: a *lausá vísa* from Sigvatr (24) who is mourning his dead king Óláfr Haraldsson.

*Hø þótti mér hlæja  
høll of Nóreg allan  
— fyrr vask kenndr á knørrum —  
klif, meðan Óleifr lifði.  
Nú þykki mér miklu  
— mitt stríð es svá — hliðir  
— jøfurs hylli varðk alla —  
óblíðari síðan*

*Hø, høll klif þótti mér hlæja of allan Nóreg, meðan Óleifr lifði; vask fyrr kenndr á knørrum. Nú þykki mér hliðir miklu óblíðari síðan; svá es stríð mitt; varðk alla hylli jøfurs.*

‘The high, sloping cliffs seemed to me to laugh over all Norway while Óláfr was alive; I was once recognized on ships. Now the slopes seem to me much less agreeable since; such is my affliction; I have lost all favour of the ruler.’ (SKP I.2, 729–30).

This transfer of mood and feelings onto the landscape, so that it mirrors the emotions, is well known from Romanticism, but it is extremely rare in this early poetry. Examples from European literature can be found in Latin mourning poems on kings and other rulers (s. Bornscheuer 1968). A similar moulding of this motif appears in the refrain of Hallfreð’s Erfidrápa for King Óláfr Tryggvason. Hallfreðr too is mourning his dead king and expresses this in the refrain in his poem:

*Norðr eru øll of orðin  
auð lønd at gram dauðan;  
allr glepsk friðr af falli  
flugstyggs sonar Tryggva.*

*Øll lønd norðr eru of orðin auð at dauðan gram; allr friðr glepsk af falli flugstyggs sonar Tryggva.*

‘All lands in the north have been desolated by the king’s death;<sup>2</sup> all peace is confounded by the fall of the flight-shunning son of Tryggvi [= Óláfr].’ (SKP I.1, 440)

Here, some differences to the previous stanza can be noted: While the first stanza deals with the impression of the landscape on the skald’s mind (the slopes seem to laugh or to look less agreeable), mourning in the second stanza is so to speak a quality of the landscape itself. All lands are desolated: There is no doubt that in both cases this is not a genuine quality of the landscape itself; rather, the lands are desolated because their ruler has died.

<sup>2</sup> In certain respects st. 21 of Hákonarmál could be compared with this stanza: *Deyr fé/ deyjra frændr, | eyðisk land ok láð, | síz Høkun fōr/með heiðin goð | mōg es þjóð of þéuð.* ‘Wealth is dying, kinsfolk are dying, land and realm become deserted, since Høkun went with the heathen gods; many region is enslaved.’ (Marold 2006, 233–234; 236–237).

These examples, where the emotion is projected onto a landscape, can only be called mythical if this word is used with a relatively broad meaning. Landscapes are not turned into mythical figures, but they are bearers of emotions and other psychic conditions or processes.

## Landscapes depicting the inner space of a human being

Another function of landscape in skaldic poetry comprises depicting the inner space of a human being. This is the case in many kennings for ‘breast’, which itself can be a metaphor for the inside of a human being just as in almost all European poetry. Because of this figurative meaning, these kennings are sometimes interpreted as ‘soul’ or ‘mind’. Hence kennings for ‘mind’ or ‘soul’ use the same patterns as kennings which paraphrase the physical breast. We can only decide by analysing the context whether a kenning refers to the physical breast or whether it is a metaphor for the mind or soul. There are several patterns of these kennings for the physical breast or for the mind; according to the theme only those kennings will be discussed whose base word designates a landscape.<sup>3</sup> Such base words are:

*lād, land* ‘land’, *fjall, berg* ‘mountain’, *klif* ‘cliff’, *hallr* ‘stone’, *grunnr* ‘shoal of sea’, *fjörðr* ‘fjord’, *strönd* ‘shore’, *skógr* ‘wood’, *vangr* ‘meadow’, *braut*, ‘way’, *stígr* ‘path’.

The determinant in all these kennings is a word for an emotion, a mental quality or ability like the following:

*glaumr* ‘joy’, *munr* ‘wish, willing’, *hugr* ‘courage’, *móðr* ‘courage’, *lyndi* ‘character’, *sefi* ‘mind’, *eljun* ‘steadfastness’, *geð* ‘mind’.

Kennings of the pattern ‘landscape of emotion/mental agility’ are also used in Christian Skaldic poetry, and sometimes the metaphorical quality of the base word is extended to further parts of the sentence.<sup>4</sup>

Anonymous, *Leiðarvísan* 42: *ræðk harmsfullum halli hugstrandar* ‘I govern a sorrowful **stone of the shore** of thought [BREAST > HEART]’. (*SKP* VII.1, 175–6) This kenning for ‘heart’ consists of a base word ‘stone’ and the kenning for breast ‘shore of thought’ as the determinant. Shore and stone match well, and the stony coast is possibly a good picture for the emotional situation of sorrow.

<sup>3</sup> The examples are excerpted from Meissner (1921, 134–138).

<sup>4</sup> The following examples are cited only in prose order.

