

Bárðar Saga as a Source for Reconstruction of Pre-Christian Religion?

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Abstract:

This article discusses the value of *Bárðar saga* as a source for the reconstruction of pre-Christian religion. The title's question mark should be stressed. *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss* is certainly not one that stands out as a valuable source for the reconstruction of Old Nordic religion since it is considered a late saga and is dominated by fantastic and clearly fictitious elements. But, it is argued, some information, especially on cosmology and the supernatural beings inhabiting the local landscapes, probably is valuable. That information must be used with caution, because it seems to be 'contaminated' by literary inventions. The saga's references to pre-Christian gods – Bárðr's byname *Snæfellsáss*, the Óðinn-figure *Rauðgrani*, and the references to Þórr and Frigg – seem too problematic to be of any use.

I. I will start with a few thoughts on our source situation and our alternatives. A fact that is often not realized is that how strict we should be about our sources depends upon what alternatives we have. Some scholars adopt an absolutist stand on source criticism: only 'reliable' sources should be accepted, always. But is this not a self-delusion? Is it possible to maintain such a claim when working with the Nordic Middle Ages? Ideally, when studying Nordic pre-Christian religion, we should only use contemporary sources from within the Nordic pre-Christian cultures, sources that explain the whole breadth of the Old Nordic religion in every detail. But, as we all know, we do not possess plentiful sources of that kind.

Regarding many of the gods, we have quite a bit of information that seems fairly reliable, mostly from Eddic and skaldic poetry and *Snorra Edda*. However, there are other aspects of the old religion that must have been important but are virtually left out in the 'standard' sources for the religion. Regarding these parts of the religion, it seems that we have two options: We can give up and, in many cases, that is what we should do. But in other cases, we can attempt to supplement our evidence with more problematic material. When this option is viable, I believe we ought to do that, although it will not give us certain results,

because when studying these questions, it is unrealistic to demand certainty. Were we to demand certainty above all, we could only study very few questions and the research field would more or less be closed down. Instead, I think we should try to identify the most probable explanation or model of understanding given the body of information that we have at hand. This means that a student of Old Scandinavian religion should not ignore *Bárðar saga*, although it is certainly not an important source for that study since much of the information it presents that *seems* to be relevant probably is not. But concerning certain aspects of the old religion, *Bárðar saga* is nonetheless interesting.

II. I will now discuss some passages from the saga that may yield information on the old religion, especially the gods. The most obvious example is Bárðr's byname *Snæfellsáss*, allegedly given to him when he moved into a cave below the Snæfellsjökull glacier combined with the information that people started worshipping him as their god (*heitguð*) at this point, because he was able to help many people (*Bárðar saga* 1991: 119–29, 142). Does this reflect a tradition of local gods in addition to the central gods, Þórr, Óðinn and the others? I find this idea problematic because we are dealing here with a quite isolated instance. Troll-like beings living in mountains do not normally function as gods. On the contrary, they are dangerous (e.g. *Fljótsdæla saga* 1950: 225–29; *Grettis saga* 1936: 215–16; *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfjfls* 1959: 360–61; *Egils saga einhenda* 1954: 343); people try to stay away from them, as is also the case with other trolls in the saga, especially in the latter part. To be sure, Bárðr is half human, genetically (*Bárðar saga* 1991: 101–02), but he was raised by a troll (*ibid.* 103, 119) and ends up living like a troll (*ibid.* 119–21), so when he becomes the *Snæfellsáss*, he seems to be perceived more as a troll than as a human. One could argue that support for understanding the *Snæfellsáss* as one of the *æsir* is found in the local god-like beings Þorgerðr Hølgabrúðr / Hørdabrúðr / Hørgatroll in several Old Norse texts (see Røthe 2007) and Óláfr Geirstaðaalfr in *Flateyjarbók* (II 1944–45: 74–78). But to me it seems that these beings either are not analogous when we take a closer look at them, or the passages describing them contain so little information that we cannot say anything about them. Þorgerðr Hølgabrúðr was connected to a cultic building with a depiction of her inside it and this makes her very different from Bárðr. Óláfr Geirstaðaalfr became an *alfr* after he was buried, which also is very different from Bárðr, because Bárðr is not dead when he allegedly becomes an *áss*, and *alfar* in general are more

