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Old Norse religion
in long-term perspectives
Origins, changes, and interactions

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Spinning *seiðr*

Eldar Heide

This paper argues that *seiðr* was about spinning a mind emissary, sending forth such a spun emissary, or attracting things or doing other things with such a mind emissary. Further arguments for this view can be read in my dissertation on *gandr*(r). (*Gandr, seiðr og ándevind.*)

The etymology of *seiðr* is disputed, but it is clear that etymological equivalents are known from Old High German and Old English (cf. for example de Vries 1961). Those equivalent words mean ‘cord, string’ and ‘snare, cord, halter’. The skaldic poetry also has an example of *seiðr* in the meaning ‘cord’ or ‘girth, girdle’ (*Ragnarsdrápa* 15, Finnur Jónsson 1912:4). A straightforward etymology for *seiðr* could then be ‘snare, cord, string, halter’. The problem is what sense this would make. One suggestion has been that *seiðr* was about binding, but binding is not very characteristic of *seiðr*.

However, with a cord, one can not only bind, but also attract things, and this is characteristic of *seiðr* (cf. Almqvist 2000:262ff). In perhaps half of the prose sources, the effect of *seiðr* is that desired objects, persons or resources, like fish, are drawn to the sorcerer. The clearest example is Saxo’s version of the *seiðr* séance in *Hrólfs saga kraka*. The prophetess’s task is to see where two boys are hiding, and Saxo says that they are “drawn out of their recess by the weird potency of the enchantress’s [sic] spells and pulled under her very gaze” (Fisher and Davidson 1979–80 I:202). In Icelandic *seiðr* tradition, from recent times, attraction dominates and most of the sources have the fixed expression *seiða til sín* ‘attract by *seiðr*’ (Jón Þorkelsson 1956; Jón Árnason 1958–61 [1862–64]). In some of the sources, it is as if the victim is pulled by an invisible rope (cf. Almqvist 2000:263). As far as this kind of *seiðr* is concerned, the etymology ‘cord’ makes very good sense.

There is, however, broad agreement that *seiðr* was an ecstatic kind of sorcery (Strömbäck 1970:78). That is, during the séance the *seiðr* performer could send forth his mind, in animal shape or other shape, or could ride in the sky (*Lokasenna* 24 and *Völuspá* 22 [Eddadagte 1955–59 I], *Fridþjófs saga* 72–80, *Þiðriks saga* 303–04). This may seem contradictory to the etymology ‘cord’, but I will argue that it is compatible, because it appears that the sorcerer’s mind emissary could be regarded as something spun: a thread or rope.

My studies on *gandr* have been a gateway to this view. In several sources, *gandr* is a designation of such a mind-in-shape emissary that the *seiðr* performer could send forth. This is evident in the description of the Saami *noaidi* séance in *Historia Norwegie* (60–63), and is the most reasonable interpretation also in *Fóstbræðra saga* (243), *Þiðriks saga* (303–04) and *Forsteins þátrr bæjarmagns* (176). Several of the early

eighteenth-century sources for Saami religion also support this view (Heide 2002:77ff). The word *gandr* is still in use in Norwegian and Icelandic, and modern Icelandic also has retained the derivative *göndull*, as *göndull*. Some of the meanings of these words connect them with spinning. In Modern Icelandic, *göndull* may mean ‘coarse yarn’ and other twisted items (Sigfús Blöndal 1920:282). *Gandr* in modern Northern Norwegian may mean ‘spinning top propelled by a string’ (Aasen 1873:207), which closely resembles a spindle twirling on the floor (using a certain spinning technique):

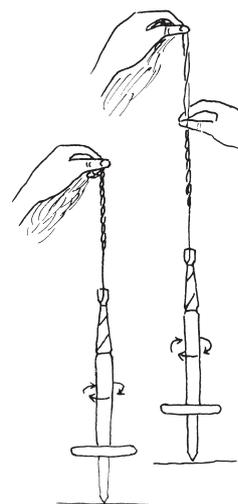


Figure 1. After Hoppe and Edberg 1974:71.

