

Vǫrðr and *Gandr*: Helping Spirits in Norse Magic

The *Vǫrðr*

The Background in *Seiðr*

Seiðr is the distinctive term for certain Old Norse magic practices, attributed to both gods and men.¹ The earliest reference in skaldic verse to *seiðr* is in Kormákr's *Sigurðardrápa*, c. 960; it is also mentioned in the Eddic *Ls* and *Vsp*.² Prose works such as the 13th century *Heimskringla* and *Eiríks saga*, and several of the 14th century *fornaldarsögur*, present instances of the practice.³

References to texts are to page, or in the case of poetry to stanza numbers. I use the abbreviations of Neckel and Kuhn for Eddic poems (*Gg*, *Grm*, *Hdl*, *Hrbl*, *Ls*, *Vsp*), and the following for other texts:

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| ANF | <i>Arkiv för nordisk filologi</i> |
| APhS | <i>Acta Philologica Scandinavica</i> |
| AR | <i>Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte</i> (J. de Vries) |
| Flt | <i>Flateyjarbók</i> |
| FSNL | <i>Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda</i> |
| Hkr | <i>Heimskringla</i> |
| HN | <i>Historia Norvegiae</i> |
| ÍF | <i>Íslenzk Fornrit</i> |
| KLNM | <i>Kulturhistorisk Leksikon for Nordisk Middelalder</i> |
| MM | <i>Maal og Minne</i> |
| Skj | <i>Skjaldedigtning</i> (ed. Finnur Jónsson) |
| SnE | <i>Snorri's Edda</i> (ed. Finnur Jónsson) |

¹ The most complete study of *seiðr* remains that of Strömbäck, published in 1935. Strömbäck's work leaves many gaps, however. I have considered *seiðr* and its parallels with shamanism in ch. 5 of my doctoral thesis (Tolley 1993).

² Much archaic material is used in these poems, indicating their early date; see Dronke 1989, 106–8.

³ The sources are surveyed by Strömbäck 1935, 17–107; they include: skaldic: *Sigurðardrápa*, and probably *Ynglingatal* (*seiðr* is mentioned in *Ynglinga saga* in Snorri's prose summary of stanzas he does not cite); Eddic: *Ls*, *Vsp*, *Hdl*; family sagas (13th century): *Laxdæla saga*, *Vatnsdæla saga*, *Kormáks saga*, *Eiríks saga*; other 13th century: *Landnámabók*, *Hkr*; *fornaldarsögur* (late 13th–14th century): *Hrólfs saga kraka*, *Norna Gest's þáttur*, *Friðþjófs saga*, *Orvar Odds saga*, *Þáttur Orms Stórolfssonar*, *Göngu Hrólfs saga*, *Sögubrot*, *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*, *Völsunga saga*, *Halfdanar saga Brönufóstra*, *Þiðriks saga*.

The functions of *seiðr* fall into two categories: most instances of its use are *divinatory*, i.e. for fortune-telling, reflecting the commonplace nature of prophecy as a poetic device; the *efficatory* uses vary, but consist of effecting a physical change by means of magic, i.e. they are spells; sometimes the spell is for good, as with Þuríðr sundafyllir, who used *seiðr* to fill a fjord with fish (*Landnámabók* p. 186), but more often it is for a sinister purpose such as murder. Changing of outward form could also be effected with *seiðr* (as the *seiðkona* exchanges appearance with Signý in *Völsunga saga*: FSNL I: 121). In *Vsp* 21–4 *seiðr* emerges as the magic needed for rebirth, used by the Vanir in their war against the Æsir.⁴

That some form of trance was involved in *seiðr* is indicated in particular by *Vsp* 22, where the *seiðkona* Heiðr is described as *leikin* 'entranced' while she practises *seiðr*.⁵ The existence of trance does not necessarily imply the concept of the free-soul wandering, such as is often found among Lappish and Siberian shamans, but for which there is no evidence in *seiðr*; it may equally indicate that the seeress has put herself in a receptive state to hear information passed to her by spirits summoned in the course of the séance, and to send these spirits on missions if need be (Bäckman & Hultkrantz 1978, 20). The mention of yawning as a preliminary to *seiðr*, mentioned in *Hrólf's saga kraka* (FSNL I: 7–8), probably indicates a breathing in of spirits, such as is found in certain shamanic rituals⁶ (rather than a letting out of the free-soul).

Eiríks saga rauða gives the fullest account we have of a *seiðr* séance; in brief, the saga tells the following story (pp. 206–9):

A famine is raging in Greenland. Þorbjörg, a peripatetic *spákona* 'fortune teller', had the custom of travelling round the farms in winter foretelling fortunes and *árferð* (i.e. people's livelihoods). Her dress, including a staff, is described at length. She comes to a farm and is fed; she asks for women to be fetched who knew the art of *varðlokur*, which was necessary for the performance of *seiðr*. Guðriðr is the only one who knows it. After some discussion, some women form a circle around Þorbjörg, who places herself up on the *seiðhjallr*

⁴ As argued by Dronke 1988, 230–1.

