

Reflections of Celtic Influence in *Hildinavisen*

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The Orkneys seem to have been of particular importance in transmitting certain Celtic material. Gísli Sigurðsson argues, however, that it is more likely that cultural contacts and exchanges which took place in the Orkneys between Icelandic and Gaelic-speaking people were limited to single motifs, tales or poems. This does not mean that the single features are limited in number, only that they are found as single items in a tradition which had to be built up in Iceland from the cultural elements available in the country itself (Gísli Sigurðsson 1988: 42). Though the Orkneys were an ideal meeting place where Scandinavian and Celtic cultures could exchange traditions, the Gaelic custom in question existed in Iceland as well, having been brought there by the Gaelic settlers. It is another matter that these traditions could be reinforced because of the contacts in the Orkneys (Gísli Sigurðsson 1988: 44). Among the most important elements identified as transmitted through the contacts via the Orkneys are stories including *Hjadningavíg* 'The Battle of Hjadnings'. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson assumes that Celtic tales played an important part in forming Icelandic ideas about the everlasting fight – a motif which becomes extremely common in Iceland, relevant right down to the 19th century, but is rare in the Scandinavian tradition (Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 1959: 17–18). *Háttalykill*, 'Clavis metrica' or 'Key to Metres' composed in the Orkneys in the 1140 by an Icelander and the Orkney Earl Rognvaldr kali, contains what is believed to be the earliest reference to the 'Everlasting fight' motif in Old Norse / Icelandic literature, the motif being taken over from the Irish 9th century tale *Cath Maige Tuired* 'The Battle of Mag Tuired' (Chesnutt 1968: 132).

The literary works which are likely to have emerged from the cultural mixture in the Orkneys and the Scottish Isles are poems such as *Darraðarljóð* and *Krákumál* (Holtsmark 1939: 82). *Konungs Skuggsjá* contains a passage on Ireland which shows similarities to *Topographia*

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Hibernica of Giraldus Cambrensis (Holtmark 1964: 667). The source may have been a written one. Michael Chesnutt goes further and claims that Latin may have been the medium of communication (Chesnutt 1968: 135). Considering the transmission of various motifs, it seems that Orkney was a channel through which motifs could travel from Scandinavian to Celtic areas and vice versa. Celtic material, such as single motifs, tales or poems could also reach the surrounding areas, above all Shetland Islands.

The Shetland material has never been discussed before in this particular aspect, though the Shetland Islands were clearly on the route for the transmission of the Celtic material. Ideas from the Orkneys could be easily transmitted to Shetland (the distance between the clusters of Orkney and Shetland Islands is not so long). The Norn ballad *Hildinavisen* to be discussed in this chapter, which seems to contain Celtic elements, has clearly been influenced by the Orkney tradition, because its main protagonist is *Jarlin d'Orkneyjar* 'Earl of Orkney'. However, we should not imagine that the Orkney Earldom was always an intermediary in the exchange of such tales. There was also direct Gaelic influence on the Western Scandinavian, especially Icelandic and Faroese, folk tradition, since some of the Scandinavian settlers on these islands came via Ireland and Scotland and had sometimes lived there and absorbed Gaelic culture (Almqvist 1981: 89).

Language of the Settlers

The variety of Scandinavian language in Orkney and Shetland came to be called "Norn". "Norn" is a contracted form of the feminine adjective *norræn* (from Old Norse *nordrænn*, meaning 'coming from the north'), which in the 13th century came into use in order to differentiate between the western and eastern variety of Norse. Until then, all Scandinavian languages were called "Dǫnsk tunga", a term which has survived in Orkney dialect till now (Rendboe 1987: 1). The term "Norn", meaning '(Western) Norse language', 'Norwegian language', '(Western) Norse' or 'Norwegian' was first recorded in an endorsement in Scots appended to a Norwegian document from 1485 dealing with Shetland matters. Although it was also occasionally applied to Norse speech elsewhere in Scotland (Barnes 1996: 21), Norn is in most contexts used exclusively of the Northern-Isles variety (Barnes 2000: 179). Norn was not a dialect,

since its speakers appear to have considered that they have formed their own speech community in the same way as the speakers of Faroese (Barnes 1996: 13). These islands retained their Scandinavian character for a long time, even after they had been pledged to King James III of Scotland in 1468–9 (Barnes 2000: 173).

The Sources in Norn

The settlers and their descendants have not left so many written sources, either in runes or the Roman alphabet, and the few texts that exist tend to mirror faithfully the contemporary idiom of Norway (Barnes 2000: 179). There exist a few runic inscriptions from the 11th century, some old diplomas – the oldest one is from 1299 written in Old Norse, and some of them are written in Old Danish. Another coherent text is James Wallace’s Orkney version of the Lord’s Prayer (source unknown) published in the second edition of *An Account of the Islands of Orkney*, written in 1700 (Wallace 1700). Probably the most interesting sources have been registered by George Low from Edzell in Angus, but resident in Orkney – more an amateur student of natural history than a linguist. He recorded samples of Norn from the Shetland island of Foula during a visit there in 1774 from the 19th of June until the end of August and included them in his book *A Tour through the Islands of Orkney and Shetland*, first published in 1879. Low has also recorded a Shetlandic version of the Lord’s Prayer (source unknown), and a list of thirty English words translated into Norn, presumably by different informants.

Another text is a 35-stanza ballad obtained from an old man “William Henry, a farmer in Guttorm, in Foula.” This old folk song, never registered before, is now popularly called *Foulavisen* or *Hildinavisen*, after the heroine. It has been assumed that the language of this song is much older and represents the language from the 1660 (Flom 1925: 127). I would argue that its language could be even older, because of its poetic form, which usually conserves the grammatical form and content. Other material comes from the period when Norn was no longer a living language. Here the most important are Jakob Jakobsen’s collections. This scholar from the Faroe Islands called *Jákup doktari* contributed significantly to the understanding of individual Scandinavian words (Barnes 1996: 1). His dictionary contains ca. 10 000 items. Hugh

Marwick's glossary of Norn contains ca. 3000 items. The scantiness of sources is frustrating, especially when it comes to coherent texts.