These or related meanings of *gandr/gand* and *göndull/göndull* probably existed in Old Norse, as there was not much contact between Northern Norway and Iceland after the Middle Ages. If so, the “spinning” or “twisting” meanings of *gandr/göndull* suggest that the mind emissary that the *seiðr* performer could send forth could be conceived as something spun or spinning. Support for this can be found in folk traditions from all over Northern Europe: A magic projectile – in Norway often called *gandr* – comes in a *whirlwind* or is a whirlwind, and if one throws a knife into the whirlwind, it will hit the sorcerer at home. (For details of this, see for example Lid 1921:39ff, 1935:29–30; Strömbäck 1935:175–76; Zimmermann 1938–41:636ff). The whirlwind spins, it resembles a rope or thread, and sorcerers use it for attracting desired objects, like a magic lasso, so to speak (Hyltén-Cavallius 1863:13; Storaker 1924:13; Wessman 1931:501; Klintberg 1972:224).

More support for the mind emissary as something spun

is found in a small, magic creature that sucked milk from other people's cows and brought it home to its owner. In Norwegian it is usually called *smørkatt* ('butter cat'), in Swedish *bjära*, and in Icelandic *tilberi* or *snakkur*. In Northern Sweden and Norway it looked like a ball of yarn, in Finland it was partly made of a spindle or spindles with yarn on them, and in Iceland it looked like a certain kind of bobbin used as a shuttle in the traditional, warp-weighted loom (Wall 1977–78). These shapes all are variations on the theme of "concentrated yarn", and if the milk thief got hurt or killed, the same happened to its owner (Qvigstad 1927:458–59; Solheim 1952:321; Wall 1977–78 II:61). Thus, this seems to be an example of the sorcerer's mind emissary conceived of as something spun, a thread.

In Northern European folklore, people skilled in sorcery could also get milk from other people's cows by milking a rope (Kittredge 1929:164; Eckstein 1934–35:302ff; Bjørndal 1949:120; Jón Árnason 1958–61 [1862–64] III:622; Klintberg 1972:233). This technique of milk-stealing closely resembles *seiðr* conceived as attracting by a magic, invisible rope (also because hand milking resembles pulling), at the same time as the rope-milking and the sending forth of the ball of yarn probably are variants of the same theme. (Compare how the magic milk-thief's activity could be referred to by verbs meaning 'to pull, to draw'. Kleiven 1894:39; Kittredge 1929:164; Wall 1977–78 I:94).

The notion that one could send forth one's mind in the shape of a thread or a ball of yarn seems strange to us. I will suggest a two-step explanation for it:

- I Magic wind could be conceived as a sorcerer's mind sent forth.
- II Magic wind could be conceived as something spun, a thread.

Accordingly, the sorcerer's mind sent forth could be conceived as something spun, a thread.

I

It is a widespread notion that magic wind can be a sorcerer's mind. The skaldic poetry has many examples of this (Meissner 1921:138f), and Snorri says: "The mind should be paraphrased by calling it the ogress's wind" (Huginn skal svá kenna, at kalla vind trollkvenna. *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, 191). The expression is derived from the notion that one's breath is one's mind, spirit or soul (cf. Liestøl 1937:96). Compare the relationship between Old Norse *gnð* 'spirit' and *anda* 'to breathe', and between Latin *spiritus* 'a breath, breeze; a spirit' and *spirare* 'to breathe, blow'. It is not likely that the notion of a connection between the breath and the mind comes from the Romans (as has been suggested), because we also find it in European Russia and Siberia (Holmberg [Harva] 1927:7).

II

From Northern Norway, there is a Saami legend about a woman who was skilled in sorcery, and whose husband was a merchant and a skipper. A short time before Christmas, he has still not returned from Bergen, thousands of kilometres away.

Then she goes with her distaff to the top of the Kjøpsvikfjellet mountain to look for the ship. Then she sees that his ship is already leaving Bergen, and she *yoiks* [sings in the Saami way] on the mountain; she has her distaff on the mountain. She sits down *yoiking*, and [...] [her husband] lets the ship sail so that the sea sprays to the sides in front of it [...], and she shouts to him to come on and not be afraid, and the ship should be at home within three days and nights. (Qvigstad 1929:520–21. Translated from Qvigstad's Norwegian translation, but *gobkkql-soppin/gobkkql-soappu* 'distaff' from the Saami original.)