⁵ The word is used in the sense 'out of his mind' in *Eyrbyggja saga* (146): *syndisk monnum þann veg helzt sem hann myndi leikinn, því at hann fór hjá sér ok taladi við sjalfan sik*, 'it seemed to people most likely that he was possessed, since he went out of his mind and talked to himself'. I therefore take *leikin*, in connexion with *seiðr*, to mean 'entranced'.

⁶ See note 34.

'*seiðr* platform'. Guðriðr proclaims the *kvæði* 'verse' well, and Þór-björg thanks her for it, saying that a good many spirits had come that otherwise would have avoided them, and a lot of things are clear to her now which were hidden before, which she goes on to reveal, each person asking his fortune in turn.

In view of its remoteness from the pagan period (*Eiríks saga* was composed in the early thirteenth century) the saga cannot be regarded as authentic in all, or even many, of its details about *seiðr*.⁷ Nonetheless, it preserves certain ancient elements, and the general outline of the *séance* may reflect actual practice; this is confirmed to some extent by its closeness to the shamanic practices of the neighbouring Lapps, whose commonplace presence in Norse society as fortune-tellers and magicians may well have influenced the Norse practices.

Séances varied according to time, place and purpose, but it is possible to give a composite analysis based on all the accounts we have from the 17–18th centuries (Bäckman and Hultkrantz 1978, 97–101); not all the elements were necessarily present in all places and on all occasions:

The shaman prepares himself for a day beforehand by fasting. He takes an intoxicant (lye or brandy). He sits naked, beats the shamanic drum and starts singing, accompanied by the men and women present; the singing (*juoigos*) is mostly inarticulate, but includes words referring to the places to be visited by the shaman in trance, or to details of the journey. The shaman runs around like a madman, holding glowing embers and cutting himself. After the shaman has drummed for at most quarter of an hour, he turns black, walks on his knees with his hands on his hips, sings a *juoigos* in a high voice, and falls down exhausted as if dead. He stops breathing; the return of his breathing indicates he is leaving trance. The trance lasts half to one hour, during which the shaman's soul wanders in the spirit realms and the realm of the dead (in a different ritual, during trance the shaman sends out helping spirits to fight against spirits of rival shamans). The journey of the shaman's free-soul takes place in the company of his helping spirits (which take the form of birds and fish; the reindeer spirit takes part in fights). Whilst in trance watchmen are left to guard the shaman's body; these probably consisted of a choir ordered by the shaman. At the beginning of the *séance* all those present seem to have taken part in the singing, but a special choir was appointed for continuing operations: this is in several accounts said to

⁷ Strömbäck already pointed this out with regard to *Eiríks saga*; for a recent critique on the same lines see North 1991, 157.

consist of women or one woman. Singing continues throughout the séance, the purpose being to remind the shaman of his mission. Some sources indicate that the singing was concentrated or confined to the final stages of the trance, and the aim here was to wake the shaman; it seems to have been the particular responsibility of one girl to perform this waking song, and her task involved searching for the shaman's soul, so she must herself have gone into trance.⁸ As the shaman returns, the choir starts to sing again, and he rises, puts the drum to his ear and beats it slowly; he then stops and sits thinking, before recounting the details of his journey and what he has found out (about the healing of the patient, for example, depending on the purpose of the séance). He also praises the girl who woke him and sings to her, alluding to his genitals and her sexual qualities.

The *Vardlokur*

Of greatest interest in the *Eiriks saga* account is the word *vardlokur*. We are told the following about the word, much of which parallels the role of the singing in the Lappish séance:

- a. It is a *kvæði*, some form of verse, perhaps a song.
- b. It was normally pronounced by a group of women, who gathered around the *seiðkona* during the séance.
- c. In this instance it was however recited by just one woman, there being no others who knew it.
- d. It is recited by way of preparation: the effect is to summon spirits, from whom the *seiðkona* acquires information. The summoning of spirits — *gandir* — is also mentioned in *Vsp* 22 in connexion with *seiðr*.

The *vardlokur* is to be compared to the Lappish *juoigos*, sung to enable the shaman to make his trance journey, as well as to call spirits (the *Saiva guelie* fish appears after the shaman sings a *juoigos* for it; its length varied according to the length of the song). There is no hint that the song was by preparation for a trance journey in *seiðr*, however. The one girl in the Norse replaces, or rather acts as spokesman, for a normal choir, and corresponds to the choir, with its preparatory function, in the Lappish, rather than to the one girl there responsible for rousing the shaman from trance.

⁸ An assistant with the responsibility of waking (or assisting in the waking of) the shaman is found elsewhere, e.g. among the Yukagir (Jochelson 1926, 196–9), and the Evenk (Anisimov 1963, 102–3).

Whilst the function of *varðlokur* in the *Eiríks saga* account of *seiðr* is clear — it is explicitly used to summon spirits who inform Þór-björg — the meaning of the word is debatable.

