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Frands Herschend. How Norse is *Skírmismál*? – A comparative case study

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Reviewer 1, Olof Sundqvist

Review of the manuscript “How Norse is *Skírnismál*? – A comparative case study”

In my opinion, the manuscript titled “How Norse is *Skírnismál*? – A comparative case study” can be published. It is well written with a clear line of argumentation, and a plausible conclusion. In what follows, I will give some minor comments and recommendations, which may be used in order to slightly improve the text.

1. The argument depends largely on Gro Steinsland’s research on *Skírnismál* and her idea that behind Old Norse royal ideology there was a holy marriage (*hieros gamos*) between a god (Freyr) and a giantess (Gerðr). This odd marriage brought forth something new, a prototypical ruler. It created a bridge between mythical and historical levels, with consequences. The Ynglingar, for instance, were the products of the marriage of Freyr and the giantess Gerðr. Other ruler families in ancient Scandinavia, according to Steinsland, were also the products of a marriage between a god and a giantess. In *Haleygjatal*, for instance, the Earls of Lade originated from the union between Óðinn and the giantess Skaði. Many scholars have been sceptical of Steinsland’s theory (e.g. La Farge 1994; Hultgård 1994; Clunies Ross 1994; Motz 1996; Lönnroth 1997; Krag 2001; Sundqvist 2002; 2016; Frank 2007; Cöllen 2011). Some have denied the *hieros gamos* between the god and giant in general, on the grounds that the normal hierogamy is between the god/ruler and the goddess. That a prototypical king is always a product of a meeting between a god and a giantess has also been questioned. The Skjöldungar of Denmark, for instance, according to Snorri, were descendants from Óðinn’s son Skjöldr and the goddess Gefjun. The mythical father is not always a god; some rulers in Norway were descended from Fornjotr, who perhaps was a giant (*Hversu Noregr byggðisk*). Steinsland’s idea that the abnormal exogamy leads to the ruler’s ignoble death has also been contested. Lotte Motz (1996) states: “All kings must die, and some die in an honourable and others in a dishonourable manner.” (for an overview, see Sundqvist 2002; 2016). It seems as if the author is not aware of this criticism. He/She should at least comment on the problems that are inherent in Steinsland’s theory.
2. Even if there are many similarities between Venantius Fortunatus’ poems including his epithalamium to Brunhild and Sigibert, on the one side, and *Skírnismál*, on the other side, there are also some striking differences (which I think the author is aware about on e.g. p. 22f.). In some passages, the author states that the ritual processes in these texts refer to legitimate marriage customs. Among specialist on Old Norse mythology, it is often stated that the actions in *Skírnismál* are illegitimate. Rudolf Simek states, for instance: “The much quoted union between Freyr and Gerðr, as described in *Skírnismál* and misinterpreted by Snorri is not a marriage, but an attempt at rape, and *Skírnismál* does not even state the consumption of it, so that the scene can be discarded once and for all.” (Simek 2002: 107). In another text, Simek states that the union between a god and a giantess should be regarded as a misalliance against social norms (cf. Simek 2002; 2014: 76 [2003: 76]). In my opinion, the author should consider such commentaries.
3. The background and the dating of *Skírnismál* should be elaborated. I cannot find some of the standard works on *Skírnismál* in the bibliography, such as Klaus von See’s (et al.) *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda* (Vol. 2) (1997). Daniel Sävborg wrote an important essay on *Skírnismál* in the anthology *Old Norse Religion in Long-Term Perspectives* (2006).
4. When it comes to the relationship between Freyr and Gothic *franja* (Old High German *frō*) ‘Lord, ruler’ see the discussion in Lennart Elmevik in *SAS* 2003 and Olof Sundqvist

Saga och Sed 2014. In the latter article, the author may find a discussion on the similarities between Freyr and the earthly ruler. It could be added to the discussion on p. 12.

5. The proposal that Skírnir was a hypostasis of Freyr was suggested by Magnus Olsen in 1909. This should be added.
6. Details: The reader does not get information about the translations. Are they made by the author? The name of the god should not be written *Oðinn* but *Óðinn*. There are some abbreviations which do not fit into an academic text such as isn't (p. 2) (should be is not) doesn't (p. 8) (does not), hasn't (p. 10) etc. On p. 15 the adjective *skírr* should not be written *skér* (and passim).