The Norn Ballad

Though the ballad *Hildinavisen* is recorded in Foula, it does not mean that it was composed there. There were plague epidemics in 1700, 1720 (when just six inhabitants out of ten survived), 1740, 1760 and 1769. So *Hildinavisen* could have been brought from the mainland of Shetland, because people were moving to the islands, especially to the islands further North. *Hildinavisen* was sung by William Henry, a farmer in Guttorm in Foula. Low writes about the old man who recited *Hildinavisen* in a letter from 1776, saying that he "could neither read nor write, but had the most retentive memory I ever heard of" (Low 1879: 107). In his book Low claims that "the following song is the most entire I could find, but the disorder of some of the stanzas will show that it is not wholly so... Here it is worthy to be observed that most of the fragments they have are old historical Ballads and Romances, this kind of poetry being more greedily swallowed and retentively preserved by memory than any others". Low continues that "he [William Henry] spoke of three kinds of poetry used in Norn, and repeated or sung by the old men; the Ballad (or Romance, I suppose); the *Vysie* or *Vyse*, now commonly sung to dancers; and the simple Song. By the account he gave of the matter, the first seems to have been valued here chiefly for its subject, and was commonly repeated in winter by the fireside; the second seems to have been used in public meetings, now only sung to the dance; and the third at both" (Low 1879: 107). He also notes that William Henry "repeated and sung the whole day" (Hægstad 1900: 11). The most peculiar moment of recording is that Low did not know any Scandinavian language, i. e. he did not understand a word of what he was writing down. He writes: "In this Ballad I cannot answer for the orthography. I wrote it as an old man pronounced it; nor could he assist me in this particular" (Low 1879: 107). Having in mind the words of William Henry, one can call this ballad a diffuse continuum of an earlier epic tradition.

The analysis of a ballad is a complicated matter, because the recording is faulty. The late date of the recording is one factor. But at least we can be sure that when this ballad was recorded, Norn still was a living language. This is

indicated not just by Low, but also by other sources, such as *The Description of the Isles of Orkney and Zetland*, published in Edinburgh in 1771 by Sir Robert Sibbald. He describes conditions in Shetland around 1680 as such: “All the Natives . . . can speak the Gothick or Norwegian Language, and seldom speak other among themselves” (Sibbald 1771: 48–49). It seems though that this situation soon changed, and, according to Laurits Rendboe, Norn sang its swansong i. e. lived its last days (Rendboe 1987: 6). This ballad is the only complete ballad in Norn (there are no other complete ballads either from Orkney or from Shetland). Moreover, it was transmitted orally and Low presented what he heard through the medium of English, and to a limited extent French orthography.

Thus we have some issues that complicate the analysis of the ballad: the lack of other similar texts in Norn, the incomplete information on which projections are made, as well as the paucity of texts.

The fact that Low did not understand what he was writing may indicate that the text, as we have it, reflects its pronunciation. Besides, the bound form of the ballad ensures its longevity in an unchanged form. However, “stylistically, one would not expect . . . a (medieval?) ballad to reflect everyday speech” (Hammersheib 1981: 181). At the same time, it is to be expected that the language of this ballad was preserved by its bound form, and since the ballad was sung, the melody must have preserved the form and contents unchanged.¹ This type of conservation allows us to think that the language of the ballad is more or less archaic and its content has been preserved without drastic changes.

The Sources of Scandinavian Material

There is a voluminous tradition related to the names of the two protagonists of the Shetlandic ballad – *Hiluge* and *Hildina* – in Scandinavian sources.

1) First of all, it goes back to *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra* ‘The Saga of Illugi, Grid’s Foster Son’ which belongs to the bulk of *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda* ‘Sagas of Ancient Times’. However, *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra* is not preserved in any of the collections of *Fornaldarsögur* from the Middle Ages. The oldest manuscript of this saga is AM 123 8vo, which

¹ The fact that it was sung at the time when it was recorded is known from the letter of Low mentioned above.

is on parchment, but hardly much older than 1600 (Davið Erlingsson 1975: 11). With regard to *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, Knut Liestøl supports the traditional opinion that it dates back to about 1300 (Liestøl 1958: 125). The writing of *Fornaldarsögur* is generally believed to have started at the end of the Golden Age of Icelandic literature in the late 13th century. It became increasingly popular in the 14th century, when most of these sagas are thought to have been written down (Sigurðsson 1988: 48).

Secondly, there are quite a few ballads containing names similar to the protagonists' of *Hildinavisen*:

2) Two versions of the ballad (A and B) found in the Faroe Islands are called *Kappin Illugi*. The second protagonist is Hilda (in the version A) or Hildur (in the version B). Both versions of the Faroese ballad were published by Venceslaus Ulricus Hammersheib in *Færøiske kvæder*, 2.

3) A version of a ballad which has a similar story is found in Norway and is called *Kappen Illhugin* and was published by Magnus Brostrup Landstad in *Norske Folkeviser*, nr. 2.

4) In Denmark, the ballad is called *Herr Hylleland henter sin jomfru*. It was published by Sven Grundtvig in *Danmarks gamle Folkeviser*, nr. 44. The difference is that here the male protagonist is called *Hylleland* instead of *Illugi*.

5) Finally, there is the Shetlandic ballad called *Foulavisen* or *Hildinavisen* which contains protagonists with the same names. However, the content of the Shetland ballad differs greatly from the Faroe, Norwegian and Danish ballads, as well as from the Icelandic saga.