Etymology

Varð- is the stem (used in compounds) derived from *vǫrðr* 'guard, watch, protector'. In so far as the word designates a spirit it must therefore be a 'guardian spirit'; such a use is found in modern Norwegian *vord* and Swedish *vård* (Pering 1941, 131–4). Thus an independent spirit is implied, who in some way acts as the guardian of the summoner.⁹

The plural form *-lok(k)ur* is to be explained as referring to the *kvæði* as a collection of verses. Forms with both *k* and *kk* occur in the MSS, making two etymologies possible: *lokur* is the fem. pl. of *loka* 'fastening'; *lokkur* is not recorded as an independent noun: we must assume it is a fem. pl. noun from the verb *lokka* 'entice', thus 'enticements'.¹⁰ Two meanings for *varðlok(k)ur* are therefore possible: 'guardian spirit fastenings', i.e. what 'locks the spirits in', under the power of the summoner; and 'guardian spirit enticements' — the song entices the spirits to be present; it is in this sense that the author of *Eiríks saga* appears to have taken the word. There is little difference between these interpretations in practice, as the implied effect of summoning the spirits for consultation is the same.

⁹ Strömbäck (1935, 138) argues that the meaning is the 'free-soul' sent out by the *seiðkona*. He cites the parallel between the one girl in the Norse account who recites the verse, and the single girl in the Lapp accounts who is responsible for recalling the shaman's spirit. However, that there is only one girl singing in *Eiríks saga* is specifically mentioned as unusual, and her role there is clearly not to recall the *seiðkona*'s spirit. Moreover, there seems no reason why a free-soul should be designated by a word meaning 'guardian', for which nomenclature no evidence exists from the Old Norse period (later uses of *vǫrðr*, as noted by de Vries (*AR* § 160), no doubt result from confusion between independent spirits and the soul, probably under the influence of Christian antipathy to the idea of independent spirits employed by witches).

¹⁰ In *Gg* 7 Gróa sings a charm called 'Urðr's *lokur*': *lokur* here implies the sense 'spells'; the poet also plays on the sense of 'lock, hold fast', for the next word is *halda* 'hold, keep safe'. *Urðar lokur* is similar in sound to *varðlokur*; it is likely that the poet has deliberately remodelled a no longer understood traditional word *varðlokur* (or perhaps by an even closer **varðarlokur*: in compound forms the genitive (*varðar*) could as well be used as the stem (*varð*)) bringing in fate in the person of Urðr (the poet's mention of Urðr is deliberate: she is mentioned again at the end of the poem, indicating a structural use of fate).

Conclusion

Eiriks saga clearly witnesses to a genuine tradition about the circumstances of a *seiðr* séance in so far as the summoning of spirits was involved (cf. *Vsp* 22). It may be surmised that these were called *verðir*, a pagan usage barely understood by the time of the composition of *Eiriks saga*, which refers to them by the Latin word *náttúrur*.¹¹

It appears that the Norse *seiðr* corresponded to Lappish shamanism, at least in so far as the summoning of 'guardian spirits' was concerned, but differed from it in the absence of soul wandering during trance.

The Gandr

The *Gandus* and Lappish Shamanism

Lapps are frequently to be encountered in Old Norse literature; when they are not being tyrannised for payments of tax in the form of furs, they are presented as powerful fortune-tellers and magicians. They could, for example, take on the shape of beasts and recover distant objects: in ch. 12 of *Vatnsdæla saga* (pp. 34–5) Ingimundr sends some Lapps from Norway to spy out his future home in Iceland, which they manage to do in three days; *Landnámabók* (p. 218) relates the same story: *sendi hann [Ingimundr] þá finna tvá í hamförum til Íslands eptir hlut sínum* ('he sent two Lapps to Iceland in assumed shapes to recover his talisman').¹² That the Lapps' renown for magic powers existed not merely in the realm of fable is shown by the law which forbids anyone to *trúa á finn eða fordæði* 'believe in a Lapp or in sorcery' (*Norges Gamle Love* I: 389, 403).¹³

The rich traditions of Lappish sorcery would have ensured that

¹¹ I do not accept North's interpretation (1991, 157) of the use of the Latin word, namely that it indicates the whole scene was fabricated on the basis of ecclesiastical sources. This would pose insurmountable problems for explaining how the word *varðlokkur* appears here at all.

¹² The story is very similar to that in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* where Haraldr Gormsson sends a 'wise man' (*kunnugr maðr*) in whale shape to spy out Iceland (*Hkr* I: 271). He found a cold welcome at the hands of the Icelandic *landvættir* (guardian spirits of the land). Snorri does not describe him as a Lapp, but in view of the similarity to the Ingimundr story, and of the Lapps' partiality for travelling in whale shape, such a supposal is likely. For example the Lapp who died in *HN* was travelling as a whale or possibly some other large water beast (*in cetinam effigiem*).

¹³ There is even a verb *finnvitka* in Old Norse, 'to Lapp bewitch', indicating the extent of the association of magic with Lapps.

contemporaries would find nothing untoward in the account of a Lappish shamanic séance in the twelfth century *Historia Norvegiae*; yet for us the account stands out as extraordinary, for it is the only genuine account of Lappish shamanism by the Norse, and is indeed the oldest account of Lappish shamanism in existence:¹⁴