Reviewer 2 (anonymous)

Report on 'How Norse is *Skírnismál*? – A comparative case study

There is a great deal of detailed interdisciplinary and cross-cultural work in this article, and some nice close reading of the texts under discussion. The proposition advanced is interesting and up to a point original: the starting-point, the link between the poems of Venantius Fortunatus and *Skírnismál* was made already in 1996 by Frands Herschend (a point fully acknowledged by the author). But the new contribution and central proposition here – that the poet who composed *Skírnismál* wrote and perhaps was educated in England – is handled with the least detail of all parts of the piece and is some ways the most problematic, at least for this reader, and unconvincing without more work. The great proportion of the energy goes into establishing the whereabouts and situation of Venantius Fortunatus, seemingly as way of pointing up his exilic or alien status, and then comes the dependence upon his verses by the author of *Skírnismál* (there is much that is enjoyable in stimulating in that discussion) and a comparison of their cultural and linguistic situations, and then the conclusion, that the Scandinavian author met the work of Fortunatus in Anglo-Saxon England. Everything about the ideas here is stimulating, not least the uncoupling of *Skírnismál* from purely oral tradition and composition to a literate (and partly Latinate) context – but I think that the author needs to do a lot more work before it is a convincing case.

Coming at this piece from a position of less expertise with Old Norse literature than with Latin or the Anglo-Saxon context suggested for the poem's composition, I found the author's presentation of the argument very allusive and telegraphic, taking for granted earlier scholarship's arguments -- there's a lightness of touch that is sometimes just too light. This applies especially to the introductory paragraphs which take few prisoners in terms of assumptions about the reader's knowledge and familiarity with the arguments in play – particularly baffling the statement, 'In Fortunatus' poems, therefore [why therefore?], there was more than just affinities with a changing poetic genre': what is the genre and why is it changing? What assumptions about the 'more' are we being asked to take for granted here? The next paragraph plunges straight in with reference to 'the myth' and again some assumptions are taken for granted. Finally, the introduction ends by suggesting that the discussion, because it will be anchored in the 6th century (i.e. with Venantius Fortunatus), will be 'deconstructive rather than questioning' – deconstructing what? And why does that emerge from the focus on the 6th century? Thus, for an article that does some very interesting things and ranges widely, the introduction seems very off-putting and unhelpful – it doesn't provide any kind of road map for where the author will take us, or what we'll meet there; it simply assumes we already know everything about what lies ahead, when we may not. For me this section is one of the weakest of the whole piece, so deeply into the subject and what's happening in the article, the texts, the scholarship, as to have no sense of an audience outside that doesn't have the same perspective and knowledge. From the standpoint of accepting the author's overall argument, one needs to have a much clearer sense of why so much detail about Venantius Fortunatus's journey northwards is relevant. The narrative is interesting, but why is it here? A long preamble to the suggestion that Fortunatus ended up with a multi-cultural perspective? The reader needs to be helped great deal more than at present to see the point.

As far as argumentation is concerned, my final point relates to the main hypothesis of the article, which commences on p. 25. It runs thus: if it is agreed that the author of *Skírnismál* had been influenced by these particular poems of Fortunatus, then one context in which they might have been encountered would be through study of the poems in tenth-century Anglo-Saxon England, 'as an example of old literature typical of a transition period in which a pagan Germanic society transformed itself into a Christian one.' The author goes on to note in a rather cursory fashion that the Anglo-Saxons liked Fortunatus's poems, that they were popular there as elsewhere, and the England offered 'education for scribes and scholars'. It is deeply interesting to consider the possibility that the poet had indeed read Fortunatus and wrote his poem accordingly. But the author will have to work a great

deal harder to make the case: it is very difficult to be at all confident that the particular poems by Fortunatus circulated and were available in England. The author should really have taken a look at Michael Lapidge's *The Anglo-Saxon Library* (Oxford, 2006), which surveys very fully the texts known in England, using the evidence of both surviving manuscripts and book-lists and citations in Anglo-Saxon works. For sure, the author does cite the 1979 piece by Hunt ('Manuscript evidence for knowledge of the poems of Venantius Fortunatus in late Anglo-Saxon England'), with an appendix by Lapidge on the early period – but that article cannot have been looked at properly, since it concludes (as did Lapidge again in 2006) that there is pretty scant manuscript evidence for extensive knowledge of Fortunatus's poetry in England and patchy evidence from quotations. There are only four manuscripts from England, only with excerpts, and none, as far as I can tell, including the *epithalamium* under discussion here. That evidence needs to be thought about more carefully, as also the manuscript circulation of these poems more generally. And if the poems had been available in England in the tenth century, in a copy that is now lost to us, it is also open to debate whether Fortunatus's verse would have been taught or studied or read with a consciousness of the historical context or the personal journey of the author, or of the transitional status to which the present article refers. One might look to the possibility that the poems were glossed or accompanied by some sort of account of the identity of Fortunatus (similar to the kinds of *accessus ad auctorem* which accompanied, Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, for example), but that cannot be shown at the present state of our knowledge and seems somewhat unlikely. Thus, I would argue that the author's conclusion here is too speculative and too thinly supported by adequate research to stand up to scrutiny.

