

The hunting of the *vétt*: in search of the Old Norse shamanic drum

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In stanza 24 of the Old Norse Eddic poem *Lokasenna* (written down some time around 1270 on the basis of earlier written and oral versions), the god Loki makes an accusation of disreputable practices against Óðinn, saying that “draptu á vétt sem vǫlor” (“you beat on a *vétt* like *vǫlur*”, i.e. female magical practitioners). The word *vétt* is puzzling, and its connections and derivation are unclear.¹ The tantalizing and ambiguous information that can be deduced appears to point in several directions; I attempt here, if not to disentangle the intertwined roots of this problem, at least to allow it to yield some fruits in terms of how we position Old Norse magic in its cultural context. I begin by gathering the few instances of *vétt* and the possibly related *vitt* that I am aware of, along with some contextual animadversions, a good many of which consist of summaries of well-established previous research (which it seems worth relaying and commenting on for convenience), before moving on to look at a new possibility for the interpretation of the *vétt*.

THE *VITT*

The present discussion focuses on the word *vétt*, but consideration should first be given to another word with which *vétt* has sometimes been conflated: *vitt*.

Laws

The *vitt* (or possibly *vitt*) is mentioned in the Norwegian *Den ældre Eidsivathing-Christenret* i.24 and 45:²

engi maðr skal hafa i husi sinu staf eða stalla. vit eða blot. eða þat er til hæiðins siðar uæit . . .
engi maðr a at trua. a finna. eða fordæðor. eða a vit. eða blot. eða rot. eða þat. er til hæiðins

¹ I attempted to set out some rather inconclusive considerations in Tolley (2009a: 534–6); the present analysis differs in many respects from my earlier treatment.

² *Norges gamle love* I, 383, 389: both spellings, *vit* and *vitt*, occur in different manuscripts.

siðar hoeyrir. eða læita ser þar bota

no-one shall have in his house staff or altar, *vitt* or idol, or what relates to heathen practice

...

no-one should believe in Finnar or witches or in *vit* or idols or a root, or what belongs to heathendom, or seek remedies for himself there³

The two texts tell us different things: the first condemns the *possession* of objects related to magic practice, while the second attacks the *practice* of magic. The first text gives two pairs of objects, which appear to consist in each case of magical apparatus + pagan religious apparatus, suggesting *vitt* belongs to the field of magic. Believing in a *vitt* means ascribing to it the ability to afford magical knowledge or effects. There are two categories of object that are condemned in these passages: those that have a mundane as well as a magical purpose – the staff and the root; and those that have only a magical or pagan use – the altar and idol. It cannot be determined which group *vitt* belongs to, but the word is never found in anything but magical contexts elsewhere.

Þjóðólfr, *Ynglingatal*

The Norwegian poet Þjóðólfr, composing around the year 900 (but whose work is preserved only in fragmentary form, in much later written sources), uses *vitt* in *Ynglingatal*, st. 3, in the genitive plural, where a “vitta vétr” (“creature of vitta”), engineered Vanlandi’s death; another “vitta vétr” kills Aðils in st. 21 of the same poem. It is impossible to deduce any specific meaning for *vitt* here, but it may be noted that the word occurs in the plural, and a “being” – either someone called up by the *vitt* or responsible for their use, presumably – effects magical, and harmful, results through them. The best translation would appear to be “charms”, understood as being physical charms – objects endowed with magical potency – in the primary sense, but perhaps developing a connotation of verbal charms, in that the “creature of charms” is presumably calling on their power through incantation.

Völuspá

A verb *vitta/vitta* occurs in the Eddic poem *Völuspá*, st. 22, where the *seiðkona* (sorceress) Heiðr “vitti ganda”, meaning that she performed some magic involving *gandar* spirits. A connection with *vitt* (substantive) seems likely (cf. *seiðr* (substantive), “(specific type of) magic”, *siða* (verb), “practise *seiðr*”): “vitti ganda” would be a verbal equivalent to the nominal “vitta vétr”, the *gandar* which are “charmed” being functionally the same as the *vétr* of “charms”. However, a denominative verb from *véttr* (i.e. “to use a *véttr*”) could take the form *vitta* (with umlaut: *weht-j- > *wiht-; cf. *mæta* from *mót*); in this

³ The latter text then goes on to condemn anyone who visits *Finnar*, Sámi.

case, the poet would be depicting the use of the *vétt*, discussed below, to send out the *gandar* on their mission (here, to find things out). Further derivations of this verb (along the lines of “send out”) are also possible.⁴ However, a direct connection between *vitt* and *vitta* (or *vitt* and *vitta* if it had a long vowel) remains the simplest solution, and one that obviates any potential confusion between derivatives of *vitt/vitt* (with “i/i”) and *vétt* (with “é/æ”).⁵

Summary

A *vitt* was a charm, and clearly functionally comparable to a *blót*, an idol, and to a root (itself apparently being used as a charm in this context), and could be kept along with idols in a house. A supernatural being is associated with *vitt* (in the plural) when it carries out deadly efficatory magic, from which it may be inferred that a *vitt* was used in efficatory spells. There is no indication of any mundane use for the *vitt*.