Horum itaque intollerabilis [*sic*] perfidia vix cuiquam credibilis videbitur, quantumve diabolicæ superstitionis in magica arte exercent. Sunt namque quidam ex ipsis, qui quasi prophetæ a stolido vulgo venerantur, quoniam per immundum spiritum, quem *gandum* vocitant, multis multa præsagia ut eveniunt quandoque percunctati prædicent; et de longinquis provinciis res concupiscibiles miro modo sibi alliciunt nec non absconditos thesauros longe remoti mirafice produnt. Quadam vero vice dum christiani causa commercii apud Finnos ad mensam sedissent, illorum hospita subito inclinata exspiravit; unde christianis multum dolentibus non mortuam sed a gandis æmulum esse deprædatam, sese illam cito adepturos ipsi Finni nihil contristati respondent. Tunc quidam magus extenso panno, sub¹⁵ quo se ad profanas veneficas incantationes præparat, quoddam vasculum ad modum taratantarorum sursum erectis manibus extulit, cetinis atque cervinis formulis cum loris et ondriolis navicula etiam cum remis occupatum, quibus vehiculis per alta nivium et devexa montium vel profunda stagnorum ille diabolicus gandus uteretur. Cumque diutissime incantando tali apparatu ibi saltasset, humo tandem prostratus totusque niger ut Æthiops, spumans ora ut puta freneticus, præruptus ventrem vix aliquando cum maximo fremore emisit spiritum. Tum alterum in magica arte peritissimum consuluerunt, quid de utrisque actum sit. Qui simili modo sed non eodem eventu suum implevit officium, namque hospita sana surrexit et defunctum magum tali eventu interisse eis intimavit: gandum videlicet ejus in cetinam effigiem inmaginatum ostico gando in præacutus sudes transformato, dum per quoddam stagnum velocissime prosiliret, malo omine obviasset, quia in stagni ejusdem profundo sudes latitantes exacti ventrem perforabant; quod et in mago domi mortuo apparuit.

Moreover their intolerable paganism, and the amount of devilish superstition they practise in their magic, will seem credible to almost no one. For there are some of them who are venerated as prophets by the ignorant populace, since by means of an unclean spirit that they call a *gandus* they will declare many predictions to many people, when they are petitioned, as they turn out; and they draw desirable things to themselves from far off regions in a wondrous way, and

¹⁴ The text is from Storm's edition (Storm 1880, 84–6).

¹⁵ Manuscript reading. Storm emends needlessly to *super*.

amazingly, though themselves far away, they produce hidden treasures. By some chance while some Christians were sitting at the table amongst the Lapps for the sake of trade their hostess suddenly bowed over and died; hence the Christians mourned greatly, but were told by the Lapps, who were not at all distressed, that she was not dead but stolen away by the *gandi* of rivals, and they would soon get her back. Then a magician stretched out a cloth, under which he prepared himself for impious magic incantations, and with arms stretched up lifted a vessel like a tambourine, covered in diagrams of whales and deer with bridles and snow-shoes and even a ship with oars, vehicles which that devilish *gandus* uses to go across the depths of snow and slopes of mountains or the deep waters. He chanted a long time and jumped about with this piece of equipment, but then was laid flat on the ground, black all over like an Ethiopian, and foaming from the mouth as if wearing a bit. His stomach was ripped open and with the loudest roaring ever he gave up the ghost. Then they consulted the other one who was versed in magic about what had happened to them both. He performed his job in a similar way but not with the same outcome — for the hostess rose up hale — and indicated that the deceased sorcerer had perished by the following sort of accident:¹⁶ his *gandus*, transformed into the shape of a water beast,¹⁷ had by ill luck struck against an enemy's *gandus* changed into sharpened stakes as it was rushing across a lake, for the stakes lying set up in the depths of that same lake had pierced his stomach, as appeared on the dead magician at home.

We have to wait several centuries before we find further lengthy accounts of Lappish shamanism, written in the 17th and 18th centuries by Norwegian and Swedish missionaries, who zealously set out in considerable detail the beliefs they were intent on eradicating.¹⁸ These

¹⁶ I have translated this sentence to make clear that the shaman, not the hostess, is the subject throughout, which the Latin leaves ambiguous. For the hostess to report what had happened on the spirit journey she would herself have to be a shaman, which neither this text nor Lappish tradition, which scarcely recognises female shamans, suggest.

¹⁷ The obvious translation, 'whale', is problematic since the setting is a lake; *cetus* can in fact refer to any large water beast. 'Pike' may be intended, as this functioned as a fresh-water equivalent to the whale for shamanic journeys (Haavio 1952, 124–5). If 'whale' is the intended meaning, the writer may either have been influenced by the commonplace that Lapps transformed themselves into whales, or the word *lacus* could indicate 'fjord' rather than 'lake', a more natural setting for a whale.

¹⁸ The relative merit of the various accounts is assessed in Bäckman & Hultkrantz 1978, 39; Skanke, Olsen, Rheen and Lundius are the most valuable. We possess almost no records of the shamanic beliefs and practices of the Lapps of Finland and Russia taken down while shamanism was still practised. Lappish shamanism was moribund already in the 18th century, and was extinct other than as a folk memory by the early 19th century.

accounts are, however, usually generalised, rather than recounting specific observed séances.

One of the most striking features of the *HN* account is the part played by the *gandus*; the later accounts enable us to see something of the Lapps' beliefs about spirits, against which the account of the *HN* may be assessed.