There is one other problem which needs to be fixed before this article can be published, namely some issues with the handling of the Latin and its translation. Mostly the quotations seem to have been carefully recorded, but some of the short phrases have slips in them. Every quotation needs to be checked again, and the Latin carefully matched up with the translations offered. I also don't quite understand why, when Judith George has produced some perfectly good translations, the quotations are re-translated here, not always very accurately. But looking more carefully into the matter (in fact I was trying to see how the translations have been credited, i.e. whether the author's own – the article doesn't give any help at all to the reader on this matter), I see that several of the translations seem to come directly from the 1996 article by Frands Herschend (in the journal *Tor* volume 28). Herschend, as far I can see, did not make clear where the translations he provided come from – perhaps they are his, or perhaps he is the author of the present piece. Whatever the case may be, there are mistakes that mangle the meaning: it would be far better to adopt George's translation (and credit them as such), or at least come closer to them and to accuracy, ironing out the mistakes that derive, it would seem, from Herschend or his source. Some of these make a difference to the argumentation. Here is a list of the problems I noticed (the rest of the quotations and translations seem ok – but I still don't know whether they are author's or are borrowed from elsewhere; it is a simple matter of courtesy to the article's sources – and indeed the reader – to make this much clearer):

Page 7: 'he wrote a *carminum*' – presumably *carmen* is meant (*carminum* is the genitive plural form of the Latin noun for song, *carmen*). Repeated again at pages 16 and 17.

Page 11: 'he *cardinis occidui dominans in flore iuventae*– "is ruling the western lands in the blossom of his youth"' – the Latin quotation doesn't have the equivalent of 'is' which therefore needs to be supplied after 'he'.

Page 12 NB the lines quoted here are VF *Carm* VI, 1:43-6 rather than 143-6

Page 13 '*clarior aetheria* – "more brightly resplendent than the radiant heavens"' – this doesn't work, as there's not enough of the Latin to match the translation: in fact, the whole line runs *clarior aetheria, Brunichildis, lampade fulgens*, where *aetheria* is an adjective modifying *lampade*, so that what we really need to go with the translation which has been provided is *clarior aetheria ... lampade fulgens*.

And *lactea cui facies incocta rubore coruscat* – should be *coruscat* (this one is an auto spell-correct issue, probably)

Page 13: *Hic nomen avorum / extendit* 'This, his ancestors' name, he spreads' – *hic* is 'he' rather than 'this', as it's in the wrong gender to refer to *nomen*, so we just need 'He spreads his ancestors' name...'.

And in *cui de patre virtus* ..., 'by which manliness from the father', *cui* refers to Sigibert, 'to whom manliness [coming] from his father ...' Again George's translation works better.

Page 14 *Quis crederet autem / Hispanam tibi met dominam, Germania, nasci, / Quae duo regna iugo pretiosa conexuit uno?* (VF *Carm* VI, 1:117–19) 'But who would have believed that there was born in Spain, with you a mistress for Germania, (you) who shall connect, like a yoke, two rich kingdoms into one.' [NB This quotation and translation repeats the one provided by Herschend, 1996, p. 290]. A few things go astray here: 'with you a mistress for Germania' misconstrues the force of *tibi met* and overlooks that *Germania* here is being addressed in the vocative; and then the verb *conexuit* is in the perfect tense and third person singular, 'has connected/joined' rather than 'you ... shall connect', and *iugo* and *uno* belong together. It seems likely that George is also correct to put *pretiosa* with *quae*. Cf. her version 'Who would believe, indeed, that your mistress, Germania, was born a Spaniard, she of great price who united two kingdoms under one bond?' (p. 30).

Page 14 *Non labor humanus potuit tam mira parare / Nam res difficilis divinis utitur armis. / Longa retro series regi hoc vix contulit ulli:* (VF *Carm* VI, 1:120–22) 'No human skill did prepare such wonder. For difficult matters divine vigour is needed. Hardly any, way back in the series of kings, have conferred this on any king.' [Taken presumably from Herschend 1996, p. 290]

Here 'did prepare' for *potuit ... parare* needs to be 'could prepare', and 'skill' is not quite the right nuance for *labor* – perhaps more like 'effort/toil'; then 'divine vigour' for *divinis ... armis* misses the concreteness of 'divine ... weapons'. The final line is further awry: *longa ... series* is the subject of the verb, literally 'the long sequence backwards has conferred this on hardly any king' (George, p. 30, has it elegantly as 'the generations long past have scarce afforded this to any king').