closely connected to the departed than are trolls. A possible parallel could be the *Svínfellsáss* mentioned in *Njáls saga* (ch. 123, *Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954: 31). The name is parallel to *Snæfellsáss* – ‘the áss of NN mountain’ – but we have no information that he was venerated like a deity; the little information that we have on him indicates that he is a rather unpleasant figure, something like a troll: Skarpheðinn insults Flosi by claiming that Flosi is the bride of the *Svínfellsáss* every ninth night, being turned into a woman by him.¹ The explanation for the bynames *Snæfellsáss* and *Svínfellsáss* could be a folk etymological association between áss ‘a god’ and áss ‘a hill’ (people could think that an áss ‘god’ was a being that lived in an áss ‘hill’). But it could also be irony. At the end of *Bárðar saga*, there is a stanza that compares the sons of Hjalti to æsir – they were so well dressed that people thought they were æsir (ch. 22, *Bárðar saga* 1991: 171–72). This appears to be some sort of joke and it is conceivable that the names *Snæfellsáss* and *Svínfellsáss* were coined with similar irony. These suggestions may well be wrong, but the important part is that they still illustrate that the *Snæfellsáss* motif is too problematic or uncertain to throw light on the Old Norse gods, at least at the present state of research – although there is every reason to believe that some supernatural being was associated with the *Snæfellsjökull* mountain, as it is one of the most prominent mountains in all of Iceland.

The second eye-catching example is the verse pronounced by the troll-woman Hetta in chapter 7 of the saga, giving the bearings for the fishing spot *Grímsmið* (*Bárðar saga* 1991: 124–25):

Róa skaltu Fjall firða
 framm á lög stirðan;
 þar mun gaurr glitta,
 ef þú vilt Grímsmið hitta,
 þar skaltu þá liggja –
 Þórr er viss til Friggjar –; (variant: Þórr er vinr Friggjar)
 rói norpr enn nefskammi
 Nesit í Hrakhvammi.

This verse is complicated and in all likelihood partly corrupt, so I will not supply it with a complete translation. For our question, the interesting part is the *stál*, ‘parenthetical clause’, in line 6, which translates as ‘Þórr is certain to Frigg’ or ‘Þórr is Frigg’s friend’ in an alternative variant. Is this verse evidence that Frigg could be understood as Þórr’s

¹ *Því þá – ef þú ert brúðr Svínfellsáss, sem sagt er, hverja ina níunda nótt ok geri han þik at konu* (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954: 31).

wife, an alternative tradition to that of Frigg being Óðinn's wife since in Iceland Þórr was the main god, not Óðinn (Turville-Petre 1964: 90 ff.; Brink 2007)? This does not seem likely, because this information is completely isolated, and the supernatural character Grímr, who turns up just after this stanza, appears to be a mixture of Þórr and Óðinn: he has a red beard, associating him with Þórr, but Grímr is a common name for Óðinn (Falk 1924: 14). It also does not fit that the Þórr-like Grímr functions as a representative of evil trolls, which he does in this passage, because in other sources, Þórr's most fundamental characteristic is exactly his opposition to trolls. Thus, *Bárðar saga's* information about Þórr seems confused.

Another possible example is that, right after Bárðr and his people came to Iceland, they sacrificed for good luck in a cave (*blótuðu ... til heilla sér, Bárðar saga* 1991: 111). This, however, is miniscule information to go by and there is no particular reason to believe it is authentic.