Anonymous, *Máriuvísur III* 2: *svá að eg hitti hrein orð ok gleði hugarland mitt fyrir best unað*. ‘... so that I may find pure words and may please my mind-land [BREAST] by the best bliss.’ (SKP VII.2, 719)

Anonymous, *Liknarbraut* 5: *...dreifðu mér í lyndis láð dýru himnesku sáði* ‘sprinkle my mind’s land [BREAST] with precious heavenly seed’. (SKP VII.1, 234) Departing from the kenning *lyndis láð* ‘mind’s land’ the poet develops the idea that heavenly seed is sowed on this ‘land’ which now can come into bloom. This too depicts the desire for heavenly mercy and assistance.

Anonymous, *Heilags anda drápa* 5 (SKP VII.1, 455): *faldið skóg h\*ugar ... nógu aldini* ‘you cover the forest of the mind [SOUL] ...with abundant fruit.’ Here the base word ‘forest’ of the kenning ‘forest of mind’ is associated with ‘fruit’, which belongs to the same semantic field.

Anonymous, *Heilags anda drápa* 3 (SKP VII.1, 453): *sú tryggva einkagjöf hefr grænkat geðfjöll ...blómi siðferðar*. ‘That true, unique gift has made green the mind-mountains [SOULS] ...with the bloom of moral conduct.’ The same is true here: the mountains are in blossom, a picture for the soul receiving god’s mercy.

These kennings following the pattern ‘land of mind’ are restricted to Christian poetry, and there are no kennings with landscape as a base word referring to mind before this period. However, there is a special group of kennings with landscape as the base word which occur very early in the 10th century: These kennings are all used in a poetological context in so far as the kennings for ‘breast’ designate the place where a poem is made, i.e. the inner space, and then brought to the listener. This inner space is paraphrased as marine scenery, e.g. – *munströnd* ‘mind-beach’, *grunn munar* ‘the shallows of (my) mind’ and *geðfjörðr* ‘mind fjord’.

All these kennings using marine scenery have to do with the myth of poetry, which is related at the beginning of *Skáldskaparmál* (SnE 1998, I, 35); they refer to the last part of the narrative where Óðinn as an eagle carries the mead of poetry from the world of the giants to the Æsir. The kennings for ‘breast’ could indeed refer to the physical breast of the god, as he brought the mead of poetry in the form of three mouthfuls of this mead. Some examples may illustrate this:

- Following the pattern ‘marine scenery’ for ‘breast/mind’, the mead of poetry can be called e.g. *mar munstrandar Viðris* ‘the sea of the mind-beach [BREAST] of Viðrir i.e. Óðinn.’ (Egill, *Höfuðlausn* 1; SKJ BI, 31). Here the mead of poetry is called *mar* ‘sea’, which is a good match for the base word ‘beach’ in the kenning for ‘breast’.
- In Egill’s *Höfuðlausn* 19 (SKJ BI, 33) the poet says: *Hrærðak munni Óðins ægi af munar grunni* ‘I have moved with my mouth Óðinn’s sea [MEAD OF POETRY] from the shallows of my mind [BREAST] ... *Munar grunn* ‘the shallow of mind’ must be a kenning for the ‘breast’, i.e. the inner world of the skald himself; the mead of poetry has its own kenning *Óðins ægi* ‘the sea of Óðinn’. In this

case too, the base word *ægir* ‘sea’ matches the base word *grunn* ‘shallow’ of the kenning for ‘breast’ – ‘the shallow of mind’.

- Ulfr Uggason, *Húsdrápa* 1 (*SKP* III.1, 405): *lō geðffjarðar Hildar hjaldrgegnis* ‘the water of the mind-fjord [BREAST] of the promoter of the noise of Hildir <valkyrie> [BATTLE > = Óðinn > POEM]<sup>5</sup>

Although this kenning appears to be complicated, the structure of the kenning is in fact clear and matches the other examples: Water (*lō*) of the breast (*geðffjarðar* ‘mind fjord’) of Óðinn (the promoter of the noise of Hildir <valkyrie> [BATTLE]). The reason why the kenning seems complicated is that the kenning referring to Óðinn is very long.

So far, the examples show that the inner world of the poet or of Óðinn is represented metaphorically as marine scenery – beach, fjord, shallow; the sea is the mead of poetry resp. the poem itself coming from this landscapes – i.e. the inner world of the poet.

In contrast, the following example from *Völusteinns* *Ögmundardrápa* 1 (*SKP* III.1, 428) is of a somewhat different nature. In prose: *heyr mína strauma glaumbargs vinar Míms glymja við sker góma* ‘hear my streams of the joy-cliff [BREAST] of the friend of Mímr <mythical being> [= Óðinn > MEAD OF POETRY] resound against the skerries of gums [TEETH]’. Also this long kenning is derived from the pattern ‘water of Óðinn’s breast’: The ‘streams’ are the water, the breast is ‘the joy-cliff’, and Óðinn is paraphrased as ‘friend of Mímr’. The poet construes a metaphorical net: Óðinn’s breast is a mountain (*cliff*) from which streams are flowing, and these streams now – when the poet recites his poem – ‘resound against the skerries’ – here again, we can detect our marine scenery, when ‘skerry’ is used as a base word for ‘teeth’.

