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### **FROM EPIC TO BALLAD: THE FAROESE ‘SJÚRÐUR CYCLE’**

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The story of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer exists in the major Germanic traditions (except Old English), represented by texts recorded between the second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> and the mid-19<sup>th</sup> centuries, viz. the Old Icelandic *Eddas* and the *Völsungasaga*, the German *Nibelungenlied* and the three Faroese ballads recorded by V. U. Hammershaimb. One part of the Faroese cycle (up to the assassination of Sjúrður) is similar to the Icelandic version of the story, the rest being reminiscent of the German tradition. (The boundary lies within the second ballad.) In the Icelandic tradition, plots either make up a succession implying continuation and pre-history (heroic epic) or they may be confined within the boundaries of one poem (mythological epic). The Faroese Sjúrður ballads, although heroic, are closer to the latter type (the limits of the poem and the plot coincide). Both the ballads and the epic show traits of orality (formulaic style, repetitions, etc.), suggesting variability and, hence, lack of fixity typical of literary tradition. Normally, orality is put an end to as a result of recording. In the ballad tradition, the process is characterized by a specificity connected with the circumstances of performance (dance combined with singing), and the active role of the audience, who were active participants, which implied some knowledge of the texts sung. In this way, the ballads acquired stability to become, later on, *fixed* texts and a special genre within literary tradition.

**Keywords:** Sigurðr poems, Nibelungenlied, Old Icelandic epic, Faroese ballads, orality, recording, fixed texts.

The story of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer exists in the major Germanic traditions (except Old English), represented by texts recorded between the second half of the thirteenth and the mid-nineteenth centuries, the

*Eddas* and the *Völsungasaga*, and the ballads, respectively. Three of the Faroese ballads recorded by V.U.Hammershaimb [Hammershaimb, 1851] make up the so-called Faroese ‘Nibelungen cycle’ consisting of *Regin the Smith* (131 stanzas; the birth and early years of Sjúrdur (OI Sigurðr), his revenge for his father and his encounter with the dragon Frænur (OI Fafnir); *Brinhild* (238 stanzas; the meeting of Sjúrdur and Brinhild, Sjúrdur marrying Guðrun, the assassination of Sjúrdur by his sworn-brothers, Gunnar and Högni); and *Högni* (239 stanzas; the visit of Gunnar and Högni to the Huns and Guðrun’s revenge).

Problems discussed in connection with the ballad tradition focus on its origin and its ties both in and outside Scandinavia. As M.I.Steblyn-Kamenskij [Steblyn-Kamenskij, 2003, p.408] remarks in this connection, “the Scandinavian ballad as a verse form is considered to be of a foreign origin, most probably French. [...] But the fact itself that the ballad verse came from France does not imply that the ballad, as a genre, also came from France.” Although paradoxical enough, this remark is not self-contradictory. Indeed, the organizing principle of the poetic form of the ballad, i.e. end-rhyme in place of the alliteration of both eddic and scaldic verse, is definitely not a local innovation. On the other hand, the plots of Scandinavian ballads are exclusively Germanic. In the Faroese Sjúrdur (Sigurðr) ballads, two parts are clearly discernible, devoted to the events before and after Sjúrdur’s death. The part concerned with Sjúrdur’s exploits is similar to the Icelandic tradition, while the story of the revenge is closer to that of the *Nibelungenlied*. The boundary between the two parts lies within the second ballad of the cycle (*Brinhild*):

*Tá var rómur í buðlungs höll,  
sveinar riða út,  
Brinhild sat eftir í giltum stóli,  
hon fellir tár á dúk*

‘There was noise in the hall of the Buðlungs;  
the heroes go for the journey;  
Brinhild sat on her golden seat,  
she is shedding tears onto her shawl’ (B. CCI).