There is also the account of Rauðgrani, who is Óðinn in disguise and who assists Gestr in the quest for the treasure belonging to the living dead (*haugbúi*) Raknarr in Helluland, but who fails because he is not powerful enough (*ibid.* 160–69). This occurs in a part of the saga that functions mostly to demonstrate that the pagan religion is a delusion, so the context certainly does not support the trustworthiness of this information. The description conforms to a presentation of Óðinn which is frequent in the legendary sagas (Røthe 2010; Lassen 2011). This does not necessarily render it trustworthy as such, but it seems worth pointing out that the disguised and treacherous Óðinn is also found in the Eddic poetry (e.g. *Grímnismál, Sæmundar Edda* 1867: 75–89) and *Snorra Edda* (e.g. the myth of Óðinn, Gunnlǫð and the mead of poetry, *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar* 1931: 83–85), so there is reason to believe that this version of Óðinn did, indeed, form some part of pre-Christian beliefs. Even so, *Bárðar saga* does not give us more information about this facet of Óðinn than we know from other and better sources.

I conclude that *Bárðar saga* does not tell us much of what we usually think of as Old Nordic religion.

III. However, Old Nordic religion was not only about the gods who were venerated by populations spread out across large geographical areas. In addition to these gods, supernatural beings inhabiting the local landscape and the cosmological notions connected to them must have been important to people. Thus, such beings constituted a significant part of Old Nordic religion although non-historians of religion are perhaps

not accustomed to this perspective – because Christianity has led to an understanding of religion proper as primarily concerning the central, universal part while the rest is regarded as spurious superstitions and popular beliefs.

I have in mind beings like the *landvættir*, ‘land spirits’ or ‘nature spirits’, who live in groves, (*lundar*), mounds (*haugar*) or waterfalls (*forsar*) according to the Norwegian Gulapting law (*Nyare kristenrett, Norges gamle Love 1846–95 II: 326–27; trúa at landvættir sé í lundum, haugum eða forsum*, ‘believe that land spirits inhabit groves, hills or waterfalls’), and of which mountains and hillocks were full, according to *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar (Heimskringla I 1941: 316; fjöll qll ok hólar váru fullir af landvættum, sumt stórt en sumt smátt*, ‘all mountains and hillocks were full of land spirits, some large and some small’), or who live in cairns and caves and give prosperity when receiving sacrifices, according to *Hauksbók (1892–6: 167)*,² and *alfar* who live in mounds and cure people when receiving sacrifices, according to *Kormáks saga (1939: 288)*; and the *spámaðr / ármaðr* who lives in a boulder near the farm and secures prosperity in *Þorvalds þáttur víðfjóra (2003: 61–68)* and *Kristni saga (2003: 7–8)*; *troll, risar* ‘giants’ and the like who live in caves, mountains, gorges and similar places according to many sources (e.g. *Fljótsdæla saga 1950: 225–26; Grettis saga 1936: 215–16; Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfjfls 1959: 360–61; Egils saga einhenda 1954: 343*), and the *bergbúi* ‘rock dweller’ who multiplies a farmer’s flock in *Landnámabók (1968: 330)*.

Bárðar saga seems to give quite a bit of information about *bergbúi*-like beings. To a remarkable extent, it tells of trolls and the like living in the wilderness, in caves, prominent mountains or glaciers, canyons, waterfalls, etc. (*Bárðar saga 1991: 111–12, 119, 124, 128, 130, 144, 149*), and of the names and locations of these dwelling places, providing many details on how they can be dangerous to people and their livestock, how humans find entrances to their dwellings only when they are lost in fog, darkness or drifting snow (*ibid.* 134–35), and how they live isolated from humans (in the last part of the saga; see IV below).

For many reasons, most of this probably reflects pre-Christian notions. Firstly, as Stefan Brink (2001: 88) points out: there is no reason to believe that the pagan Scandinavians lacked the ‘pantheon’ of spirits that we know from later sources. Secondly, it is hard to see how