It is of great importance that *Hildinavisen* contains completely different features and even a different story which accommodates the so-called "Celtic love triangle" and where the new character *Jarlin d'Orkneyar* is introduced. Other major aspects that make it specific are Hiluges negative character and the female protagonist's name Hildina. The etymology of the name *Hiluge* (*illr* 'ill' + *hugr* 'mind') might indicate that it was attached to an evil personage or a troublemaker from the very beginning, similar to *Bricriu* and *Efnisien* in Celtic medieval literature.

Celtic Motifs in *Hildinavisen*

Comparative literature studies enable us to discover various types of connection between the literature of different countries. Motifs and

tales often have a wide distribution and it is often unsafe to suggest an intimate connection between various tales merely because each is a complex of similar motifs. A motif can be defined as the simplest form of a basic situation (Carney 1979: 48). Motifs or elements usually undergo adaptation. Roland Barthes states that narrative on the level of the story is translatable into different media and different cultural settings without fundamental damage. “It is the last layer, the discourse, which resists transference” (Barthes 1977: 121). I do not claim that the elements I am going to discuss below derive directly from certain Irish or Welsh stories, but I would like to emphasize that these elements are unique in Scandinavian balladry and it is not unlikely that they have sources other than Scandinavian. I discovered a number of parallels to the motifs in Shetlandic ballad in Celtic medieval literature.

Speaking about the transference of literary motifs, or elements, it is necessary to touch upon another important issue, namely the change of literary medium, i. e. the difference of genre. Celtic sagas are prose with some poetic interpolations, whereas Scandinavian ballads are in verse. It is possible that stories were transmitted orally and the ballads were created from their motifs. Be that as it may, the sagas are not contemporaneous with the composition of the ballads. Prose texts usually provide space for countless details, while the poetic form of the ballad demands compactness and details tend to be obliterated. As Liestøl puts it, “instead of somewhat complicated content arrangement which is customary in *fornaldarsögur*, simpler and more popular fairytale motifs dominate in the ballads with the same subject” (Liestøl 1910: 272). Besides, in prose there is much less repetition and formula. Compared with the verse, dialogue in prose is natural and free in its movement, and is often conducted with swift-moving economy and terseness.

Hurling of the Head

As indicated, there is some evidence of strong links between Celtic sources and Scandinavian balladry in general. I would like to note some motifs that are especially prominent in Celtic literature and that also appear (certainly transformed) in this only ballad found in Shetland.

The first one is the episode in *Hildinavisen* where, according to the summary of the ballad given by Low “the Earl is killed by Hiluge,

who cut off his head and threw it at his lady, which, she says, vexed (!) her even more than his death, that he should add cruelty to revenge” (Low 1879: 113). The translation given by Low can be compared with the same lines from the ballad *Hildinavisen*:

Hildinavisen 22

*Nu fac an Iarlin dahuge
Dar min de an engin gro
An cast ans huge ei
Fong ednar u vaxhedne mere mo.*

‘Now the Earl got a deathblow – nobody could help / save him.
He (Hiluge) cast his head into her (Hildina’s) lap (embrace, chest)
and she was angered’ (Hægstad 1900: 6).

Two Irish sagas have episodes connected with beheading. One of them is *Fled Bricrenn* ‘Bricriu’s Feast’, the other is *Scéla Muicce Meic Da Thó* ‘The Story of Mac Dá Thó’s Pig’ which are reminiscent of the beheading episode in our ballad. Both these sagas have “the constellation of concepts that may be conveyed by headings such as ‘contention at the Celtic feast’, ‘the Celtic cult of the head’, and others of this type” (Koch 2000: 23–25). This feature was earlier described by Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson as the ‘head hunting and the beheading game’ (Jackson 1964: 19–20, 35–37). The beheading motif can be called a stock motif and it is counted among the ones that belong to the earliest Celtic tradition.

The earliest version of *Fledd Bricrenn* is found in the oldest Irish manuscript *Leabhar na h-Uidre* ‘The Book of the Dun Cow’, written at Clonmacnoise about 1100 yet containing interpolations from 1250–1300. As it was proved in 1912 by the Irish palaeographer R. I. Best, the manuscript had been written by three different scribes.² The story was first committed to writing in the 8th century – to judge by the language (O’Brien 1968: 68–69). *Fledd Bricrenn* contains the so called ‘beheading game episode’, where Cú Roi is beheaded three times, only

2 One of them was Maelmuire – murdered in 1106 by a marauder, probably a Viking.

to recover instantly. Concerning the sources of ‘the beheading game episode’ in the Icelandic *Sveins rímur Múkssonar*, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson rejects the idea that the motif in the Icelandic version could have been taken over from English or French sources (Sveinsson 1975: 134).

The Irish story is closest to the Icelandic one, but the influence from Arthurian works indicates that the *rímur* could not have derived directly from the Irish tradition. A now lost source, possibly written in England, might therefore have served as an intermediary (Sveinsson 1975: 134).

Orgain Mic Da Thó ‘Mac Dá Thó’s Slaughter’ is included in the list of *prím-scéla* (‘primary stories’) even before the period of our earliest manuscript text in the Book of Leinster. The list itself probably dates from the 10th century; but the tale is also mentioned in a poem by Flannacán Mac Cellaich who is said to have been slain by Norsemen in 896 (Chadwick 1968: 90). *Scéla Muicce Meic Da Thó* is also a very early story, probably composed in its present form about 800 AD. The setting of the story, and its link to Kildare, suggest that the author belonged to Leinster, and had inherited its fine heroic tradition.