A distaff is a stick to which the spinner attaches the spinning material:



Figure 2. Woman with distaff and spindle. Hordaland, Norway, 1717. After Molaug 1985:88.

The woman apparently spins the wind that so to speak "pulls" her husband back to her. Also in an early seventeenth-century account from Finnmark, magic wind is made by something twisting (*Tingbok for Finnmark*, 169), and sailors used to avoid spinning wheels on board because they could raise a gale (Wikman 1917:25f). Also the fact that the magic wind emissary is so often conceived as a whirlwind supports the idea of an underlying notion that magic wind was something spun, or even a thread or rope. This nature of magic winds fits with the widespread notion that one can buy sailing winds from people skilled in sorcery, usually in the form of a cord with three knots on it, which will release wind when untied (cf. Foran 1995 and Hagen 2002). This is logical if the wind could be conceived as a thread or rope.

In the Saami poem "The Son of the Sun" (*Biejjen baernie* [S. Saami] / *Beávvi bártni* [N. Saami]), it appears that three wind-knots contain a new human being's soul. A central theme of the poem is the untying of three wind knots during a sea voyage. The knots come from the female deity *Maadteraahka* (S. Saami) / *Máttaráhkká* (N. Saami), who in other sources is central to the handing over of souls to embryos (for text, see Gaski 1987 and 2003). In "The Son of the Sun", there seems to be a close connection between the untying of these wind-

knots and the conception and birth of a child. This seems to be confirmed by Peder Claussøn Friis's seventeenth-century information that a Saami could, in particular, make the kind of wind that was blowing when he was born (see Claussøn Friis 1632:402).

A sixteenth-century source from Southern Sweden seems to unite the notions that I have dealt with so far. A woman has some cords with which she can draw away the fish in the sea and take the milk from cattle. The cords have knots, like the wind magic knots – although in this case five. In the cords, there are evil spirits, and if the woman unties the knots, she can send the spirits wherever she wants, and she sends them to gather butter and calves from other farms (Wall 1977–78 I:125–26). If we remember that in the sources, there is very often no clear distinction between helping spirits and the sorcerer's own mind emissary (cf. Bäckman and Hultkrantz 1978:18), then this comes very close to what I have been outlining.

I want to arrive at the following: The easiest etymology of *seiðr*, 'string, cord, snare, halter', is fully compatible with *seiðr* as an ecstatic kind of sorcery, with the sending forth of the sorcerer's mind, because it seems that the mind can be sent forth in the shape of a thread or function as a thread or rope.

I would now like to support this view with further arguments from sources later than the High Middle Ages, before I turn to older sources:

In Icelandic folklore, there is a story of a "knitwear contest" between a woman skilled in sorcery and a priest. The woman gives the priest a sweater, and when he puts it on, it nearly kills him (but his attendant cuts it off him with a knife). As a response, the priest with supernatural power forces the woman to walk in her underwear only, in freezing cold, one late night, all the way to his place. In one of the versions, this is referred to with the expression *að seiða til sín*, and in one version, it is an underskirt which the priest has made and sent her that "pulls" the woman (it says that the priest himself spun the yarn for it and knitted it) (Jón Árnason 1958–61 [1862–64] III:521–23).

Spinning could fit the *seiðhjallr*, because one will often want to stand or sit in a high place when spinning on a spindle. In that way, the spindle can drop farther before one has to stop to wind the spun yarn onto the spindle. Therefore, spinners could stand on a chair (Warburg 1974:85), or sit on the attic and let the spindle drop through the stair-hole all the way to the floor below (Guðmundur Finnbogason 1943:170). Interestingly, in modern Norwegian, an attic can be called a *hjell* (<*hjallr*) (Aasen 1873:293). Also, interestingly, in one Icelandic account of rope-milking, the ropes (in this case four) are hanging from the attic (Jón Árnason 1958–61 [1862–64] III:622).