In the introductory stanzas 1–5 of *Vellekla* (975–995), the famous poem of Einarr Skálaglamm, the poet combines metaphors and kennings in a very unconventional way, imaging the recitation of the poem as a wave growing and roaring before the ruler, or coming from inside the poet through his mouth and booming against the cliffs of his teeth, or passing over the ruler’s men. Into this metaphorical framework the poet inserts the kennings for ‘poem’, sometimes adjusting their base-words to this imagery. It is not possible to discuss these stanzas as a whole,<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The noise of the valkyrie is the battle, and the promoter of the battle is Óðinn. The water of the mind-fjord [BREAST] of Óðinn is the mead of poetry.

<sup>6</sup> For more information see my edition in *SKP* I.1, 280–289; the text here corresponds to that in this edition with one exception: Here I use ‘mead of poetry’ as a referent instead of ‘poem’, to show the metaphorical network. The referent ‘mead of poetry’ is used as metonym for ‘poetry’, as it is the source of inspiration. See also Marold 1994, 472–476.

but their network of metaphors shall be explained:

1. *Hugstóran biðk heyra*  
 – *hey, jarl, Kvasis dreyra* –  
*foldar vörð á fyrða*  
*fjarðleggjar brim dreggjar.*

*Biðk hugstóran vörð foldar heyra á brim dreggjar fyrða fjarðleggjar; hey, jarl, dreyra Kvasis.*

‘I bid the high-minded guardian of the land [RULER = Hákon jarl] listen to the surf of the dregs of the men of the fjord-bone [ROCK > DWARFS > MEAD OF POETRY]; hear, jarl, the blood of Kvasir <mythical being> [MEAD OF POETRY].’

The poem begins with the traditional appeal to the ruler and his men to listen to the poem. This act of listening to the poem is compared to listening to the surf of the poem, which is paraphrased as ‘dreg of the dwarfs’, since according to Snorri’s narrative in *Skm* they made the mead of poetry by mixing Kvasir’s blood with honey (*SnE* 1998, I, 3). However, ‘listen to the surf’ is not part of the mead-of-poetry kenning itself, rather it is part of the metaphoric image spanning the introductory stanzas of *Vellekla* which likens the poem’s effect on the listener to that of an onrushing wave (see Marold 1994a, 473; cf. Frank 1981, 158).

2. *Nús, þats Boðnar bára*  
*(berg-Saxa) tér vaxa*  
*(gervi í holl ok hlýði*  
*hljóð fley jöfurs þjóðir).*

*Nús, þats bára Boðnar tér vaxa; þjóðir jöfurs gervi hljóð í holl ok hlýði fley berg–Saxa.*

‘Now it happens that **the wave** of Boðn <mythical vat> [MEAD OF POETRY] **grows**; may the retinue of the ruler give a hearing in the hall and **listen to the ship** of the rock-Saxons [GIANTS > MEAD OF POETRY].’

Here, too, the marine scenery is present: The wave begins to grow, which could be compared to the context of the poem’s presentation. The poem grows in the inner world of the skald like a wave. The last two lines of the stanza also match the marine theme: The retinue shall listen to the ship – *líð* ‘ship’ is a homonym to ‘beverage’, and the ‘beverage’ of the giants is the mead of poetry. Hence, listening to the ship is equivalent to listening to the poem.

3. *Eisar vágr fyr vísa*  
*(verk) Røgnis (mér hagna);*  
*þýtr Óðræris alda*  
*öldrhafs við fles galdra.*

*Vágr Røgnis eisar fyr vísa; verk mér hagna; alda öldrhafs Óðræris þýtr við fles galdra.*



**The wave** of Rognir <= Óðinn> [MEAD OF POETRY] **roars** before the ruler; the works are successful for me; **the wave** of the ale-**sea** of Óðrœrir <mythical vat> [MEAD OF POETRY] **booms against the skerry** of incantations [TEETH].

This stanza continues the picture of stanza 1, where the ruler is asked to listen to the surf, and of stanza 2 with the metaphor of the growing wave. Now the wave roars – i.e. the poem is presented to the ruler. In the second *helmingr* the focus is shifted to the poem itself: The kenning for mead of poetry, ‘sea of Óðrœrir (the mythical vat where it is stored)’ is combined with the metaphorical image of a wave booming against the skerries – a metaphor for the reciting of the poem. The metaphorical net is extended to the next kenning for teeth – skerry of incantation.

4. *Ullar gengr of alla  
asksögn, þess's hvöt magnar,  
byrgis þöðvar sorgar,  
bergs grynniló dverga.*

*Grynniló bergs dverga gengr of alla asksögn Ullar sorgar byrgis þöðvar, þess's magnar hvöt.*

**The shoal-wave** of the rock of dwarfs [MEAD OF POETRY] **passes over the entire ship's crew** of the Ullr <god> of the sorrow of the fence of battle [SHIELD > SWORD > WARRIOR = Hákon], who increases boldness.