² Normalized: *Sumar konur eru svá vitlausar ok blindar um þurft sína at þær taka mat sinn ok fóra á hreysar út eða undir hella ok signa landvættum ok eta síðan til þess at landvættir skyli þeim þá hollar vera ok til þess at þær skyli þá eiga betra bú en áðr.*

these beliefs could have come from Christianity and learned literature since the descriptions given there correspond poorly to the Old Norse accounts (and to later Scandinavian accounts, which, on the other hand, correspond well to the Old Norse accounts), and because the Church would have opposed the introduction of such beliefs rather than facilitated it. Thirdly, the terminology is native (*troll*, *risar*, *bergbúar*, *jǫtnar*, etc.) and many of the terms can easily be demonstrated to be ancient. For example, the Sami word *jiehtanas* (Kåven *et al.* 1995: 269; Sveen 2003: 55) must have been borrowed from a Proto-Scandinavian form of *jǫtunn* (namely **etanar*; **etanaz* in an alternative spelling. *Jǫtunn* reflects a variant **etunar*). Fourthly, very similar beliefs and practices are found in neighbouring cultures, such as in Finno-Ugric parts of Fenno-Scandia (e.g. Manker 1957; Sveen 2003; Itkonen 1946: 70 ff.), even in the far (north-)east (*ibid.*); there, too, in connection with a native terminology. Fifthly, beliefs in giants and monsters living in or belonging to mountains and caves are found all over the world, independently of Christianity and Medieval European learned literature.³ Why should we derive such beings from these sources here in Scandinavia?

Notions of trolls and other local supernatural beings and the cosmological ideas connected to them seem to have lived on, not much changed, into Christian times and partly even into modern times. This is understandable, because such beliefs are not in direct competition with the essential Christian beliefs and practices. In the Christian paradigm, they are not an alternative, they are something else than the faith in God and the saints and the rituals that followed this faith. Therefore, Christianity would not necessarily displace them.

Based on combined evidence of the kind just exemplified, we can be quite confident that *bergbúi*-type traditions existed in pre-Christian times. But if we want a fuller understanding of them, we have to turn to late Old Norse texts, like *Bárðar saga* (and to some degree even folklore recorded in post-medieval times). This means that *Bárðar saga* and other late texts *can* play a role in the reconstruction of this part of Old Nordic religion in the sense that they can contribute to a more complete picture of the everyday side of Old Nordic religion.

³ E.g. Scylla among the Classical Greek (Price and Kearns 2003: 502); Yama-uba in Japan (Ashkenazi 2003: 237, 290–91); Agngalo in the Philippines (Ramos 1971: 71), Nargun in south-eastern Aboriginal Australia (Massola 1965: 155 [Thanks to Bernard Mees, Melbourne, for help with this reference.]), or Trawum among the Indians living in the Cordilleras of South America (Kössler-Ilg 1956: 68–70).

Much of the useful information I have mentioned concerns points in the landscape where supernatural beings can be encountered and it is thus connected to cosmology in a wide sense. The saga also contains other interesting information of this kind. I have previously used *Bárðar saga's* information on the location of Raknarr's grave in the latter part of the saga in an article on a specific aspect of the cosmology of Old Nordic religion, namely how the otherworld is so often located on the other side of water (Heide 2011). Raknarr's grave is located in *Hellulands óbygðir*, on an islet connected to the mainland with a reef flooded at high tide and passable only at low tide (*Bárðar saga* 1991: 160–69). It is hard to find a more liminal location: at the extreme outskirts of the world, on the border to the otherworld, one could say, and in addition it is in the ocean where it shifts back and forth between this side and the other side due to the tide. I used this information because such ideas did not come from Christianity, even if the moral of this part of the saga is definitely Christian. Such ideas of liminality seem to be ancient as well as essential to religious cosmology throughout the world. Among the Sami, sacrificial sites are often located on islets separated from the mainland by a shallow sound that can be forded (Manker 1957: 24; Heide 2011: 74) – as if they belong to the otherworld because they are islands, but also belong to this world because you can go there on foot – such islets are therefore even more liminal than ordinary islands.

Bárðar saga also provides examples of a different type of liminal marker that hides points of passage to the otherworld: low visibility in the form of fog, drifting snow and darkness created by supernatural beings for their own needs (*Bárðar saga* 1991: 124, 133–34, 148). Again, this idea is not something that stems from Christianity or learned literature, but seems to be ancient, so *Bárðar saga's* examples can supplement our picture of this.