Scéla Muicce Meic Da Thó is highly sophisticated story which belongs to the early period of the Viking regime, and this may have done something to substitute laconic humour and a spirit of ripe burlesque for dignity and poetical beauty. The story is preserved in at least six manuscripts. *The Book of Leinster*, written about 1160 is the earliest. The text of the story is also found in *Harley 5280*, a manuscript written in the first half of the 16th century and now kept at the British Museum. These texts of the story are independent. They seem to be derived from a common source, which was a transcript of a previous version, believed from its language to date from about 800.

Nora Chadwick assumed that *Scéla Muicce Meic Da Thó* also shows certain parallels with the Icelandic *Bandamanna saga* ‘The Story of the Banded Men’ (Chadwick 1957: 172), but these parallels are considered dubious by other scholars (Gísli Sigurðsson 1988: 93). Another episode from the same Irish story is paralleled in *Njáls saga*. *Njáls saga* has a description (Chapter 70) of an Irish dog *Sámr*, brought from Ireland as a gift by Ólafr Pá to Gunnar Hámundarson. The descriptions of legendary dogs in Irish stories are frequent, as for example the description of a dog brought from Spain in the opening lines of

the above mentioned *Scéla Muicce Meic Da Thó*. If these two episodes in different family sagas are really connected with *Scéla Muicce Meic Da Thó*, then it seems that material of this Irish saga in one or other form was well known not just in Shetland, but also in Iceland. If Chadwick's suggestion about these motifs is correct then it proves that the material of this particular Irish saga was well known in the area.

Scéla Muicce Meic Da Thó refers to the so-called *curadmír* – 'Hero's Portion'. Diodorus Siculus, who already wrote about the Celts c. 60–30 BC, describing the behaviour of the Celts during feasts, mentions 'the choicest portion': "They honour the brave warriors with the choicest portion, just as Homer says that the chieftains honoured Ajax when he returned having defeated Hector in single combat. They also invite strangers to their feasts, inquiring of their identity and business only after the meal. During feasts it is their custom to be provoked by idle comments into heated disputes, followed by challenges and single combat to death" (Koch 1997: 11).

The story *Scéla Muicce Meic Da Thó* tells about the rivalry of two heroes Cet Mac Mágach of Connacht and Conall Cernach of Ulster. Conall and Cet argue about the champion's portion at the feast. At the end of the dialogue, Cet reluctantly acknowledges Conall to be a greater hero, regretfully adding that if a certain Anlúan were present, he would have challenged Conall:

'He is present though', cries Conall, who at this point takes the head of *Anlúan* which is hanging at his belt, and flings it at the opponent.

"It is true", Cet said, 'you are even a better warrior than I. If Anlúan mac Mágach were in the house', said Cet, 'he would match you contest, and it is a shame that he is not in the house tonight.' 'But he is,' said Conall, taking Anlúan's head out of his belt and throwing it at Cet's chest, so that a gush of blood broke over his lips' (Koch 1997: 62).

Chadwick claims that "terse and humorous, with laconic brevity, it (the story) reminds us of the Icelandic sagas at their best. The dialogue in particular is masterly in its understatement and crisp repartee" (Chadwick 1968: 87).

The element with the head in the story was certainly capturing and probably used to make an indelible impression on the listeners of the story. The narrative aims at arousing and riveting attention and exciting interest, not at stimulating thought. The story-teller makes use of the element of surprise, of quick developments and dramatic moments. “He seeks to impress by rapid crescendo to a startling climax, and a shock, when Cet reluctantly gives precedence to Conall Cernach in the absence of Anlúan. There is more than a touch of humorous hyperbole in Conall’s throwing the head of Anlúan at Cet” (Chadwick 1968: 87–88).

The story was evidently much liked in later times also, for it forms the subject of a number of independent poems. None of these seem to be based directly on the text of our saga. Chadwick suspects that the poems were inspired by a different version of the story (Chadwick 1968: 90).

The motif is reused in *Hildinavisen*, but it is transformed and employed in a completely different context. The head of the dead husband is thrown at his wife. The motif occurs in a very dramatic and crucial moment of the story and perfectly serves its function to surprise and awaken interest and horror.

This element is so particular that it is used twice – the second time at the very end of the ballad when Hiluge asks Hildina for mercy but she reminds him of having thrown the earl’s head at her and how much it had vexed her:

Hildinavisen 34

Du tuchtada lide undocht yach

Swo et sa ans bugin bleo

Dogh casta ans huge

I mit fung u vexmir mire mo

‘You thought I suffered not yet enough to see his body bleed, still you threw his head to my lap and I was vexed’ (Hægstad 1900: 9).

It is impossible to know how this motif penetrated into *Hildinavisen*, but it might have come through the Viking contacts with the aboriginal population in Shetland and Orkney, to whom the contents of the Irish

sagas were known, because the story *Scéla Muicce Meic Da Thó* was coming into shape at the period of Viking invasions. It is clear that this motif in *Hildinavisen* is of Celtic origin, because in the Scandinavian balladry, except for *Hildinavisen*, it is used only in one more instance and is once more transformed and used in yet another different context.

The severed head at the feast has a strong emotional effect (and the position of the episodes within the respective tales confirms that medieval authors felt the power of the device, much as we do now). Its currency may, therefore, be purely literary. Storytellers and writers knew an effective episode when they encountered it and simply reused the device (Koch 2000: 35).

As Marius Hægstad was the first to notice, we find fundamentally the same incident in the Faroese ballad *Frúgvín Margareta* (Hægstad 1900: 11). But in this ballad, it is not a full-grown man's head, but a little child's. Decapitation and throwing of the head are present just in Shetlandic *Hildinavisen* and Faroese *Frúgvín Margareta* (Hammersheib 1981: 93–120). The motif is Celtic, but the context is different. This element in the Faroese ballad might have been influenced by the Shetlandic ballad and reused in *Frúgvín Margareta* later – this time related to the killing of a child. The Faroese ballad is very likely to be much later, because it is clearly dominated by the Christian element.