The *HN* account is consistent with later accounts, in its portrayal of the shamanic contest, and in that behind it clearly lies the sending out of the free-soul by shamans in trance.¹⁹

However, this is not quite what the writer of the account presents; he seems to see the séance as a magic ritual for the sending of the *gandus* on its mission. The Christian author clearly regards the *gandus* as an evil spirit quite independent of the shaman (or his soul). His picture of the *gandus* may be summarised thus:

- a. It is an unclean spirit;
- b. It functions as a helping spirit to the shaman, telling him future (and present) happenings, and enabling him to retrieve distant treasures;
- c. Harm to it results in harm to its owner;
- d. It can steal people (i.e. their souls, since the body clearly remains stationary);
- e. It travels by means of animals, ships, snow-shoes;
- f. It can assume the shape of whales/water beasts and other objects.

In brief, the Lappish shaman in trance was in contact with three sorts of spirit: the dead; anthropomorphic spirits who were responsible for initiating him as a shaman, and who could later provide him with

¹⁹ Some confusion has arisen in that these two shamanic activities are conflated in the *HN*, unlike in any later account. Shamanic journeys aimed at retrieving souls taken to the otherworld always involve the shaman's own soul in later accounts; in shamanic fights the shaman went into trance, during which he sent out a helping spirit (in later accounts usually the reindeer, but the fish spirit could conceivably also have been used) to fight that of the enemy shaman (his own soul not being involved). Presumably in the *HN* séance the shaman did send his soul out; the attack on his helping spirit occurred by accident not design. The author writes of the collapse and death of the shaman without separating them, whereas in fact the shaman must first have a. collapsed as if lifeless, b. sent out his soul, and c. subsequently have died while in trance as a result of the attack on his helping spirit. Although it must be the hostess's soul that is stolen, the *HN* writer does not show that he is aware of the sending out of the free-soul during trance taking place at all: indeed, he talks of the shaman 'sending out his spirit' only in the sense of dying, and this at a point into the trance when according to Lappish belief he would already have sent his soul out (not, of course, to die).

sought for information; theriomorphic spirits in the form of birds, fish and reindeer, who accompanied the shaman on his trance journeys, and who were responsible for fighting against the spirits of rival shamans (this was particularly the reindeer spirit's role in the extant accounts), such that any injury sustained by the helping spirit would appear on the shaman as he lay in trance:²⁰ this feature is preserved accurately in *HN*, with the difference that the spirit is in the form of a water beast rather than a reindeer.

In points a, b, and c it corresponds to the Lapp animal helping spirits, though it was anthropomorphic spirits that were consulted for information (Bäckman & Hultkrantz 1978, 43).

In point d it corresponds to Lapp helping spirits or the dead.

In point e it may represent the Lappish shaman's own soul, which could travel on the animal spirits as steeds; ships and snow-shoes are not recorded as spiritual vehicles, and these depictions may have served a different purpose from that assigned by the Norwegian writer.

Point f either represents a distortion of the animal spirit, which had animal form, but not as a result of transformation, and did not assume other forms, or it may represent the shaman himself, who in later tradition could transform himself, and take on the form of various beasts (not just those of the helping spirits), though not, as recorded, stakes.²¹ A more sophisticated concept may have underlain this feature: cf. the Evenk *marylya*, a spiritual clan-boundary fence of stakes guarded by shamanic spirits.

It thus appears that the Norwegian writer has recast and amalgamated various Lapp spirits, both anthropomorphic and theriomorphic, as well as the shaman's free-soul and the dead. This spirit he calls a *gandus*. This is not a Lappish word, but the Old Norse *gandr*, found in a number of sources.²²

²⁰ As recorded by Jens Kildal (c. 1730–50) (J. Kildal 1943–5, 138–9).

²¹ In Evenk shamanism, however, a shamanic helping spirit in the form of a split stake is responsible for seizing an escaped disease spirit and bringing it back to the shaman to deal with (Anisimov 1963, 104, and 110 on the *marylya* fence).

²² I do not consider modern Norwegian uses of *gand*: Lid covers this topic in great detail (Lid 1927, 331–9). To summarise: *gand* is used in the senses 'stick'; 'swollen ridge around a damaged place on a tree'; 'magic' specific to the Lapps: in particular, it designated a sort of artificial mannikin made of twigs, nails, hair etc., which might in vengeance be sent unseen into the intestines of a victim.

Etymology

De Vries argues that *gandr* derives from a root *gan-*, an ablaut variant of *gin-* found in *Ginnungagap*, with the deverbative suffix *-ðra-* (cf. *galdr* from *gala*); the basic sense would be 'magic'. In corroboration, he notes the runic *ungandir* 'against sorcery'. The name of the prophetess of the Semnones, *Ganna*, mentioned by Dio Cassius (*Roman History* 67: 5), is from the same root (*AR* § 229). The word has no basic sense of 'staff': depictions of it as such derive from later traditions (the witch's broomstick motif: de Vries 1930–1, 53); a basic meaning of 'staff' would hardly yield the meanings of 'wolf', or 'Mighty Serpent' (*Jormungandr*), nor would it make any sense in the passage in *Fóstbræðra saga* (see next paragraph), since the woman could hardly ride a staff during sleep.