IV. I do not claim that everything *Bárðar saga* tells us about trolls or cosmology comes close to pre-Christian beliefs. On the contrary, essential troll motifs in *Bárðar saga* seem to be literary inventions. One suspicious trait of *Bárðar saga* is that trolls and humans live completely side-by-side. Humans and the different kinds of trolls mix freely, as humans of different races might do, and they even emigrate to Iceland together on board the same ship (*ibid.* 108–111). This seems unparalleled (as is also noted by Ármann Jakobsson 2005: 2). In other accounts, trolls and humans certainly interact and they sometimes even have

children together (e.g. *Kjalnesinga saga* 1959: 33–34; *Örvar-Odds saga* 1954: 274–75), but there is a very distinct barrier between them; trolls belong in a different world, typically in distant places that are difficult to visit (e.g. *ibid.*). One example of *Bárðar saga*'s lack of this barrier is that Þórðr is able to locate again the entrance to the troll Kolbjörn's cave and to walk right in (*Bárðar saga* 1991: 150). In the rest of the saga (e.g. *ibid.* 134–35), in other texts and in the popular traditions, the entrance to the otherworld is hidden or inaccessible in other ways – e.g. *Bergbúa þáttr* (1991: 450). It is also conspicuous that it is Bárðr's *father* who is a troll. Normally, in mixed relationships, it is the *mother* who is a troll (Meulengracht Sørensen 1977; Steinsland 1990; Steinsland 1991 [1989]). Accordingly, *Bárðar saga* represents a violation of the pattern, although exceptions to the rule are found in some other sources, too (*Hversu Noregr byggðist* 1954; *Fundinn Noregr* 1954). In the last part of the saga, the trolls maintain their normal distance to humans. It also seems unparalleled that the saga distinguishes between *risar*, *þursar*, *troll* and so on. In other accounts, and in popular traditions throughout the Nordic countries, these are different terms for the same beings, or at least it is impossible to distinguish between them. As mentioned above, the *Snæfellsáss* motif is also somewhat suspicious. The idea that, on moving into the glacier, Bárðr *becomes* the god (*heitguð*) of *Snæfellsness* and people start worshipping him because he can help them, bears some resemblance to Snorri's euhemerism in *Ynglinga saga* and *Gylfaginning* (*Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*), which originates in learned literature (Dronke and Dronke 1977).

In spite of such probable inventions, it seems that much of *Bárðar saga*'s information on trolls and cosmology can help us get a more complete view of pre-Christian religion. In fact, there may be information valuable to our purpose even in motifs that clearly are literary inventions. The story about the quest for Raknarr's grave in the latter part of the saga clearly is fiction and serves to demonstrate that the pagan religion is a delusion, but the ideas behind the location of Raknarr's grave nonetheless seems to be pre-Christian, although they have become adopted into a Christian world-view.

V. It is also possible to use late texts in an indirect way, by understanding them as comparative material, which does not directly say anything about the questions we are looking to answer, but which may give us 'keys' that can potentially unlock our essential material. We can pick up inspired ideas from texts generally deemed unreliable and

apply these to more reliable texts in order to see whether these make sense in a new way when approached with such new ideas in mind. In other words, we can use problematic texts as a background for asking questions to the best texts. Schjødt has advocated this way of using legendary sagas (Schjødt 2000: 38). One possible such ‘key’ in *Bárðar saga* could be the byname *Snæfellsáss*, the notion of local deities that the local population would rely on. I am sceptical about the case of this particular byname, but the question may well be worth considering more in-depth. *Snæfellsáss* (and *Svínfellsáss*) can also inspire us to re-question other aspects of the category *áss*, especially its demarcation in relation to other mythical beings.

Another possible ‘key’ is *Bárðar saga*’s depiction of the role of *jötnar* within the old religion. Røthe (2010) points out that, in the legendary sagas, the giants fulfil a more important role than in the Eddic poetry and *Snorra Edda*, and in this respect, *Bárðar saga* follows the legendary sagas. One reason for the heavier emphasis on giants in the late texts could, of course, be that the traditions had degenerated when they were composed. But, in many cases, it is worth having another look at the best sources to check whether we may have overlooked something regarding the giants, their role(s), within (popular) beliefs and their social organisation.

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