Here, the poem is the shoal-wave, which passes over the entire ship's crew – a picture for the retinue listening to the poem.

5. *Hljóta munk, né hlítik,  
hertýs, of þat frýju,  
fyr orþeysi at ausa  
austr vín-Gnóðar flausta.*

*Munk hljóta at ausa hertýs vín-Gnóðar austr fyr orþeysi flausta; né hlítik frýju of þat.*

‘It will fall to me to **bale out the bilge-water of the Gnóð** <ship> of the wine of the army-god [= Óðinn > MEAD OF POETRY > VAT > MEAD OF POETRY] for the valiant racer of ships [SEAFARER = Hákon]; I will not endure a reproach on account of it.’

The poetic process is presented as bailing out the water in a ship, but this ship is in fact the vat where the mead of poetry is stored. The marine metaphor is continued.

Let me summarize the points made so far: We found two different ways of depicting the inner world of man: the Christian one, where either a stony shore depicts the harmful situation, or the land which has begun to green and blossom under God's mercy; and the old pagan one, where the inner space of the poet or of Óðinn is depicted as a marine scenery of shore and waves.

## The sea as a monster or threatening goddess

The next two items can be called mythical in the stricter sense. In these instances there appears to be some kind of interchangeable relation between the landscape and demonic or mythical beings. One example is a description of sea-voyages on the turbulent sea where the sea is not depicted as the real sea but as a threatening monster or even as the goddess Rán, ready to devour the ship.

The *Ferðavísur* of Hofgarða-Refr *SKP* IV.1, 243–250 present a good example of this type: These stanzas share a common theme, a voyage of a ship battling high wind and waves. It is characteristic of these stanzas that they use congruent images carried through several stanzas. Ships are treated as animate beings in the grip of animate destructive forces. The following stanzas picture a ship's diving down between the waves and resurfacing again as a victorious struggle between an animal (horse, bear) and the threatening jaws of a mythical monster.

The first stanza begins by depicting the ship as an animal, likely a horse ploughing through the waves. The metaphorical description of the ship as an animal in the kenning 'animal of mast-tops' is continued by referring to the ship's bow as the shoulders of the animal.

*Vágbrýsta berr vestan*  
 – vættik lands fyr brandi –  
 – hvalmæni skefr – húna  
 hógdýr of lög bógu.

*Hógdýr húna berr vágbrýsta bógu vestan of lög; skefr hvalmæni; vættik lands fyr brandi.*

'The gentle animal of mast-tops [SHIP] carries its wave-pressed shoulders over the sea from the west; it scrapes the whale-ridge [SEA]; I expect land before the prow.'

The next stanza shows the sea as a mythical monster with threatening jaws, which wants to devour the ship which is paraphrased as 'bear of twisted moorings'.

*Færir björn, þars bára*  
*brestr, undinna festa*  
*opt í ægis kjapta*  
*úrsvöl Gymis vǫlva.*

*Úrsvöl vǫlva Gymis færir opt björn undinna festa í kjapta ægis, þars bára brestr.*

'The spray-cold vǫlva <seeress><sup>7</sup> of Gymir <sea-giant> [= Rán] often leads the bear of twisted moorings [SHIP] into the jaws of the sea, where the wave breaks.'

<sup>7</sup> The kenning *vǫlva Gymis* is formed according to the normal pattern 'woman of ...' but is unusual

The realistic situation shows a ship in danger of being shipwrecked. The relative clause *pars bára brestr* ‘where the wave breaks’ seems to refer to the offshore shallows where waves break and ships are in the greatest danger. The base word of the ship kenning is now a ‘bear’, as any quadruped animal can be used as a base word in a kenning for ‘ship’. The sea is not depicted as a personified divine force in human shape, but rather as a ravenous monster into whose jaws the ship is being driven. The word *ægir* – here translated as ‘sea’ – could also be the personal noun *Ægir*, a sea giant, but there is otherwise no evidence that this giant was thought of as a monster that devours ships and men. The force which drives the ship into the jaws of the sea is *Rán*. *Rán* is a sea-goddess and the wife of *Ægir*, the sea-god or sea-giant. She seems to personify the destructive power of the sea, as becomes clear in this stanza and above all in the eddic *Helgi* poems (*HHund* I 29–30; *HHj* 18).<sup>8</sup> On the mythological level, the dangerous situation of the ship is represented as an interaction between the goddess *Rán* and a devouring monster.

The third stanza depicts the victorious resurfacing of the ship out of the waves:

*En sægnípu Sleipnir  
slítr úrdrifinn hvítrar  
Ránar rauðum steini  
runnit brjóst ór munni.*

*En úrdrifinn Sleipnir sægnípu slítr brjóst, runnit rauðum steini, ór munni hvítrar Ránar.*

‘But the spray-spattered Sleipnir <mythical horse> of the sea-peak [WAVE > SHIP] tears its breast, covered with red paint, out of the mouth of white *Rán* <sea-goddess>.’