According to Helmut de Boor [De Boor, 1918, S. 71], this and some previous stanzas reveal motifs of two traditions, viz. Old Norse (Brinhild’s tears in spite of her being the instigatrix of the assassination) and German (the assassination that took place in a forest), cf.

CXCI.

*nú skulu teir Júkungar  
burt á skógin ríða.*

CCVIII.

Ríða teir á skógin burt,  
Sjúrður í terri ferð,  
hann vitsti ei af svikumum  
teir hövdu í ráðagerð.

CCXVIII.

Sjúrður legðist at drekka,  
sum vatn stóð firi í veit,  
Gunnar átti mækan tann  
á Sjúrðar hálsi beit.

CCXIX.

Högni stakk og Gunnar hjó  
við hvössum slíðragnívi,  
teir gjördu so mikið niðingsverk,  
teir tóku hann Sjúrð af lívi.

CXCI.

now, Gjukungs, you must go from here,  
and to the forest

CCVIII.

They ride in the forest,  
and Sjúrður with them,  
He didn't know about the deceit  
they had in mind

CCXVIII.

Sjúrður lay down to drink  
where water ran into a stream  
Gunnar had the sword  
which stroke Sjúrður on the neck

CCXIX.

Högni stang and Gunnar hewed  
with a sharp sheath knife,  
they did so a great evil deed,  
they deprived Sjúrður of life.

De Boor [De Boor, 1918, S. 62] remarks that, from CXCI the ballad acquires features similar to those of the Nibelungen tradition, e.g. the hunting episode absent in the Edda (for discussion, see [Piotrovskii, 2000, p. 14–16]). In the Scandinavian tradition, it was not unknown that the ‘forest motif’ had come from Germany, cf.

*þýðverskir menn segja svá, at þeir dræpi hann úti í skógi*

‘German men say that they killed him out of doors in the forest’

(Br. Prose: *Frá dauða Sigurðar*).

One cannot exclude, however, that it circulated, in some form, beside other versions, cf.

*Hér er sagt í þessi kviðu frá dauða Sigurðar ok víkr hér svá til, sem þeir dræpi hann úti, en sumir segja svá, at þeir dræpi hann inni í rekkju sinni sofanda. ...ok svá segir í Guðrúnarkviðu hinnu fornu, at Sigurðr ok Gjúkasynir hefði til þings riðit, þá er hann var drepinn, en þat segja allir einnig, at þeir sviku hann í tryggð ok vágu at hánnum liggjanda ok óbúnum*

‘Here it is told in this poem about the death of Sigurd, and the story goes here that they slew him out of doors, but some say that they slew him in the house, on his bed while he was sleeping. ...and so it is told in the old Guthrun lay, that Sigurd and Gjuki’s sons had ridden to the council-place, and that he was slain there’ (ibid.).

The same applies to other motifs that, at some stage, could become a part of ballad plots, cf.

FM (prose)		RS (CXIX — CXX)	
<i>Sigurður tók Fáfnis hjarta ok steikði á teini.</i>	Sigurd took Fafnir's heart and cooked it on a spit.	CXIX <i>Sjúrdur stakk til hjartað, tá vegurin var trangur, steikti hann tað á teini, ið tríati alin var langur.</i>	CXIX Sjúrdur rushed for the heart, the path was steep, he cooked it on a spit, which was three ells long.
<i>Er hann hugði, at fullsteikt væri ok freyddi sveitinn ór hjartanu, þá tók hann á fingri sínum ok skynjaði, hvárt fullsteikt væri. Hann brann ok brá fingrinum í munn sér. En er hjartablóð Fáfnis kom á tungu hánnum, ok skilði hann fugls rödd.</i>	When he thought that it was fully cooked, and the blood foamed out of the heart, then he tried it with his finger to see whether it was fully cooked. He burned his finger, and put it in his mouth. But when Fafnir's heart-blood came on his tongue, he understood the speech of birds.	CXX <i>Sjúrdur gjördist á hendi heitur, hann brá sar í munn, fuglar og so alskins djór vóru honum á máli kunn.</i>	CXX Sjúrdur hurt his hand, put it into his mouth, of birds and different animals he began to understand the speech.