An initial sense of *gandr* as 'sorcerer spirit', one that can be sent out or summoned to provide information, and which (not necessarily always) took animal form, is established from the following. The word occurs twice in *Vsp*: the *seiðkona* in 22 *vitti ganda* 'summoned *gandir* with a drum';²³ in 29 Óðinn receives *spáganda* from the *völva*: here the word is used in the sense '[news from] *gandir* of prophecy'. In *Fóstbræðra saga* (p. 243) it is said *viða hefi ek gondum rennt í nótt, ok em ek nú víis orðin þeirra hluta, er ek vissá ekki áðr*, 'I have caused *gandir* to run far in the night, and I have now become wise about those things that I did not know before.' The idea of setting *gandir* in motion is found also in *Þiðriks saga* (p. 304), where *Ostacia færir út ok rærði sinn gand, þat kollum ver at hon færir at sæiða* 'Ostacia goes out and moves her *gandr*, that is, she begins to practise *seiðr*'; this provides confirmation of *Vsp*'s association of *gandir* with *seiðr*. The effect of Ostacia's *seiðr* is to summon various animals, and change herself into a dragon. This indicates an awareness, somewhat distorted, of *gandir* as animal spirits.

Animal senses

Gandr is used in the sense 'wolf' in a number of kennings: 'fire' is *hallar gandr* 'hall wolf' and 'wind' is *selju gandr* 'willow wolf' and *stordar gandr* 'coppice wolf' (Meissner 1984, 100, 102). The connexion

²³ In *Ls* 24 Óðinn is said to 'strike upon a *vett*' while practising *seiðr*; *vitti* almost certainly comes from the same root. What the instrument was cannot be ascertained, but its function is equivalent to that of the Lappish shaman's drum.

between 'wolf' and 'sorcerer spirit' lies in the fact that wolves were witches' steeds: thus 'wolf' in kennings is *leiknar hestr* 'ogress's [i.e. witch's] steed' and *kveldriðu hestr* 'evening rider's [i.e. witch's] steed' (ibid. 124–5); The term *gandreid*, a 'riding of *gandr* spirits' is used in the sense 'a ride of the wolf' by Sturla Þórðarson in the late 13th century (*Skj* B: II: 123):

En gandreid
grœnna skjalda
Svölnis vegg
sleit á lopti.

The ride (movement)
of the wolf of green shields [sword]
cut Svölnir's (shield-)wall
up in the air.

The world serpent is called *Jormungandr*, 'Mighty *gandr*' in *Vsp* 47 and in *Ragnarsdrápa*,²⁴ which indicates that the wolf was not the only animal that a *gandr* could appear as; the meaning of *gandr* is thus 'animal spirit'. The witch's animal helping spirit was above all the wolf, and *gandr* often — but not always — refers specifically to the wolf; the shift from 'wolf spirit' to 'wolf' is a small one.

The *gandreid* was originally a 'riding by *gandir*', to seek out information or for other purposes (e.g. to harm people). In late (14th century) sources *gandreid* was also taken to mean 'ride on a staff': e.g. Þórsteinn decides to make a visit to the underworld in *Þórsteins saga bæjar-magnis* and requests: *fá þú mér út krókstaf minn ok bandvetlinga því at ek vil á gandreid fara* 'get out my crooked stick and my woollen gloves, as I want to go on a *gandreid*' (*FSNL* IV: 322). The understanding of *gandr* as a staff cannot however be reduced merely to late European influence; it is to be noted that in some shamanic societies the staff is ridden by the shaman.²⁵

²⁴ *Skj* B: I: 4. Notice how the word *öndurr* 'snow shoe' occurs immediately before *Jormungandr*, suggesting a traditional association of the *gandr* and the means of travel characterised by *HN* (p. 83), just before the account of the séance, as typically Lappish.

²⁵ See Oinas 1987, 330 for some details of these practices.

Göndull

Two names derive from *gandr*. *Göndul* is applied to valkyries (*Vsp* 30, *Darradarljóð* 5 (*Skj* B:I: 490, post 1014)); this is to be seen as deriving from *gandr* in the sense ‘wolf’, which was one of the beasts of battle. Freyja in *Sörla þáttr* is called *Göndul*; this reflects her valkyrie nature (cf. *AR* § 528, 536), but also her familiarity with *gandir* as spirits, as she is the founder of *seiðr* (introducing it amongst the *Æsir* in *Ynglinga saga* ch. 4). The name *Göndlir* is borne by Óðinn (*Grm* 49:10): it could be interpreted as referring to his power over *gandir* as a magician: this would be in keeping with his connexion with the rites focused on *seiðr*, involving the summoning of *gandir*; it could also signify ‘controller of [the valkyrie] *Göndul*’.²⁶ Perhaps the most likely significance is ‘user of a *göndull*’, which itself is of uncertain meaning.²⁷