Now, the ship is again a horse, Sleipnir, Óðinn’s horse, which tears its breast, presumably painted in red colour, out of the threatening waves of the sea – here presented as the jaws of the goddess *Rán*. This is a metaphorical depiction of the ship as it re-emerges from the trough of a foaming wave, thus escaping from the gorge of the sea which threatens to swallow it. As in the previous stanza the sea appears as a cannibalistic monster, but here it is *Rán* herself who appears in this role. The description of *Rán* as *hvítrar* ‘white’ presumably refers to the white crests

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in its choice of the base-word *vǫlva* ‘seeress’. *Vǫlva* must have negative connotations here, as in a few other instances in eddic and skaldic sources (see *Kommentar* IV, 292 and *LP*: *vǫlva*). The choice of base-word underscores the threatening character of the sea-goddess.

<sup>8</sup> On the motif of the sea as a malevolent, threatening female being, see Clunies Ross (1998, 166–7).

of waves. One might speculate whether there is some sort of colour symbolism in this stanza: red as the colour of life, and white as the colour of death?

Another mythical representation of the sea is a *helmingr* (halfstanza) – probably a fragment – of Þórðr Sjáreksson *SKP* III.1, 480, depicting the acoustic impression of a roaring sea as the voice of the goddess Rán:

*Svát ór fitjar fjøtri  
flóðs ásynja, blóði  
– raust bifask rømm – en systra,  
rýtr, eymylvir spýtir.*

*Svát ásynja flóðs rýtr ór fjøtri fitjar, en eymylvir spýtir blóði systra; rømm raust bifask.*

‘So that the goddess of the sea [= Rán] wails from the fetter of the meadow [SEA], and the island-grinder [MAELSTROM] spits out the sisters’ blood [WATER]; the strong voice trembles.’

Again the sea is depicted as the goddess Rán here, who is wailing from the water. This could be the mythological interpretation of the noise of the maelstrom mentioned in the next sentence. In most descriptions of this powerful tidal current its sound is described as a squealing noise that could be interpreted as the voice of a sea-goddess. The parenthesis ‘the strong voice trembles’ probably refers back to the wailing Rán. The question why the water is called the sister’s blood will be discussed later in a different context.

Sea, storm and giant also serve as a theme in one of the most well-known stanzas of Egill (Lv 23)<sup>9</sup>

*Þel høggr stórt fyr stáli  
stafnkvígs á veg jafnan  
út með éla meitli  
andærr jøtunn vandar;  
en svalbúinn selju  
sverfr eirarvanr þeiri  
Gestils ølpt með gustum  
gandr of stál fyr brandi.<sup>10</sup>*

*Andærr jøtunn vandar høggr stórt þel fyr stáli út á jafnan veg stafnkvígs með meitli éla; en eirarvanr svalbúinn gandr selju sverfr þeiri ølpt Gestils með gustum of stál fyr brandi.*

<sup>9</sup> As vol. V is not published yet, the stanza is cited from the old Skaldic edition (*SKJ* BI, 47).

<sup>10</sup> The emendations in the last two lines date back to Finnur Jónsson (*SKJ* BI, 47) and are also accepted in *Skald* I, 30 and in *Egilssaga* (*ÍF* 2, 172).

‘The giant with furious breath<sup>11</sup> of the mast [WIND] knocks big ice floes<sup>12</sup> before the fore-stem out of the flat road of the stem-bullock [SEA > SHIP] with a chisel of storms, and the merciless, cold-clad wolf of the willow [WIND] files this swan of Gestill [SHIP] with gusts over the fore-stem in front of the prow.’

Although this interpretation would require some discussion, this translation can be used to show how natural forces such as storms are turned into mythical figures. The stanza deals with a sea voyage in a sea covered with ice floes. The storm is seen as a giant, hoeing ice floes in front of the stem of the ship with a chisel. ‘Chisel of storms’ is here part of the metaphorical presentation, it corresponds to the verb *hoggr* ‘knocks’ and *þel* ‘ice-floes’. This mythical figure, the giant is part of the kenning ‘giant of the mast’ developed from a kenning pattern for storm ‘injurious being of trees, masts’; in the second *helmingr* of the stanza we find another storm kenning that is constructed along the same pattern: ‘wolf of the willow’. And in this *helmingr* the storm is also personified as a craftsman, but now by the use of the verb *sverfa* ‘file’ and the object is not the sea, but the prow of the ship.

## Landscape in the Þórsdrápa

Eilífr Goðrúnarson’s Þórsdrápa,<sup>13</sup> one of the most difficult poems of skaldic poetry presents a special case. It is concerned with one of Þórr’s adventures, relating his journey into the realm of giants to meet Geirrðōðr. This journey is depicted as a dangerous path through the wilderness, through a powerful river up in the mountains, where Geirrðōðr and his giant retinue are living. The poem is unique in depicting the journey and the landscape through which Þórr and his companion are struggling to find their way. The attention the landscape receives is extraordinary for a skaldic poem, and moreover it seems as if there was a mutual relation between the landscape and demonic or mythical beings. Considering our theme

<sup>11</sup> Another possibility to interpret the mss. ‘aundurr’ resp. ‘aundr’ is *andærr* ‘opposing, adverse’ (lit. rowing against’ (*LP*: *andærr*).