Here, the two poetic stanzas of the ballad correspond to a part of the prose passage, so the similarity is not that of form.

Likewise, the killing of Regin, in prose in the Edda, corresponds to two ballad stanzas:

FM (prose)		RS (CXXII — CXXIII)	
Sigurðr hjó höfuð af Regin, ok þá át han Fáfnis hjarta ok drakk blóð þeira beggja, Regins ok Fáfnis. Þá heyrði Sigurðr, hvar igður mæltu:	Sigurd hew off Regin's head. Then he ate Fafnir's heart and drank the blood of both Regin and Fafnir.	CXXII Sjúrður steikti hjartað og tað af teini dró, Regin legðist at drekka ormsins eiturblood.	CXXII Sjúrður cooked the heart and took it from the spit, Regin lay to drink venomous dragon blood.
		CXXIII Regin legðist at drekka ormsins eiturblood, Sjúrður gav honum banasár í spori sum hann stóð.	CXXIII Regin lay to drink venomous dragon blood. Sjúrður stroke him a murderous strike at the spot he stood.

In the *Edda*, it is but one episode in a succession of events, but in the ballad, the assassination of the dragon, combined with Sjúrður's departure with the treasure, is both the culmination of the story and its denouement. It requires no continuation, hence, the ending:

Nú skal latta ljóði af,  
eg kvøði ei longur á sinni,  
so skal taka upp annar tátt,  
*og víðari leggja í minni*  
'Now the song must finish,  
this time I do not speak any more,  
a new song must begin,  
and take more place in mind' (RS CXXXI).

A reference to a '*kong*' in the previous stanza,

So treður hann Grani  
grót ratt sum völl,  
tílikur kemur eingin aftur  
á ríka kongins höll

‘So Grani treads  
on wet stones and grass,  
finally he comes back  
to the rich king’s hall’ (RS CXXX);

does not imply that the king is the father of Brinhild, who is the heroine of another ballad, not necessarily connected with the present one, cf.

Eg havi eina rímu hoyrt,  
gjörd er í grönari líð,  
tað var first í firndini,  
*tað brast í Buðlans tíð.*  
‘I have heard a story,  
indited on a green hillside,  
it appeared a long time ago  
and narrates about Buðli’s time’ (B. I).

Each of the ballads is a poem in its own right, as a ballad should be. Here lies the difference between the Faroese Sjúrdur ballads and the Sigurðr story of the eddic tradition. The latter poems belong to the cyclic type based on “a genealogical ordering towards ancestors and descendants” [Yarkho, 1934, p. 48]. This means that each particular poem not only admits, but requires a continuation or some sort of prehistory (expanding of Sigurðr’s genealogy), both falling within one and the same plot, from a murder (e.g. of Fafnir by Sigurðr), via a chain of deaths/revenges (Sigurðr — Gunnar/Högni — Atli), to the last victims of the feud (Hamðir and Sörlri). It is for this reason, no doubt, that many of the heroic poems have linking endings or beginnings in prose (by a redactor?), such as *Sigurðr reið eptir slóð Fafnis* ‘after the killing of Fafnir, Sigurd went...’ (*Fm* end) or *Sigurðr reið upp á Hindarfjall* ‘Sigurd went up to the top of Hindarfell...’ (*Sd* beginning). This differs from the mythological portion of the *Edda* where the boundaries of the plot (e.g. from the first creation to Ragnarøk, a segment of creation, recovery of Thor’s hammer, etc.) and the poem (*Völuspá*, *Vafþúðnismál*, *Þymaskviða*) coincide. Among other things, this manifests itself, in the endings, such as *nú mun hún sökqvaz* ‘now must she sink’ (*Vsp* 66, 8), *þú ert æ víastr vera* ‘you are the wisest’ (*Vm* 55, 9), *Svá kom Óðins sonr endr at hamri* ‘And so his hammer got Othin’s son’ (*Þrk*, prose after 32) (see [Kleiner, 2004]).