From early sixteenth-century Germany, I know of a couple of paintings of witches who use distaffs in their magic or supernatural riding (Morris 1991, plate 8 and 30; cf. also a painting by Goya, eighteenth century, Morris 1991, plate 16).

In German folklore, the spindle was a characteristic of wise women and witches, and it was considered dangerous (Klein 1936–37:264).

The basis for my theory is mostly later than the High Middle Ages. The question is, of course, whether it can be confirmed by medieval or Viking Age material. Unfortunately, the sources are mostly silent as to what the *seiðr* performer did, but I will try to compare the theory with the information that we have.

- a) Attracting *seiðr* fits well with the spinning theory. In *Gríms saga loðinkinna* (186–88, "seiðing away" – of fish – is done by a storm. Is it spun, like the attracting wind that the Saami woman made on the mountain top?
- b) In *Laxdæla saga* (99), *seiðr* which causes a storm that sinks a boat and kills people, is called *harðsnúin fræði*, 'hardtwisted knowledge / sorcery' – as if the wind or sorcery is spun.
- c) One type of *seiðr* makes people invulnerable. No source tells us how this is done, but in *Fóstbræðra saga* (99), the same is done with some kind of magic and hanks of yarn put under a man's clothes. In *Orvar-Odds saga* (239, 242–43), a shirt spun and woven in a marvellous way makes the hero invulnerable. (Compare how properties opposite to this could be put into sweaters in Icelandic folklore [above].)
- d) If the essence of *seiðr* was a thread, then divinatory *seiðr* would fit well with the notion that fate was a thread spun by the *nornir*. Then fortune-tellers could spin a thread that represented a person's life or fate, and examine that thread. In *Þáttr af Norna-Gesti*, travelling prophetesses are called *nornir*, and one semantic element of *norn* seems to be 'witch' or the like, in Old Norse as well as in Modern Icelandic (Strömbäck 1935:88–89).
- e) The notion that a person's life or fate is a thread invites the idea that one can manipulate other people's life by spinning. *Laxdæla saga* seems to have an example of this, when Guðrún is sitting at home spinning while Bolli is out killing Kjartan. When he comes home and tells her about it, Guðrún's reply compares her spinning with his killing (*Laxdæla saga* 154). Guðrún manipulated Bolli in the deed, and her spinning has been compared with that of the norns, and also with the valkyries' weaving on the grotesque loom of men's body parts in *Darradarljóð* (*Njáls saga* 454ff), which directs a battle and the outcome of it (Else Mundal 1997:66–67). Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinnsson (1997:155) argues that Guðrún's spinning was a magic act intended to influence the outcome of the battle.
- f) Two sources tell of spinning that makes a person invisible, *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Fóstbræðra saga*. I think the mechanism or logic behind this is easier to understand if the "main type" of sorcery, *seiðr*, was closely connected with spinning.

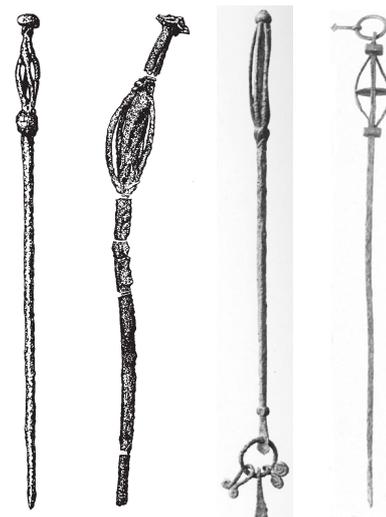


Figure 3. Iron staffs from Scandinavian women's Viking Age graves. After, from the left: Bøgh-Andersen 1999:50, 52, 78; Brøndsted 1936:196; Petersen 1951:423.



Figure 4. Distaffs. From Museum Europäischer Kulturen, Berlin.

- g) There is reason to believe that symbolic or cultic distaffs are found in women's graves from the Viking Age. Neil Price has suggested that the metal staffs in figure 3 and others are *seiðr* staffs (Price 2002:181ff): His main argument is that the staffs resemble the description of the *volva's* staff in *Eiríks saga*: It was made of metal, there was “a knob on it, it was fitted with brass and set with gem stones up around the knob” (translated from *Eiríks saga*, 206). This could fit the staffs of the type shown in figure 3. Such staffs are found almost exclusively in women's graves, they are very elaborate, some of them are fitted with brass, and the “basket” could be the knob. I can add that they closely resemble a certain type of distaffs, in shape, proportions, and length, see figure 4.