<sup>12</sup> Finnur Jónsson’s (*SKJ* BI, 48) translation ‘dybe huller’ is not very convincing, unless something like whirlpools in the sea are meant. Here, I am following Finnur Jónsson’s conjecture that *þel* might be a variant of *þeli* (*LP*: *þel*) because there is a tool called *þelahögg* ‘ice axe’ (Sigfús Blöndal 1920–1924, 968); cf. also *þelalauss* ‘without frost, thawed’ (*ibid.*) Another possibility to is to interpret the mss.’ ‘þel’ as *þél* ‘file’ (so Egilssaga, *ÍF* 2, 172; *Skald* I, 30); however, the verb *hoggr* ‘knock’ does not go together with *þél* ‘file’.

<sup>13</sup> The stanzas cited come from my edition (*SKP* III.1, 68–129). It is not possible to argue here for the cited text of this edition, it would be too extensive.

– landscapes – two events shall be discussed: (1) Þórr's crossing the river, (i.e. stanzas 6–10) and (2) Þórr in the cave of the two giantesses.

The first climax of the myth as it is represented in Þórsdrápa is the dangerous river, depicted in five stanzas. It is not possible to explain the stanzas in full length; the analysis shall be restricted to those aspects which are essential for the theme of landscape. The river is depicted on three levels:

- (a) The river is a wild and powerful torrent with high winds and falling rocks.
- (b) The stream has qualities of an underworld river.
- (c) On a third and mythological level, the river is associated with female mythical beings.

On level (a), the realistic level, so to speak, the river is a wild torrent and in the depiction the auditory impression is prevailing: The torrent is called *hretviðri blásin hrönn áss* 'the tempest-blown wave of the ridge [RIVER]' (st. 9/5, 8).

Sometimes the river is called 'storm'; this reference may be caused by the concentration on the auditory impression of the river: *hreggi höggvin fellihryn fjalla ...haut með steðja Feðju* 'the storm-blasted toppling-noise of the mountains [RIVER] ...roared against the anvil of Fedje <river> [ROCK].' (st. 7/5, 7). That *hryn* 'noise' is a designation for the river can only be inferred from the context. *Felli* 'toppling' is probably an expression for the the power of the water which threatens to knock the waders off their feet.

In the kenning *málhvettr byrr markar* 'roaring wind of the forest [RIVER]' (st. 7/1–2) the adjective *málhvettr* literally means 'speech-whetted'. This must be a metaphor for the roaring of a river.

The river brings hail, it is *hagli olnar* 'swollen with hail' (st. 6/3), and rock-slides; that may be an appropriate interpretation of the sentence [Þórr] *leit harðvaxnar herðar hallands falla of sik* 'Þórr saw the hard shoulders of the sloping-land [MOUNTAIN > ROCKS] fall around him' (st. 8/1–2). This rock-kenning follows the pattern 'bones of the earth' for 'stones, rocks', i.e. the 'shoulders' are shoulder bones.

(b) On the second level, the stream has the qualities of an underworld river. Here, we are leaving the realistic depiction: The river is full of poison: *þars þjóðáar fnæstu eitri* 'where great rivers sprayed poison' (st. 6/7–8), and of swords. This motif appears not only once but three times: The rivers are called *hlaupár hjalts* 'the fast-flowing streams of the sword' (st. 6/3, 4); or *sverðrunnit fen* 'the sword-filled fen' (st. 9/4); the river is accompanied by an adjective *stríðan stáli* 'made harsh by the weapon' (st. 10/5). Hence the river is given the same characteristics as Slíðr in Vsp 36, the river of the underworld, which is filled with swords and flows through poisonous valleys. On this level the landscape has already turned into a mythical world, the underworld.

(c) On a third and mythological level, the river is associated with female mythical beings. The following examples clearly indicate that mythical beings were the cause of the river's sudden and dangerous rise: *Ekkjur Hrekkmímis æddu straum* 'The widows of Hrekkmímir <giant> [GIANTESSSES] infuriated the stream (st. 10/5–6). The kenning *ekkjur Hrekkmímis* 'the widows of Hrekkmímir' identifies these mythical beings as giantesses or relatives of a giant. According to language usage in skaldic poetry, 'widow' only designates 'woman', without further specification. From Snorri's narration of the myth in *Skáldskaparmál* (*SnE* 1998, I, 25) we could conclude that they are the daughters of Geirrøðr.

There is another very long kenning for 'giantesses', which shows the same characteristics: *skafls jarðar hauðrs runkykvar* 'of the quickeners of the stream of the land of the snow-drift of the earth [RIDGE > MOUNTAIN > RIVER > GIANTESSSES]' (st. 9/6, 7).

*skafls jarðar* 'the snowdrift of the earth' = RIDGE  
 the RIDGE of the land (*hauðrs*) = MOUNTAIN  
 the stream (*run-*) of the MOUNTAIN = RIVER

the quickeners (*kykkvar*) of the RIVER = In the case of *runkykvar* lit. 'the stream-quickeners', the nature of these beings remains unclear, but can be explained according to the context as the giantesses.