Page 15 VF *Carm*. VI. 1:114 *duce rege sereno* is translated 'with the Duke as serene King' [This derives from Herschend 1996, p. 290; who then provides the further interpretation which is adopted here but seemingly without citing Herschend]. Misled by Herschend, the author interprets this as referring to Gogo. But it seems an odd move to refer to Gogo as King (Herschend, in fact, acknowledges that it is puzzling: p. 292 'We know for a fact that she travelled with Duke Gogo, but we are given to understand that he was also the King in the King's serene nature, We may in other words conclude that the somewhat obscure expression matches the obscurity of the concept of emanation.'). It seems more likely that we should accept George's rendering of the phrase 'the glorious king guiding her path' (especially since Fortunatus has already referred to Sigibert in this way earlier in the poem, at line 89 *nubila nulla gravant populum sub rege sereno*, as George puts it. 'no clouds oppress the people under their glorious king'). In line 114 Fortunatus's use of *duce* is an entirely common idiom meaning 'with X leading the way, or guiding'. i.e. it is not a reference to a Duke, that is, to Gogo. It is another matter to understand how Sigibert is guiding Brunhild's path on her journey, when he is not present – except perhaps that her journey is to him and for him and at his wish, and he thus effectively presides over it. All of this, however, undercuts the link that the author then makes between Gogo being described as *serenus* and Skírnir as *skír* (p. 15, repeated at p. 23); but the fact is that it is Sigibert who is *serenus* and not Gogo.

Page 16 *Nuper ab Hispanis per multa pericula terries – for terris*. In the translation 'you ... restore the master's ways' [cf. Herschend 1996, p. 291] is a little odd for *domini mores ... refert*, which is literally 'you repeat/report ... the master's ways'. George (p. 58) has the neat formulation 'you reflect back the ways of your master'.

Page 17 *Sic modo cuncta favent, dum prosperitate superna / regia caesareo proficit aula iugo* (VF *Carm* VI, 1:15–16) 'Thus favourably inclined all the royal hall contributes with good fortune from above to Caesar's bond.' *Cuncta* is forced here into going with *regia ... aula*, whereas *cuncta* is neuter plural ('all things'), as flagged up by the plural verb (*favent*) of the clause in which it occurs. George renders this 'thus all is now propitious, as with blessing from on high the royal palace prepares for Caesar's marriage'. This means that the commentary which follows won't quite work as it stands: "all the royal hall" refers to the total agency of the Germanic hall building' (the point holds good, but needs to lose the reference to totality).

Page 18 *murere Christi* – for *munere*, and *mode* for *modo* (this second mistake occurs again on p. 19). Here also is a case where the translation is a bit of a mangling: for *Altera vota colens melius quia murere Christi / pectore iuncta prius, plus mode lege placet*. (VF *Carm* VI, 1a:33–34) we get 'Cultivating the second vow better because by Christ's favour the first joined the hearts, she pleases more lawfully.' The second part of

this doesn't make much sense – 'the first joined the hearts' in particular misreads *pectore* as plural not singular, and *prius* as an adjective/noun rather than a pronoun, etc. George (p. 33) has 'responding all the better to that second wish, since through Christ's gift, she who was first joined by her heart, now gives all the more delight joined legally'. This also means that the subsequent interpretation on this page, that *colens* in line 33 refers to what Brunhild does, is not correct, since that participle, in the wider context refers to Christ, who is the earlier nominative subject of the sentence (mentioned in line 31), the one who joins the bridal pair together. It is strange that these lines are mistranslated in this way here when they were previously translated rather more correctly (and quoted without the mistakes) on page 14.

Author's comment on the reviews

I am very thankful for the reports on the manuscript and hugely indebted to the reviewers for their close and critical reading of the manuscript, for their critique and precise corrections and their supportive suggestions.

I have followed formal comments and corrected accordingly, rewritten the introduction and the conclusions and followed all other recommendations. In one or two cases, I have compared different translations of Venantius Fortunatus and discussed some questions of interpretation where I still think that my original manuscript had a point, although my understanding of the lines differs slightly from those of Judith George or Marc Reydellet. Here the readers can easily judge for themselves – accept one translation or the other or perhaps accept the ambiguity as intentional.