The word *göndull* is derived from *gandr*. It is used in a court case heard in Bergen in 1325:²⁸ *ritt ek i frá mér gönduls öndu[m], ein þér i bak biti, annar i brjóst þér biti, þriði snúi uppá þik hæimt (/heipt) ok öfund* ‘I ride / thrust from me *göndull*’s breaths, one to bite you in the back, another to bite you in the breast, a third to turn harm and evil upon you’, Ragnhildr, the defendant, had said. To this is added *ok síðan þesse orð ero lesen skal spýta uppá þau, er til syngzst* ‘and then when these words have been read shall those be spat upon that are being sung against’. The meaning of *göndull* here is probably ‘wolf’, as the (spirit) carrier of the witch’s ill-will; the closeness of the formula to that from Basel in 1407, cited by Ohrt (1935–6, 202), is to be noted: *ich sich dir näch und sende dir näch nün gewere wolffe, drie die dich zerbysst, drie die dich zerryssent, drie die dir din hertzlich bluot uss lappent und sügent* ‘I look towards you and send towards you nine werewolves, three to bite you up, three to cut you up, three to lap and suck out your heart’s blood.’ Ragnhildr clearly sent her wolves out in the form of breaths; Weiser-Aall (1936, 77–8) notes mediaeval German analogues to this belief in the witch’s breath being a carrier of harm; the same sense is perhaps seen in a kenning noted by Olsen: *gýgjar göndull*, used in *Sálus rimur og Nikanórs IX.2*, in the sense ‘hugr’

²⁶ Note for example how Eyvindr says *Göndul ok Skögul sendi Gautatýr* ‘Óðinn sent *Göndul* and *Skögul*’ (*Skj* B:I: 57).

²⁷ To anticipate my argument, it might be noted that Óðinn is associated with magic wands: in *Hrbl* 20 he is given a *gambanteinn* by the giant Hlébarðr.

²⁸ Text in *Diplomatarium Norvegicum IX* #93. See also Fritzner 1886–96, sv. *göndull*; *AR* § 214; *KLNM* sv. *gand*; Ohrt 1935–6. I take *ritt* to stand for either *rið* ‘ride’ or *rind* ‘thrust’.

(M. Olsen 1942, 10n. Text in *Rimnasafn* II: 750); he takes this to be a shortening of *gýgjar gønduls andar* 'trollkvinnens ulv[spust]' ('witch's wolf-[breaths]').²⁹

In *Bósa saga* (FSNL III: 308), however, the word *gøndull* is used in the sense 'penis'. I suggest that the word *gøndull* had a regular meaning 'staff', specifically the staff for summoning the *gandir*:³⁰ there would have been a fundamental link between the spirit and the staff, in exactly the same way as there was between the deity *Vølsi* and the penis *vølsi* in *Vølsa þáttur* (note how the normal word for 'staff', *vølr* derives from the same root),³¹ hence confusion arose, so that *gandr* came to be used in the sense 'staff', and *gøndull* in the sense 'supernatural wolf', as in the Bergen formula and in the kenning *gýgjar gøndull*. It is only from a sense 'staff' that the meaning 'penis' for *gøndull* can be derived.

The sense 'penis' is interesting, as it suggests a sexual dimension to the *gøndull* staff (cf. the *Vølsi* rite); *Vsp* 22 hints at the unacceptable practices involved in *seiðr*, for its practitioner was the darling of evil women: this is to be connected with the sexual anarchy typical of the Vanir (e.g. their incest: *Hkr* I: 13), and associated with *seiðr* in the form of *ergi* 'effeminacy' (e.g. in *Ls* 24). Sexual licence is found in shamanism (e.g. among the Chukchi: see Bogoras 1904–9, 448–54), as well as in the viking funeral of Ibn Faḍlān (where the girl to be sacrificed both has visions into the afterlife and undergoes several bouts of sexual intercourse); the summoning of *gandir* may have constituted one of the unacceptable sexual practices that *Vsp* hints at as linked with *seiðr*.³² Sexual overtones are also apparent in the Bergen court case: the purpose of the charm was to prevent another woman from having sex with a certain man; to this end the defendant had placed a sword in their bed.³³

²⁹ The line *Gýgjar er svó gøndull hvass i Greipar láði*, in particular the adjective *hvass* 'sharp', suggests an interpretation 'so sharp is the giantess's (i.e. witch's) wind [thought] in the land of Greip [mind]': thus the reference would be, not to a witch's breath, but to the belief that witches travelled in (whirl)winds.

³⁰ Compare the Ket shaman's staff, provided with a cross bar on which summoned spirits could rest (Nioradze 1925, 79).

³¹ *Flt* II: 331–6. For an analysis of the story, see Steinsland and Vogt 1981.

³² Assuming some connexion between the spirits and the staff characterised as a penis, as in the *Vølsi* rite; shamans in many regions had a spirit mate of the opposite sex with whom they slept, and who provided the shaman with spiritual knowledge (Eliade 1972, 72–3, 77, 79–81).

³³ The sword between a sleeping couple is of course a common motif, but in this case a comparison might be made with the Indian garlanded staff placed between newly weds, which, whilst ensuring fertility, prevented sexual union for the first three nights.