The giantesses causing the river to rise correspond approximately to the prose narrative in *Skm* (*SnE* 1998, I, 25), but there the giantess Gjálp, a daughter of Geirrøðr, is the only one mentioned. Þórr sees her standing high up in a ravine straddling the river, a scene most scholars interpret as referring to urination. Although it is not clearly stated, it seems that this is what Snorri believed, although nothing in Þórsdrápa itself indicates urination. It is noteworthy that, in Þórsdrápa, reference is made not only to one giantess but apparently to a few different mythical beings, which are identified by name – Nanna, Fríðr and Mǫrn. The river is called *vǫrr Nǫnnu* 'waters of Nanna' (st. 6/1, 2), *fen Fríðar* 'fen of Fríðr' (st. 9/1, 4) and *snerriblóð Mǫrnar* 'the rushing blood of Mǫrn' (st. 8/6–7). These names cannot be treated as part of giantess-kennings, because no determinants are associated with them, as is usual for giantesses e.g. *fjalla Hildir* 'the Hildir of the mountains' (Ulfr Uggason, *Húsdrápa* 11/3). The names Nanna, Fríðr and Mǫrn could be heiti for female mythical beings. The paraphrases for 'river' – waters of Nanna, fen of Fríðr, rushing blood of Mǫrn – are problematic because it remains unclear exactly what relationship there is between these mythical beings and the river. They could be its source, its owners or perhaps even identical with it, if they are imagined as river-goddesses. This could be the case with Mǫrn, which is attested as the name of both, a giantess and a river.

*Snerriblóð Marnar* ‘the rushing blood of Mǫrn’ is the only instance in which the river is not designated by a term for ‘water’ such as *vǫrr* ‘water’, *fen* ‘fen’, *straumr* ‘stream’ or *run* ‘stream’ but by *snerriblóð* ‘rushing blood’. Kiil (1956, 118) interprets *snerriblóð Mǫrnar* as menstrual fluid, but Clunies Ross’s (1981, 373) interpretation is preferable in my opinion. She assumes that rivers can take on anthropomorphic qualities; hence *Mǫrn* would then signify both the river and a mythical being, whose blood would be the water flowing in it.

A unity of this kind between mythical beings and bodies of water is paralleled in the daughters of the sea-giant Ægir, who are both waves and mythical beings. As giantesses, they stir up the sea (*Snæbjörn Lausavísa* 1/4, *SKP* III.1, 377) and endanger ships (*Sveinn Norðrsetudrápa* 3, *SKP* III.1, 400; *HHund* I, 29/5–8). And when Þórðr Sjáreksson (see above) says ‘the maelstream spits out the blood of the sisters’, which might mean water, we have a good example that water can be referred to as the blood of mythical beings. Just as Ægir’s daughters can be both giantesses and waves, the mountain stream in Geirrøðr’s domain could be both, his daughters and the ominous river. Thus, the *snerriblóð Marnar* ‘the rushing blood of Mǫrn’ could be equated with the blood of the sisters in Þórðr Sjárekssons stanza.

This would mean that Þórr’s encounter with the powerful torrent is at the same time an encounter with the mighty giantesses. This dangerous shift from natural feature to mythical being is perhaps part of the underworld scenario of the giants’ territory, part of which is also the sword-swollen river. Following this line of argument, Snorri’s narration of Gjalp straddling the river could be interpreted as a more realistic scenario.

A comparable duality between natural phenomena and mythical beings can be seen in the way Þórr is threatened in the cave when the rock he is seated on proves to be a giantess’s headdress. This is the second climax in Þórdrápa. It is described in stanza 14 and 15 of this poem, which differ considerably from Snorri’s narration. Moreover, the stanzas are very complicated and controversially discussed, and a fully discussion would take more room than it is possible in this article (for that see my edition in *SKP* III.1, 105–111). According to Þórdrápa Þórr enters the house of the giants, probably a cave. Sitting there on a rock, this rock turns out to be a giantess’s headdress. In Eilífr’s words: *Hlǫðr hreina gnípu vas list\* færðr í fasta á greypan gránhott kvánar risa* ‘the vanquisher of the reindeer of the peak [GIANTS<sup>14</sup> > = Þórr] was cunningly brought into a tight spot upon the horrible grey hat of the wife of the giant [GIANTESS]’. The meaning of the noun *í fasta* ‘into a tight spot’ can only be deduced from the context of the prose narra-

14 Giants can be paraphrased in kennings as ‘animals of the mountains’ (Meissner 1921, 258f.).



tive in *Skáldskaparmál*, which relates how Þórr is pressed against the roof by the two daughters of Geirrþóðr crouching under his chair. According to my interpretation of stanza 15 Þórr defends himself with lightning and rocks so that the two giantesses break their backs.