THE VÉTT

Vétt as a chest lid

Cleasby and Vigfusson list five prose occurrences of the word (1957, s.v. “vætt or vétt”),⁶ defined as “the lid of a chest or shrine”; Fritzner (1886–1972, s.v. “vætt”) interprets it more specifically as “halvrundt eller ophøiet Laag (paa Kiste)” (“a semicircular or raised lid (on a chest)”), which is presumably an inference in part from the usage in *Óláfs saga helga*, ch. 253, where Magnús makes a shrine to Óláfr, “en yfir uppi vétt vaxit sem ræfr ok þar af upp hofuð ok burst” (“and over it on top a *vétt* shaped like a roof and rising from it a gable and finial”; a pointed, “gothic”, roof, rather than a rounded, “romanesque”, form seems to be implied here), and in part from more modern usages. In view of its rarity, the word clearly refers to no ordinary lid, but to something found with ornate and sizeable objects like shrines and chests, presumably more substantial than a mere flat lid.

⁴ Heide (2006: 194) takes *vitti* as deriving from *vita* (“to point in a particular direction”), the normal preterite of which, *vissi*, appears to have been altered from **vitti* on the analogy of the preterite *vissi* from *vita* (“know”), the present-infinitive homophone of *vita* (“direct”). In this case it would be parallel to *hrinda*, *renna* and *hræra* as another verb referring to the setting of *gandar* in motion to perform their task (see Tolley 2009a: 249–50) – though, as verbs initiating movement, *hrinda* and *renna* take dative, and the same might be expected of *vita* used in a similar sense (though *hræra* is used with the accusative).

⁵ The word *véttur*, “creature”, is wholly unrelated – though it is possible that “*vitta véttur*” deliberately puns on the potential connection between charms and the use of the *vétt*.

⁶ Although *vétt* and *vætt* are phonologically distinct, medieval spellings do not usually allow us to determine the precise underlying form without knowing the etymology, and the vowels also varied by dialect and period. The form in *Haustlong*, however, must be *vétt/vett*.

Þjóðólfr, *Haustlǫng*

Þjóðólfr uses the word *véttr* in the genitive (manuscript “vez”) in a kenning in *Haustlǫng*, st. 1, describing a mythological scene depicted on a shield:⁷

Týframra sék tíva
trygglaust of far þriggja
á hreingöru hlýri
Hildar vétts ok Þjaza.⁸

I see the trustless journey of three divinely eminent deities and Þjazi on the brightened cheek of Hildr’s *véttr*.

Hildr here functions both as a valkyrie name, “Battle”, and as the common noun, “battle”. The sense “curved lid” fits the context perfectly here as a description of a shield, its “brightened cheek” being the curved covering with its depictions of the myths recounted in the rest of the poem. A “curved lid of battle” suffices as a kenning for “shield”, but an image is simultaneously evoked of the valkyrie Battle wielding her shield.

It is unnecessary to look any further, and the magical associations of the *véttr* in *Lokasenna* are not necessarily present – indeed, we may be dealing with two homonyms of distinct meaning. Nonetheless, I will mention three increasingly speculative suggestions that are possibly relevant; each depends on the viability of arguments about the *véttr* presented elsewhere in this paper.

- ❖ Even if the *véttr* of *Lokasenna* is a distinct word (and all the more so if it is not distinct), Þjóðólfr could still have intended an allusion to the magical connotations of the homonym, assuming *Lokasenna* is relaying a tradition which antedates Þjóðólfr. In this case, we may see here an image of Hildr resembling the *vǫlva* (“seeress”) of *Lokasenna*, but directing battle rather than prophecy – or perhaps both, in the manner of the valkyries of *Darraðarljóð*,⁹ a *valkyrja*, taken as meaning “chooser of the slain”, is by definition an effector of fate.
- ❖ The *véttr* of the *vǫlva* might have recalled for Þjóðólfr the Sámi shaman drums, which had depictions on them, as did the shield the poem describes.

⁷ I cite the text from North’s edition. North deals with the form “vez” at length in his commentary *ad loc.*, rejecting earlier emendations to different words, such as *fats* (“clothes”).