In this respect, the Faroese (heroic) Sjúrdur ballads are closer to the mythological poems of the *Poetic Edda*. In combination with the (imported) verse-form (end-rhymes, etc.), they may be one of the sources of a pattern to accommodate all the details of story and a story generally. Some of the ballad elements are purely local, e.g. in *B.*, secondary characters' names (*Grímur*, XLIV, *Viggrím Gunnarsson*, LV) and place-names (*Hildarfjalli*, VI). Only the Faroese ballad has two dwarves decorating Brinhild's seat with runes (B. XXIX–XXX), and Sjúrdur's dream (XLVII–L). Also Faroese are the scenes of the meeting of Sjúrdur with Buðli (CXI — CXXIV) and with Brinhild after his marriage to Guðrun (CXCVI–CC), etc.

Some details can be come across in other Germanic texts, e.g. a blue attire, probably a death omen, cf.

*Hann [Hrafnkell] riðr í blám klæðum. Øxi hafði hann í hendi, en ekki fleira vápnum. [...] En við þann átrúnað at ekki verði at þeim monnum er heitstrengingar fella á sik, þá hljóp hann af baki til hans [Einarr] ok hjó hann [Einarr] banahögg*  
 'He rides in blue raiment; he had an axe in his hand, but no other weapons. [...] But by reason of the belief that those who fulfill their vows never come to grief, he leaped off his horse, sprang upon Einarr, and dealt him his death-blow' (HS 6).

But in the ballad the attire is worn by Guðrun, rather than a (prospective) murderer. Similarly, Sjúrdur acquires the ability to understand birds' speech by tasting the blood of the dragon's heart, as the Sigurðr of the *Poetic Edda* (see above). But the same ability of his manifests itself in *B.* as well, where, strictly speaking, it remains unexplained, cf.

LII.  
*Tað sögdu honum ígurnar\*,  
 uppi sitja í lund  
 væn er Brinhild Buðla dottir,  
 hon stundar á tín fund.*

LIII.  
*Tað sögdu honum villini fuglar,  
 uppi sótu í eik;  
 væn er Brinhild Buðla dottir,  
 hon væntar á tín leik.*

\* Hapax legomenon.

LII.  
 The feathered ones said to him,  
 [those who] sit up in a grove:  
 beautiful is Brinhild Buðli's daughter,  
 she is waiting for a meeting with you.

LIII.  
 Birds said to him,  
 [those who] sat up in an oak:  
 beautiful is Brinhild Buðli's daughter,  
 she is waiting for your play.

The use of the motif reflects a difference between the patterns typical of the two traditions (epic and ballad) and, in particular, their thematic arrangement. A. B. Lord defines the *theme* as “groups of ideas regularly used in telling a tale in the formulaic style of traditional song” [Lord, 2000, p. 68] and as “a structural unit that has a semantic essence but can never be divorced from its form, even if its form be constantly variable and multiform” [Lord, 2000, p. 198]. Central to both definitions is variability, which manifests itself, first and foremost, in the use of formulas by a poet. Formulas tend to be regarded, erroneously, as fixed expressions (clichés). Indeed, in traditional poetry some phrases may be repeated verbatim. But as Steblin-Kamenskij has explained, “Similarity of poetic lines in two ballads is not necessarily identity. It can be limited to syntactic structure, while syntactic similarity may or may not be accompanied by the similarity of meaning. Besides, syntactic similarity may be accompanied by coincidence of expression, which, in turn, can be limited to just one word in a line or stanza or, vice versa, all the words of a line or stanza, except one (a proper name, for instance), can coincide. An exact match of lines or stanzas of different ballads is but a particular case of repetition” [Steblin-Kamenskij, 2003, p. 408–409].