“They were trampled upon by the nuts of the sloping-plain [MOUNTAINS > STONES] and the high flame of the skies [LIGHTNING], those who pressed the hall of the moon of eyelashes [EYE > HEAD] against the rafter. The temple-steerer of the hovering chariot of the thunderstorm [= Þórr] broke the age-old keel of the laughter-ship [BREAST > BACK] of both women of the cave [GIANTESSES]” (*SKP* III.1, 108–111).

This also deviates from Snorri, but is the most straightforward way of interpreting this complicated stanza. What is important for our theme is the fact that we are confronted with the same situation here: The landscape or parts of it, in this case the stones in the cave are not what they seem to be, but they can turn out to be mythical beings. Thus the grey stone upon which Þórr is sitting proves to be a ‘grey hat’ of the giantesses.<sup>15</sup>

I conclude: In Þórsdrápa we are guided to a world of twilight, so to speak. It is a mythical landscape where everything can emerge as a mythical being or as a part of such a being. The powerful stream Þórr has to cross is a giantess or her blood, and the stone is not what it seems to be, but the hat of a giantess raising her head.

## Résumé

- (1) No realistic depictions of landscape in terms of a setting for the related events can be observed in skaldic poetry. Words or circumlocutions for landscape, even when used in poetry, do not depict landscapes according to the content of the singular stanza.
- (2) However, skaldic poetry uses landscapes or parts of it as a widespread bearer of secondary meaning:
  - (a) Emotions can be projected onto landscapes as in Hallfreðr’s well-known stanzas about the slopes of Norway reflecting his mourning.
  - (b) The inner space of man can be depicted as a landscape. In this context, two devices were common: firstly, kennings for ‘breast’ or ‘soul’ in Christian poetry which use landscapes as a metaphorical base word, such as e.g. *geðffjöll* ‘mind mountains’; and secondly, the use of marine scenery

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Clunies-Ross 1981, 380.

in the context of kenningar for poetry. The inner world of the poet or of Óðinn who bears the mead of poetry, is depicted as the coast, and the mead of poetry is mostly referred to as the sea. These pictures sometimes lead to the construction of fantastic metaphorical creations.

- (c) In descriptions of sea-voyages the sea may be depicted as a threatening monster or the goddess Rán who both try to devour the ship, or the storm may be associated with a giant. In this case we find a relation between landscape and mythical beings.
- (d) In the Þórdrápa we find this connection between landscape and mythical beings once again. The dangers Þórr encounters on his journey originate on one level from the landscape – the torrent, the stone in the cave, while on the other level they prove to be mythical forces, in case the gigantes.

## Abbreviations

|                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| <b>Kommentar</b> | von See, Klaus et al. 1993–1997. <i>Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda</i> . 6 vols (continuing). Heidelberg.  |
| <b>HHund I</b>   | “Helgakviða Hundingsbana”. 1983: In: <i>Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern</i> . 2 vols. I: <i>Text</i> . 5th edn. (Ed.) G. Neckel/H. Kuhn. Heidelberg.                    |
| <b>HHj</b>       | “Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar”. 1983. In: <i>Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern</i> . 2 vols. I: <i>Text</i> . 5th edn. (Ed.) G. Neckel/H. Kuhn. Heidelberg.                  |
| <b>LP</b>        | Jónsson, Finnur (Ed.). 1931: <i>Lexicon poeticum antiquæ linguæ septentrionalis: Ordbog over det norsk-islandske skjaldesprog oprindeligt forfattet af Sveinbjörn Egilsson</i> . 2nd edn. Copenhagen. |
| <b>SKP I</b>     | <i>Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas 1: From Mythical Times to c. 1035</i> . (Ed.) Diana Whaley. 2012. Turnhout, Belgium.  |
| <b>SKP II</b>    | <i>Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas 2: From c. 1035 to c. 1300</i> . (Ed.) Kari Ellen Gade. 2009. Turnhout, Belgium.  |
| <b>SKP III</b>   | <i>Poetry from Treatises on Poetics</i> . (Ed.) Kari Ellen Gade/Edith Marold. 2017. Turnhout, Belgium.  |
| <b>SKP VII</b>   | <i>Poetry on Christian Subjects</i> . (Ed.) Margaret Clunies Ross. 2007.  |
| <b>SKJ</b>       | Jónsson, Finnur (Ed.) 1912–1915: <i>Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning</i> . A: Tekst efter håndskrifterne. Copenhagen: Villadsen & Christensen. Rpt. 1967. B Rettet tekst. Rpt. 1973. Copenhagen.   |

- Skald** Kock, Ernst Albin (Ed.) 1946–1950: *Den norsk-isländska skaldediktningen. 2 vols.* Lund.
- SnE 1998** Sturluson, Snorri 1998: *Edda: Skáldskaparmál.* (Ed.) Anthony Faulkes. 2 vols. University College London: Viking Society for Northern Research.

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- Anonymous, *Máriuvísur III* (SKP VII.2, 718–738).
- Egill Skallagrímsson, *Höfuðlausn 1* (SKJ AI, 48–59; BI, 30–33).
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- Einarr skálaglamm, *Vellekla* (SKP I.1, 280–329).
- Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld Óttarson, *Erfríðrápa Ólafs Tryggvasonar* (SKP I.1, 400–441).
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