Even the ring in the top of some of the iron staffs matches, because at that point on distaffs, there is usually a strap for securing the spinning material (compare the figure). It also fits that the metal staffs vary a lot in length, because so do distaffs. (The distaffs that I know about vary from 25 cm to a man's length. The metal staffs shown here vary from 35 to 88 cm; Price 2002:183, 189, 192 and 194. The distaffs in figure 4 come from southern Europe and the Balkans. But the type is also known in Scandinavia – see for instance the next figure from Sweden – although other types are more common here.) – The shape of this type of distaff is a result of evolution, as emerges from the Swedish illustration in figure 5. The starting point is the top of a young spruce tree. The branches can be tied together (to the stem), and this makes the prototype.

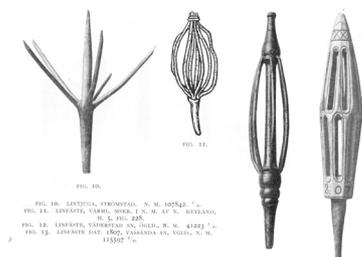


Figure 5. Evolution of this type of distaffs. After Lithberg 1918:6.

I believe that the staffs in figure 3 are distaffs, but not ordinary utility articles, because in recent times, distaffs are always made of wood, and it is very unlikely that people in the Viking Age would prefer metal more than people in later times did. Back then, metal was very costly, and metal distaffs would have been heavy, cold and cumbersome to use. Therefore, I suggest that the metal staffs are symbolic or cultic distaffs, possibly used in *seiðr*. If so, they would parallel the golden distaffs of the Greek equivalent of the *normir*, the *moirai* (Campbell 1982:240–41).

- h) In the early Middle Ages on the continent, “woollen work” and “any kind of textile work”, particularly weaving, was believed to be a way of exercising supernatural power (Flint 1991:226–27). Also in Old Norse sources, manipulation of other people's lives is done by other kinds of women's textile work. *Darraðarljóð's* weaving of fate is the clearest example. Note that the wind knots of recent folklore are not only on cords, but often on handkerchiefs or the like (for instance in “The Son of the Sun”), and in Germany witches were believed to milk towels and handkerchiefs as well as cords and ropes (Eckstein 1934–35:303–04). I believe women's textile work is the point.
- i) One enigmatic aspect of *seiðr* is that it was connected with *ergi* ‘unmanliness’. If *seiðr* was spinning, it would certainly be unmanly for men, because spinning was the most characteristic women's work.
- j) The feminine character of spinning also fits with *seiðr* in other ways. Firstly, manipulation of other people's lives was also done by other kinds of women's work, as in *Grottasöngur*, where fate is ground by two bondmaids (*Ed-dadigte* II:89ff). Secondly, women's work and their tools are central also to the witchcraft of the late Middle Ages. The witches would ride on brooms, pokers, rolling pins and so on, and from early seventeenth-century Norway I know of an example of a man accused of riding on a distaff (Næss 1982:97). Accordingly, if the essence of *seiðr* was spinning, we get the continuity that we should expect between *seiðr* and the witchcraft that succeeded it. Thirdly, another way of manipulating other people's lives was goading, and this belonged to the feminine realm. Expressed with a modern metaphor, women pulled the strings when men fought.
- k) It is striking that none of the sources tell us what the *seiðr* performer did. I believe it was censored because of the *ergi* nature of *seiðr*. But if so, it must have been more indecent than just men doing women's work, and for that, there is evidence. I have argued that the *seiðr* emissary could be called *gandr*. The close derivation *göndull* could in Old Norse mean ‘penis’ (*Die Bósa-Saga* 39), and in Icelandic pornography, *gandur* is a common word for the same. From the eighteenth-century southern Saami, we know the word *næjtiendirre*, which corresponds to *gandr* as a magic projectile, which the *noaidis* used against each other. Literally, it means ‘*noaidi's* penis’ (Heide 2002:86, 2004:55). This makes sense in light of the “phallic aggression” of Old Norse culture (Meulengracht Sørensen 1983:27), which is based upon the notion that the one who penetrates in intercourse is the strongest. In a few sources, the male member also has another interesting symbolism. Isaac Olsen tells from early eighteenth-century northern