This motif was certainly very impressive and it does not appear in other Scandinavian ballads. As a result, an interesting amalgam of two cultures that merge together is achieved, since “the Irish Sea zone is hardly a culturally sterile environment” (Koch 2000: 27). The motif of the severed heads is well known in Iceland. When Gísli Sigurðsson deals with the nature of contacts on the Orkneys between Iceland and the Gaelic world after the age of settlement, he claims that the motif of the severed head comes into Icelandic from the Celtic world (Gísli Sigurðsson 1988: 12). There are numerous references in Icelandic sources about a head-cult of some sort and related folk beliefs. Many of these are believed to be due to the Gaelic influence and some are so well established that they are most likely to have developed within Iceland.

Thus, in the Norse context, there is a group of motifs, atypical as they are of the Norse tradition and familiar from Celtic sources. Decapitation, the preservation of the severed head, its association with

a well, its powers of prophecy as well as otherworldly knowledge are all features which recur in the Celtic tradition and belief. All the evidence suggests that this episode in Norse mythology, if not a direct borrowing from a Celtic source, at least owes its presence in the Norse tradition to detailed knowledge on the part of the story-teller of such beliefs amongst the Celts (Ross 1962: 41). Severed talking heads at feasts appear in many Irish stories, particularly in the Finn Cycle. *Bruiden Átha Í* 'The Quarrel at the Ford of the Yew Tree' (Meyer 1893: 24), *Aided Find* 'The Death of Finn mac Cumail' (Meyer 1897: 464–5) and *Sanas Cormaic* 'Cormac's glossary' (the glossary of Bishop Cormac mac Cuillenáin, year 908) (Meyer 1912: xix–xx) contain episodes where a severed head demands its share of food.

Severed talking heads in Old Icelandic material are to be found in *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 43 and *Þorsteins þátr bæjarmagns*, ch. 9. Severed heads of enemies appear in *Grettis saga*, ch. 82., *Bjarnar saga Híttdælakappa*, ch. 32, *Fóstbræðra saga*, ch. 18, and *Ljósvetinga saga*, (*Þórarins þátr*). Supernatural qualities are also attached to heads in *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar*, ch. 28/19, *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 27, and *Njáls saga*, ch. 157 (i. e. the head of King Brjánn) (Gísli Sigurðsson 1988: 81).

It is important to point out that a similar tradition of severed heads is also found in Orkney, but here it is slightly different, though there are certain parallels even with *Scéla Muicce Meic Da Thó*. In *Orkneyinga saga* (chapter 5), Sigurðr, the first Earl of Orkney, defeats the Scottish Earl Melbrikta nicknamed *tönn* 'tooth' in a battle, cuts his and his followers' heads off, attaches them to the saddle and gallops triumphantly away. Unfortunately for Sigurðr, Melbrikta's tooth, sticking out of the severed head's mouth, wounds Sigurðr's calf, causing a deadly infection. Note that both the Shetlandic ballad and *Orkneyinga saga* involve the Earl of Orkney. Besides, Melbrikta is an Irish name, meaning 'devotee to St. Brigit'.

The very custom of using heads as a token of triumph and even hanging them on horses was common enough among the Celts, examples of which can be found in numerous sources (Chadwick 1970: 49–50; Coch and Carey 1997: 12). One of the most famous Irish sagas *Táin Bó Cúailnge* 'The Cattle-Raid of Cooley' contains numerous episodes about Cú Chulainn galloping away with a bunch of heads tied to his horse.

The distinctive element in *Orkneyinga saga*, however, is that the head-episode is connected with revenge. An Old Irish parallel to this combination of motifs can be found in *Aided Chonchobuir* ‘The Death of Conchobhar’ (Jackson 1971: 53–56), dated in the 9th century. *Aided Chonchobuir* also describes a feast with disputes and contentions among the Ulstermen. In this story, a ball made out of the Leinster King Mesgegra’s brain and used by the Ulstermen to boast about the victory, is stolen by a Connachtman, Cet: “He snatched the brain from the hand of one of them [buffoons] and carried it off with him, for Cet knew that it was foretold that Meis-Geghra would avenge himself after his death” (Jackson 1971: 54). Eventually, this particular brain is thrown at the Ulster King, Conchobhar Mac Nessa: “Cet fitted Meis-Geghra’s brain into the sling, and slung it so that it struck Conchobhar on the top of his skull, so that two-thirds of it were in his head, and he fell headlong on the ground” (Jackson 1971: 54). The ball enters his head but does not cause his death until several years later, when Conchobhar receives the news of Christ’s crucifixion. Then the ball falls out of his head, leaving a hole for the blood to gush forth, whereupon Conchobhar dies, is baptized in his own blood and becomes the first Irishman to go straight to Heaven.

The pattern of revenge is quite complicated in the Irish story and not as straightforward as in *Orkneyinga saga* where the full-sized head kills the actual killer, soon after having been separated from the body (Gísli Sigurðsson 1988: 45–46). The similarities nevertheless lead Bo Almqvist to conclude: “One need not assume that the tale about Mesgegra’s brain is the direct source of the Melbrikta episode in *Orkneyinga saga*, but some such Gaelic story, perhaps in a more primitive form and without hagiographic ingredients, seems likely to lie behind it” (Almqvist 1981: 99).

In the above mentioned Irish saga *Aided Chonchobuir* we also have a hurling episode, but it is not a whole head that is thrown, but a ball made out of the brain. However the similarity of the motifs and the motivation of this action, i. e. revenge, are obvious. It is also worth mentioning that the very same Cet plays a crucial role in causing the King Conchobhar’s death, i. e. he is the thrower. In *Scéla Muicce Meic Da Thó*, the head is thrown at him. It is also very important that Cet’s rival, Conall, mentioned in *Scéla Muicce Meic Da Thó* acts as one of Cet’s rivals also in

Aided Chonchobuir. It might happen that some Old Irish stories about the rivalry between the Ulstermen and Connachtmen and Cet's destiny, where severed heads (alternatively – balls made of brain) appear and are being hurled forth in order to cause the rival's death or in revenge, were well known in Orkney and Shetland and thus were paralleled in various Scandinavian texts.