Stanzas LXXXVII–LXXXIX of *B.* demonstrate both types of coincidence, with a complete match of ll. 1 and 3 in LXXXIX and LXXXVIII, a partial coincidence of ll. 2 and 4 in LXXXIX and LXXXVII, cf.

LXXXVII.	LXXXVIII.	LXXXIX.
<p><i>Hoyr tað Sjúrdur Sigmundarson</i>  <i>hvör vísti tar leið</i>  <i>gjögnum royk og váðaluga,</i>  <i>at tú higar reið?</i></p> <p>‘Hear this Sjúrdur Sigmundarson, who showed you the way through smoke and fire, so that you come here?’</p>	<p><i>Ta sögðu mar fuglar tveir</i>  <i>gjögnum grøna lund:</i>  <i>væn er Brinhild</i>  <i>Buðladottir,</i>  <i>hon stundar á tín fund.</i></p> <p>‘Two birds told me so in the green forest: beautiful is Brinhild Buðladottir, she wants to meet you.’</p>	<p><i>Tað sögðu mar fuglar tveir</i>  <i>ar á mínari leið:</i>  <i>væn er Brinhild</i>  <i>Buðladottir,</i>  <i>tí eg higar reið.</i></p> <p>‘Two birds told me so before I start on my way: beautiful is Brinhild Buðladottir, so that I come here.’</p>

A partial coincidence, particularly in the case of name substitution, ‘X, the son of X’, is a classical example of the traditional formula (see

[Kleiner, 2010]); it is defined as “a group of words regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea” [Lord, 2000, p. 30]. Another example of formulaic variation in Faroese ballads is *Tað er enn sum ofta fírr* ‘That is as often [happened] before’ (B. LXXI.) and *Tað var tá sum oftun enn* ‘That was as [will happen] later’ (RS XXIV). The fact that the two sentences belong to different poems indicates that the variation is not only formulaic but also traditional, i.e. characterizing the tradition generally<sup>1</sup>. Questions may arise concerning the nature and boundaries of the tradition in which the formulas were used: ‘ballad and/or epic’, ‘Faroese and/or Scandinavian/Germanic’, etc. Indeed, *Tað er enn sum ofta fírr* is similar in meaning to Icelandic *ár* (‘early’)- formulas, e.g. *Ár vas alda* ‘of old was the age’ (*Vsp* 3,1). The similarity is purely superficial, however, for the ‘essential idea’ of the ballad formula is based on the ‘past : future’ opposition, while in Icelandic, the reference is invariably to the past. This suggests that the formulas belong to different thematic patterns and to different poetic traditions.

The above variation (‘formulaic style’) is concordant with the basic principle of oral composition, which is ‘composition in performance’, i.e. composing a song each time it is sung. Steblin-Kamenskij’s description of the implementation of this principle in the ballad tradition is as follows: “[F]or singers, the ballad was not a fixed text, but only a scheme that required verbal expression. But if the ballad was not a fixed text for the singers, it is obvious that each of the performances was, in fact, the creation of a new work, although the singers (or recorders) were not aware of it. Of course, since the singer did not regard himself an author, he did not strive for originality, therefore the difference between the ballad he sang and the ‘same ballad’ by other singers could be minimal or even reduced to zero. Nevertheless, due to the non-fixed nature of the text, i.e. the inseparability of performance from composition, any performance was a creative work, regardless of how much the result of this work differed from the results of other singers” [Steblyn-Kamenskij, 2003, p. 405–406].

It is only natural, in this context, to conclude that the end of orality results from the fixation of texts hitherto performed orally: “[A]s a result of every recording, the ballad became a fixed text, i.e. something directly

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. A. B. Lord’s earlier definition of the theme as “subject unit... regularly employed by a singer, not merely in any given poem, but in the poetry as a whole” [Lord, 1938, p. 440].

opposite to what it was in the oral tradition ... With the spread of writing, the oral ballad tradition died everywhere. Ballads could be read and learnt by heart. Creativity typical of improvisation gave way to mechanical reproduction of the text” [Stebelin-Kamenskij, 2003, p. 406, 418].