The word *gøndull* had built up a range of connotations. I suggest all of the following form parts of the concept involved in *gønduls andar*:

- a. 'Spirits of the staff', which would be conceived as
- b. 'Wolf spirits';
- c. 'Wolf breaths', i.e. the witch's breath bearing her ill-will in the form of wolves: just as in *seiðr* spirits — *gandir* — would be breathed in, they could also be breathed out on their mission.³⁴

Conclusion

From the above consideration, it emerges that:

- a. The *gandr* was a spirit conjured during *seiðr*;
- b. It could be sent out while the sender slept;
- c. It supplied the summoner or sender with information;
- d. It could harm people;
- e. It took the form of beasts. It does not seem to have been limited to one sort of beast, since it is associated both with wolves and the world serpent;
- f. Witches however rode on wolves, giving rise to the narrower meaning 'wolf' for *gandr*.³⁵ thus there appears to have been confusion between the *gandr*, an animal spirit sent out on a mission or summoned by a witch (*vǫlva*, *seiðkona*), and the witch's steed, a wolf, *ridden* on a mission, and not associated with *seiðr*;
- g. The *gandir* were summoned with a staff (which formed a central part of the *vǫlva*'s apparatus, to judge from the word's derivation from *vǫlr*, 'staff') which was referred to specifically as *gøndull*; Óðinn's name *Gøndlir* may signify 'user of a *gøndull*'.

The author of *HN* betrays a familiarity with the Norse *gandr* in his presentation of the Lappish spirit he calls a *gandus*. He talks of the

The staff seems to represent the *gandharva* spirit that dwelt in the world tree and guarded the *soma*, and which had the *ius primae noctis* (see Viennot 1954, 68 and Eliade 1958, 309).

³⁴ For an instance of the breathing of the shaman representing the breathing in of spirits see the detailed account of a Yukagir séance given by Jochelson 1926, 196–9.

³⁵ The implication of this could be that the witch's soul was conceived as wandering (the wolves are clearly supernatural). Given the connexion between *gandr* and *seiðr*, this could imply soul journeys on the part of the *seiðkona* during *seiðr*, for which there is little evidence elsewhere. The witch ride on wolves is not however specifically associated with *seiðr*, and the practice probably belonged to another branch of magic; moreover, there is nothing specifically suggesting that the wolf was regarded as more than a supernaturally bewitched beast used as a steed.

gandus assuming various forms (water-beast, stakes); it appears that the *gandr* could take on different forms, could *skipta hǫmum*, whereas the Lapp animal spirits did not do so. Norse influence is perhaps to be seen in the interpretation of the depictions on the drum as modes of transport for the spirit (compare for example *Skiðblaðnir* as a supernatural mode of transport for Óðinn/Freyr).³⁶

The emphasis in the concept of the *gandr* on gathering information I believe furnishes a reason for placing this role at the beginning of the description of the skills the Lapp *gandus* conferred in *HN*, whereas in later tradition this is not foremost among the shaman's roles, and is in any case often performed by the shaman's own soul wandering rather than by the helping spirits.

The Norwegian writer was led astray by his knowledge of *seiðr*, the nearest native practice to shamanism, into presenting the séance as one in which the shaman performed certain rites to induce the *gandus* into effecting particular things, rather than one in which trance took place, during which the shaman sent his free-soul out of his body.

General Conclusion

The *gandr* thus appears as equivalent to the *vǫrðr* implied by the word *varðlokkur* in the account of *seiðr* in *Eiríks saga*: both appear as helping spirits, in particular for providing information. The *vǫrðr*, however, to judge from the name, was presumably originally seen as a protecting spirit, corresponding to the Lappish anthropomorphic spirits; the *gandr*, an animal spirit, on the other hand corresponds to the Lappish animal assistant spirits. Both sorts of spirit provided information, but the *gandr* also appears to have carried out tasks for the summoner, again like the Lappish theriomorphic spirits.

Outside *seiðr* there is no evidence for animal helping spirits in Norse. When the *fylgja* appears in animal form it is as a foreboding, not as a helping spirit; helping spirits are presented in human form, such as the great *hamingja* that appears, inherited by the hero in *Víga*

³⁶ The change into stakes may be influenced by Norse traditions of rivers being staked, as a trap: this is seen in *Pórsdrápa*, where Þórr crosses such a river (*Skj B*: I: 140). I here follow Davidson's translation and interpretation (1983, 521, 586–7 (*stikleidar veg breidan* 'the broad path of the stake-set way'). The Evenk analogue (p. 66 above) however makes it likely that the Lapps did indeed have concepts similar to the *marylya* fence.

Glúms saga (pp. 30–1). When animals appear as helpers (or hinderers) of an action, it is always a matter of either a. a person in disguise, e.g. Askmaðr in *Porskfirdinga saga* (p. 23), who escaping as a pig from a burning house is struck by a brand, and is found in human shape: no indication is given that his human form was anywhere else than where his animal form was; b. a person's soul taking on animal form while the body remains somewhere else, e.g. in *Hjálmþés saga* (FSNL IV: 232–4), where Hǫrðr and Hervǫr remain on board ship in body, but their souls take on the form of fish to help against an attack;³⁷ this affords evidence that the Norse were familiar with the typically shamanic idea of the free-soul, but it is not associated with *seiðr*, and does not correspond exactly to Lappish shamanic practices.

Seiðr may be counted a form of shamanism in that it involved the summoning during trance of various forms of spirit for divinatory and efficatory purposes. The practice may have been influenced by Lappish shamanism, but it is not identical with it: in particular, the evidence does not suggest that soul journeys took place while the Norse seeress was in trance.

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³⁷ Further examples are cited in Ellis-Davidson 1943, pp. 122–7.

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