“King and Goddess” Theme in *Hildinavisen*

The narrative of *Hildinavisen* is particular and divergent compared to other heroic Scandinavian ballads. The story evolves around a woman, who takes revenge for her husband in a very particular way.

This Shetlandic ballad, or rather its framework, is reminiscent of an adaptation of the Celtic “King and goddess” theme. The Celtic world shared with many other ancient cultures the mythic model of the royal rule – *hieros gamos*, or sacred marriage. According to this model, successful and prosperous government of society was the outcome of the union between female and male elements, between the goddess of the land and its sovereign (Herbert 1992: 264). In the universe of early Irish mythology, the female deity was the embodiment both of the physical land and of its dominion (Herbert 1992: 56). The feminisation of the land is amply in evidence in the sovereignty myth (Herbert 1992: 57).

In its Celtic setting, the myth is represented primarily in sources from both Gaul and Ireland. The abundance of the stories containing the “King and goddess” theme in both Irish and Welsh medieval literature is a well-known fact and sacred marriage imagery has been a constantly recurring theme in Irish literature throughout the ages (Breatnach 1953: 321–36).

The durability of the theme as a literary *topos* is surprising. Every time the motif appears, the story is different, but we still can notice an on-going continuity which inevitably implies the transformation of each and every story.

The Gaulish epigraphic and iconographic evidence belongs to the period between ca. 500 BC and 400 AD. Written sources referring to the Gaulish society were produced by Greek and Roman observers (Mac Cana 1970: 16–17). In Ireland literary evidence belongs to the period from about the 7th century AD onward. In the case of early

Irish narrative, the hypothesis is that we are dealing with mythology refracted through literature (Ó Cathasaigh 1993: 128). What is remarkable, however, is the persistence and vigour of these concepts in the tradition of the only Celtic society which remained relatively untouched by the Roman civilization (Mac Cana 1970: 121).

The iconographic imagery of a foreign consort of the goddess of the land finds a literary reflex in the story of the foundation of Massilia (Marseilles). It relates that the Gaulish king's daughter, in the act of proffering a symbolic marriage libation to her intended spouse, bestows the drink on the newly-arrived foreigner (Herbert 1971: 265).

We find very similar stories in early Ireland where a goddess validates the ruler through the act of marriage. In medieval Irish literature, we have narratives relating to two Medbs – Medb of Cruachu and Medb Lethderg of Leinster – both of them select and validate their royal spouses through marriage.

The theme persisted in Celtic territories almost unchanged in its lineament and in its influence. The concept of a female bestowing the right to rule on male sovereigns remained as a rather stable and yet shifting phenomenon, so the preservation of the myth in the literary sources of the early Christian period seem to trace the survival of its narrative realization.

The most famous text *Baile in Scáil*, 'Phantom's frenzy', dated from the early 11th century AD (Gerard Murphy holds that there is an earlier stratum in the text, possibly from the ninth century [Murphy 1937: 143]) portrays a vision of the pan-Celtic god-king Lug enthroned in iconic fashion beside his female consort. She is instructed to bestow the drink of sovereignty on a succession of rulers destined to be kings. The imagery is strongly reminiscent of the Gaulish representations (Herbert 1971: 267). Here the significance of the drink is prominent.

There are many other Irish equivalents where the goddess destroys the unrighteous and confirms the right one as a king. The underlying pattern of the stories is the same.

There are special elements constitutive of the account, i. e. brothers claiming kingship, a hunt in the wilderness, a disguised queen and an apparently repugnant sexual union, which have been noted by J. de Vries. According to J. Carey, there are some recurring elements

like hunt and / or wandering, woman dispensing a drink, woman who appears in different forms. These elements (not necessarily all of them) recur in the famous legends told of Niall Noígiallach and Lugaid Laígde (De Vries 1961: 120). Another similar story is the legend of Macha Mongruad. In the legends of Niall and Lugaid, the true claimant is united with the goddess and in the case of Mongruad she subjugates the unworthy (Carey 1983: 69). Mongruad is an example of the terrible aspect of the Sovereignty goddess (Carey 1983: 263–75).

Not all encounters with the Sovereignty goddess are equally benevolent. A notable feature of the system was the dual aspect of the goddess. The figure of the sovereignty could appear repulsive or beautiful. “Death and slaughter were the reverse sides of the personifications of growth and fertility” (Carey 1983: 268).

There is a wide range of Gaulish and Irish narratives, where instead of being confirmed as a king by the female divinity, the unsuitable ruler is destroyed. In some occasions Sovereignty goddess displays her two-fold character: sinister and aggressive on the one hand, beautiful and prosperous on the other (Carey 1983: 268).

The tale which is of great importance to the investigation of *Hildinavisen* is one of the earliest Celtic tales containing the “King and goddess” theme with a negative outcome where the goddess acts as terrifying and malevolent. The setting of the story is similar to that of the above-mentioned foundation story of Masillia. But almost the same scenario can lead to two different consequences. One version of the story comes from Asia Minor (around modern Ankara, Turkey). The story is registered by Mestrius Plutarchus (Plutarch c. 46–127) in section XX of his *Moralia* in the chapter *De Mulierum Virtutibus*, ‘On the Bravery of Women’, 257–8, called “The Poisoned libation: the Love Triangle of Sinatus, Sinorix, and the High Priestess Camma”. This work of Plutarch appears in pp. 471–581 of Vol. III of the Loeb Classical Library’s edition of the *Moralia*, first published in 1931. Polyaeus (the middle of the 2nd century AD) drew freely from Plutarch’s *Moralia* to embellish his *Strategemata*. Sinorix means ‘old king’, Camma probably means ‘evil woman’ and Sinatus means ‘the one with good ancestry’. Galatia here means the Celtic domain founded in Hellenistic times in central Asia Minor. Features of the narrative – including a queen closely connected

with a goddess, a honey drink that proves poisonous, an unnatural death instead of a wedding feast, a chieftain set in a chariot as his relatives prepare his tomb, a love triangle terminating in a fateful chariot ride and kinslaying as the prelude to the downfall of the king, a woman who brings great evil to those close to her through no fault of her own – resonate widely through the Celtic literary traditions and may be viewed as elements in its inherited preliterate substance (Koch 1997: 34).