This is true of any oral tradition, but in the case of ballads the process is characterized by a specificity connected with the circumstances of ballad performance: “No doubt, the ballad existed only as a song and it was usually a dance song. There is evidence that the custom of ballad dancing spread throughout Scandinavia. The dance consisted in the fact that dancers, men and women, formed a circle or a chain, making first two steps to the left, then a step to the right, etc. The poet sang ballad stanzas, all the others singing the refrain. It was the poet, therefore, who was the performer of a ballad” [Stebelin-Kamenskij, 2003, p. 407]. In this situation, the role of the *skipari*, ballad performer was that of a ‘moderator’; his audience, unlike the audience of an epic poet, were not passive listeners, but active participants of singing and dancing. It is only natural that they would know the texts they sung, even though their own part was limited to singing a refrain.

In this way, the ballads acquired stability to become, later on, *fixed* texts and a special genre within literary tradition.

#### ABBREVIATIONS

- B.* (= *Brinhild*) — Hammershaimb 1851: 16–36.  
*Br.* (= *Brot*) — Neckel 1914: 193–196.  
*Fm* (= *Fafnismál*) — Neckel 1914: 176–184.  
*HS* (= *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*) — Baetke 1952.  
*RS* (= *Regin Smiður*) — Hammershaimb 1851: 3–15.  
*Sd* (= *Sigrdrífomál*) — Neckel 1914: 185–192.  
*Vm* (= *Vafþúðnismál*) — Neckel 1914: 44–53.  
*Vsp* (= *Völuspá*) — Neckel 1914: 1–15.  
*Prk* (= *Prymskviða*) — Neckel 1914: 107–111.

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### **ОТ ЭПОСА К БАЛЛАДЕ: ФАРЕРСКИЙ «СИГУРДОВСКИЙ ЦИКЛ»**

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История Сигурда (фар. Шуур) Змееборца, известная во всех основных германских традициях (кроме английской), представлена текстами со второй половины XIII по середине XIX века, древнеисландской «Старшей и Младшей Эддой», немецкой «Песню о Нибелунгах» и тремя фарерскими балладами «Нибелунговского цикла» («Кузнец Рейн», «Бринхильд» и «Хёгни»), записанными В. У. Хаммерсхаймбом (1851). Первая часть фарерского цикла (до убийства Сигурда) сходна с древнеисландской, вторая — с немецкой традицией. (Граница между частями проходит внутри второй баллады, «Бринхильд».) В древнеисландском героическом эпосе сюжеты располагаются в виде последовательности,

что в каждом конкретном случае предполагает продолжение (соответствующую предысторию); в мифологическом эпосе сюжет ограничен пределами песни. В этом отношении фарерские баллады о Шууре/Сигурде, героические по своему содержанию, сближаются с исландским мифологическим эпосом: в обоих случаях границы сюжета и песни совпадают. И древнеисландский эпос, и фарерские баллады содержат черты устного бытования (формульный стиль, повторы и т. п.), характеризующегося вариативностью, не свойственной фиксированным текстам литературной традиции. Процесс становления последней в случае баллад («песен-танцев») обладал спецификой, связанной с условиями бытования и активной ролью в нем аудитории, что предполагало знание текста каждым участником танца-пения. Благодаря этому баллады еще до момента записи приобретали некоторую стабильность, превращаясь после записи в фиксированные тексты, которые внутри литературной традиции объединялись в отдельный уникальный жанр.

**Ключевые слова:** Сигурдовский цикл, *Нибелунги*, древнеисландский эпос, фарерские баллады, устное бытование, письменная фиксация.

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