Saami culture that when the *noaidi* was in ecstasy, there was a girl who summoned him back. To thank her, the *noaidi* then tells her that

she shall now possess and use [his] male member in accordance with her will and as it pleases her, and she shall now possess and make use of it as a tether [...], and as a draught-rope, and drape it around her shoulders like an ornament, and she shall have it as an oar-loop and a sled-tackle and around her neck like a chain, and over her shoulders like a piece of jewellery and an ornament, and tie it around her waist like a belt. (Translated from Olsen 1910 [after 1715]:46–47)

As mentioned, modern Icelandic *göndull* means ‘coarse yarn’ and other twisted items, but it also means ‘penis’, as in Old Norse (Sigfús Blöndal 1920:282). On the basis of this, it is possible that the thread element of the *seiðr* emissary had the same sexual symbolism as we have seen in the terms used for the emissary. It should not be a problem that thread is spun by women. In *Laxdæla saga*, a man’s sword-point kills Kjartan, although Guðrún spins it. In “The Son of the Sun”, the daughter is characterized as a braider of sinew thread and a spinner, but still the males are characterized by strong sinews and pulling.

Almqvist has pointed out that when the *seiðr* in *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls* and *Egils saga* makes the victims fidget, the explanation is probably that the *seiðr* makes their bottom itch (Almqvist 2000:258) – which means that the *seiðr* attacks their backside, so to speak. That would fit well with the “phallic aggression” and *ergi* notions. Interestingly, in *Porleifs þátrr jarlsskálds* (222–23), a verbal *nið* makes the earl’s bottom itch so much that he cannot sit still, and therefore, he makes two men pull a coarse cloth with three knots on it between his buttocks (*lét hann taka strigadúk ok ríða á þrjá knúta ok draga tvá menn milli þjóanna á sér*). This pulling obviously is loaded with symbolism, for several reasons:

- The *nið* also makes the earl’s beard rot away (ibid:223), so there can be no doubt that it attacks his manliness.
- In Old Norse culture, for a man to be penetrated by another man was the ultimate unmanliness, because that symbolically turned him into a woman (Meulengracht Sørensen 1983). Injury in the buttocks had the same effect (ibid:68–70, 76).
- The knot-cloth is intended to soothe the earl’s abdominal itching, and in Old Norse a woman’s wantonness could be called *lendakláði* ‘loin itching’ (*Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* 95). In the case where *lendakláði* is mentioned, a man claims to cure it with a slap of the flat side of his sword (*sverð*: 1. ‘sword’, 2. ‘penis’) across the woman’s buttocks.

In *Porleifs þátrr jarlsskálds*, it does not say that the cloth and the knots represent Porleifr’s mind, nor does this emerge from other triple-knot passages in Old Norse sources, because the motif is not found elsewhere in those sources. But when we consider the popularity of the motif in European folklore of later times, and the fact that it is attested in England as early as in the thirteenth century (cf. Nansen 1911:188–91) – before *Porleifs þátrr jarlsskálds* – there is reason to believe

that the audience associated it with the wind-knot notion, and, accordingly, with a sorcerer’s mind emissary. When in this case Porleifr was provoking the itching with the help of sorcery, it should be possible to assume that, in a way, the cloth with the knots on it represents Porleifr’s male member, symbolically making the earl *argr* “unmanly” in the most fundamental way.

It is also possible that *seiðr* included doing sexual or symbolic sexual acts with the distaff (cf. Jochens 1996:217). A common way of holding the distaff is suggestive in that respect (see figure 6). Compare also the sexual connotations of witches’ holding the brooms etc. between their legs when riding on them.



Figure 6. Church painting from Uppland, Sweden, c. 1500. After Hansen 1947:34.

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