In order to compare the story about Camma and Hildina I give here the Plutarch's story in full. Translation is made by John Carey in *The Celtic Heroic Age*.

xx. Camma

Sinātus and Sinorix, distant kinsmen, were the most powerful of the tetrarchs of Galatia. Sinātus had a young wife named Cammā, much admired for her youth and beauty, but still more remarkable for her virtues. For she was not only modest and affectionate, but also shrewd and courageous, and fervently beloved by her servants on account of her compassion and her kindness. She was further distinguished by her office as priestess of Artemis, the goddess whom the Galatae most revere, and was always to be seen at the solemn processions and sacrifices, magnificently attired.

Sinorix fell in love with her. Unable to possess her either by persuasion or by force while her husband lived, he did a dreadful deed: he killed Sinātus treacherously. Not long thereafter he proposed to Cammā, who was now living in the temple. She was biding her time, and bore Sinorix's crime not with pathetic weakness but with a keen and foreseeing spirit.

He was importunate in his entreaties, and proffered arguments not entirely implausible: he claimed that he was a better man than Sinātus and had killed him for no reason except his love for Cammā. Even at first, her refusals were not too harsh, and in a little while she seemed to soften. (Her relatives and friends were also pressuring and seeking to force her to accept him, hoping themselves for the favour of the mighty Sinorix.)

At last she yielded, and sent for him so that the compact and the vows might be made in the presence of the goddess. When he arrived she received him affectionately. She led him to the altar, poured a libation from a drinking-bowl, drank some herself, and told him to drink the rest. It was a drink of milk and honey [melikraton], with poison in it. When she saw that he had drunk, she cried aloud and fell down before the goddess. 'I bear witness to you, most glorious spirit,' she said, 'that it is for the sake of this day that I have lived since Sinātus's murder, in all that time taking pleasure in none of the good things of life, but only in the hope of justice. Having attained this, I go down to my husband. As for you, most impious of men, your relatives can prepare your tomb, instead of your wedding and bridal chamber.'

When the Galatians heard this, and felt the poison at work in him and penetrating his body, he mounted his chariot as if the tossing and shaking might do him good; but forthwith he desisted, got into a litter, and died in the evening. Cammā survived through the night: learning of his death, she passed away cheerfully and gladly.

The scenario is almost the same as in the Shetlandic ballad. However, it is clear that Celtic motifs reused in the ballad have nothing to do with their mythological aspect, it is not rationalisation of the myth. In case of *Hildinavisen*, it is just a borrowing of the narrative. In the story Camma is depicted as a mortal female, though she is connected with the goddess Artemis, goddess of hunting, ('whom the Galatae most revere') being her priestess.

In *Hildinavisen* and in the story of Camma we have a typical Celtic love triangle, where the heroine's husband is killed by a jealous rival who discloses his intentions to marry the widow straightaway. Compare to *Hildinavisen*:

Hildinavisen 23

Di lava mir gugna

Yift bal yagh fur o landi

Gipt mir nu fruan Hildina

Vath godle u fasta bande.

‘You let me get married if she will follow me from the country, give me now lady Hildina with gold and betrothal’ (Hægstad 1900: 6).

With regard to marriage, women in both stories seem to act on their own free will. In *Hildinavisen*, Hildina’s father asks Hilugi to wait until the child is a bit older and then leaves to Hildina the right to decide. In the story of Camma though Camma seems to be urged to marry Sinorix by her relatives, she can finally decide herself.

Hiluge as Sinorix is clearly a wrongful king, not destined for kingship. The scenario of the story is the same as in the stories with the “King and Goddess” theme that have a positive outcome, but the drink turns out to be poisoned. The symbolism of the sacred drink is absolutely transparent in the story of Camma. An emphasis on the drink is also very lucid in the Shetlandic ballad.

Hildina concedes to marry Hiluge, but asks to be allowed to serve the wine. Her father allows her on condition that she will not think about the Earl. Hildina answers that even if she thought about the Earl, she would not serve any harmful drink to her father:

Hildinavisen 26, 27, 28

Nu Hildina on askar feyrin

Sien di gava mier live

Ou skinka vin

Ou guida vin.

Duska skinka vin, u guida vin

Tinka dogh eke wo

Iarlin an gougha here din.

Watha skilde tinka

Wo Iarlin gouga herè min

Hien mindi yagh inga forlskona

Bera fare kera fyryn min.

‘Now Hildina asks her father – Give me permission to dispense the wine, to pour the wine.

You shall dispense the wine and pour the wine, though do not think about the earl, your good lord.

Though I will think about the earl, my good lord, for that I would not serve any harmful drink to my dear father' (Hægstad 1900: 7).

Hægstad takes the word *forlskona* as a compound in genitive case – **fárskonnu*, composed of the word *fár*, meaning 'harm' and *kanna*, 'vessel'. Later on, Hildina serves a drink to her father and everybody else. In this case, the drink is called *mien*. It corresponds to the Old Norse word *mjoðr* 'a drink made out of milk and honey'. In the Celtic story, the drink is called *melicatron* and is made of milk and honey. It is clear from the text that Hildina 'infuses a drug', but it is not clear what kind of drug it is:

Hildinavisen 25

Hildina liger wo chaldona

U o dukrar u grothè

Min du buga till bridleusin

Bonlothir u duka dogha.

'Hildina lies in the tent, her eyes are dark of crying, and before she is called to the wedding ceremony, she infuses poison into the drink' (Hægstad 1900: 7).

Here the ending of the story is different – in the Celtic tradition, the man dies, but in this story the main hero is burned alive as in so many different Icelandic sagas. In general, the serving of ale and mead in Scandinavian ballads is traditional, but here the tradition is modified with poisoned libation and combined with a typical Celtic triangle. The burning, on the contrary, seems to be in itself a particularly Scandinavian motif, which often appears in various Icelandic sagas. In the end, when *Hiluge* asks Hildina to pity him, she again reminds him of the throwing of the earl's head at her. Again, this seemingly Celtic motif is exploited here with a new strength.

The motif of a king receiving a drink from a beautiful woman in Scandinavian literature is not unique to *Hildinavisen*. Generally stories

with this motif are held to be closely connected with the Irish tradition like for example stories about the Norwegian King Haraldr hárfagri, found in *Hálfðanar saga svarta* (chapter 8) (Aðalbjarnarson 1941: 84–93) and *Flateyjarbók* (Flateyjarbók, 1860–1862, 564–66). The King as a young man follows Finn or Dofri into a supernatural fosterage where he receives a cup of mead from his fosterer's beautiful daughter and is promised a sovereignty on his departure. Chadwick also maintains that the appearance of a Finn, a famous Irish hero, in the Icelandic version is significant (Chadwick 1957: 192) and demonstrates Celtic and Scandinavian contacts. Close relationship of Harald's supernatural experiences to those of the Irish High-King Conn Cétchathach, and still more to those of Conn's descendant, Niall Noígíallach, as well as their relations with the maiden calling herself the *flaithiusa h-Erenn* 'the Sovereignty of Ireland' are already well established (Chadwick 1957: 192).

Conclusions

The presence of Celtic elements in the only surviving ballad in Norn language *Hildinavisen*, which have been created in continually changing linguistic, social and cultural conditions, indicates a certain degree of contact with the Celtic population. The marine societies of Shetland and Orkney Islands generated various stories, where motifs and elements travelled in various directions. *Hildinavisen* is certainly of Western Scandinavian origin, but it contains or rather is adorned with Celtic motifs. The meeting of these two traditions – Celtic and Scandinavian – gave a peculiar and productive treatment of certain narratives. The analysis of the text of *Hildinavisen* indicates that on the level of the story *Hildinavisen* borrows substantially from the Celtic narrative tradition. Various motifs are externally imposed and later on adapted in Scandinavian material. Especially prominent is the appeal of the King and Goddess theme. But if it is a borrowing, it is by no means direct, because Celtic motifs and elements are adapted, transformed and melted in the text of the Scandinavian ballad. The presence of some Celtic motifs, such as throwing of the head, which is one of the favourite devices in the Irish sagas, or the King and goddess theme have wide ramifications in Celtic literature and were probably particularly prominent in the oral tradition.

It is possible that there was some kind of Orkney version of the story later on transmitted to Shetland, since the main hero is the Earl of Orkney. This story might have served as an intermediary between *Hildinavisen* and the Celtic tradition, since Orkney have been one of the important channels for the transmission of the Celtic elements and Shetland must have been on the route of these contacts. Bearing in mind the historical modes of habitation, as the sea was worn deep with boats, the favourite pastimes and working activities were connected with sailing and rowing, usually accompanied by ballads. Thus the ballad was preserved in the bound language for a long time. This rowing and singing together catalysed the appearance of new motifs, which were designated to address issues specific to the unique conditions of this region.

Appendix I. Contents of *Hildinavisen* after Low

Low wrote about the content of the ballad (Anders. page 113): “A literal translation of the above (the ballad) I could not procure, but the substance is this:”

An Earl of Orkney, in some of his rambles on the coast of Norway,³ saw and fell in love with the King’s daughter of the country. As their passion happened to be reciprocal, he carried her off in her father’s absence, who was engaged in war with some of his distant neighbours (v. 1–3). On his return, he followed the fugitives to Orkney, accompanied by his army, to revenge on the Earl the rape of his daughter (v. 7). On his arrival there, Hildina (which was her name), first (!) spied him, and advised her now husband to go an attempt to pacify the King (v. 9). He did so, and by his appearance and promises brought the King so over as to be satisfied with the match (v. 12). This, however, was of no long standing, for as soon as the Earl’s back was turned (!) a courtier, called Hiluge, took great pains to change the King’s mind, for it seems Hiluge had formerly hoped to succeed with the daughter himself (v. 15–16). His project took, and the matter came to

3 The mark for something that Low says, but which is actually not found in the ballad.

blows (v. 16–18); the Earl is killed by Hiluge, who cut off his head and threw it at his lady, which, she says, vexed (!) her even more than his death, that he should add cruelty to revenge (v. 22). Upon the Earl's death, Hildina is forced to follow her father to Norway, and in a little time Hiluge makes his demand to have her in marriage of her father; he consents, and takes every method to persuade Hildina, who with great reluctance, agrees upon condition that she is allowed to fill the wine at her wedding (v. 26). This is easily permitted (v. 27), and Hildina infuses a drug (v. 25) which soon throws the company into a dead sleep, and after ordering her father to be removed, set the house on fire (v. 29–30). The flame soon rouses Hiluge, who piteously cries for mercy, but the taunts he had bestowed at the death of the Earl of Orkney are now bitterly returned, and he is left to perish in the flames (v. 31–34).

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