⁸ The word *vetts* should show assonance with *Þjaza* here. North (commentary *ad loc.*) mentions a few Norwegian inscriptions with instances of *ve-* > *vja-* (*e* does not normally break in this position), and in any case breaking (of **Þjeza* to **Þeʒa*) at this stage represented a smaller phonological change than the later Icelandic spelling indicates, such as may well have been ignored for purposes of assonance. It is, in any case, possible that for Þjóðólfr **Þeze* remained unbroken, being “corrected” to the more familiar broken form by a scribe when it was recorded. There is no need to emend *vetts* to a form such as *fats* on these grounds.

⁹ *Darraðarljóð* is preserved in *Njáls saga*, but was an independent poem of the early eleventh century; it presents the course of a battle through the metaphor of weaving on a loom, undertaken by a group of valkyries.

The hunting of the vétt

I have argued elsewhere (Tolley 2015) that the painted shield may owe something to an awareness of Sámi drums; the kenning could be alluding to and reiterating this connection. The point, in this praise poem, would be to suggest an appropriation by the Norwegian prince of the powers of the Sámi magicians, directed to victory in battle.

- ❖ If, as suggested below, the *vǫlva*'s *vétt* was, mundanely speaking, a winnowing drum, a further element of symbolism would emerge in the allusion implicit in *Haustlǫng*'s use of *vétt*: as a valkyrie, Hildr separates out those that are slain – or the “choice” (*val*) warriors for the “choice hall” (*valhöll*), just as winnowing separates out the grain from the chaff; separation – of the choice morsel of ox meat from the gods, and of the goddess *Iðunn* from their company too – forms a theme of the first part of the poem.¹⁰

Lokasenna

Lokasenna, st. 23–4, presents an accusation by the god Óðinn against the reprobate Loki, who then responds, following the same protocol as elsewhere in the poem, by throwing back the insult upon the giver:

Óðinn:
Átta vetr
vartu fyr iǫrð neðan
kýr miólkandi ok kona,
ok hefir þú þar [bǫrn of] borit,
ok hugða ek þat args aðal.

Loki:
Enn þik síða kóðo
Sámseyio í
ok draptu á vétt sem vǫlor.
Vitka líki
förtu verþjóð yfir,
ok hugða ek þat args aðal.

Óðinn:
Eight winters
you were under the earth
milking cows, and you were a woman,
and you have borne children there,
and I thought that the nature of an effeminate.

Loki:
But they said you practised *seiðr*

¹⁰ On the ambiguity of *val* as either “slain” or “choice”, see Dronke 1969, comm to *Atlakviða*, st. 2/3; *Valhöll* in its earliest usage was almost certainly “the choice hall” (or the hall for the chosen warriors).

on Sámsey
and you beat on a *vétt* like seeresses (*vǫlur*).
In the form of a wizard
you went round mankind
and I thought that the nature of an effeminate.

First, some textual difficulties:

- ❖ The word “*síða*” (“practise *seiðr*”) is emended from the apparently meaningless “*síga*” (“sink”). Given that Loki must here be attacking Óðinn for his effeminacy (here associated with *seiðr*; sexual impropriety is a *leitmotif* of the poem), the emendation of just one letter to give an acceptable sense seems all but unavoidable. Yet “sinking” may not be wholly impossible: the *vǫlva* of *Vǫluspá* “sinks” (“*sökkvaz*”) after her performance, and in Finnish tradition a magician is said to *langeta loveen*, fall into a trance (possibly “fall into a cleft” originally; Tolley 2009a: 84, 436, 446). The context in *Lokasenna* is probably too vague to suggest such a meaning, however, unless a *vǫlva*’s “sinking” were such a commonplace as not to need explicit contextualization. Whilst there is a temptation to see trance as a central part of the *vǫlva*’s practice, we actually have very limited evidence for it (and her sinking at the end of *Vǫluspá* is more likely to refer to her return to the grave whence Óðinn most probably summoned her). The emendation to *síða* is thus well founded.
- ❖ *Vitka* (“wizard”) may, as Bugge (1881: 137–8) suggested, perhaps stand for *vitku* (“witch”); again, a charge of effeminacy is surely required here, which “wizard” might be viewed as failing to convey.¹¹ Óðinn, if the emendation is adopted, is being depicted here as a wandering female fortune-teller, in the way *Heiðr* is in *Vǫluspá*, perambulating the district and making herself the darling of housewives.¹² However, Snorri’s presentation of Óðinn in *Ynglinga saga*, ch. 7, as a male practitioner of *seiðr*, and his statement that *ergi* (“effeminacy”) accompanied the practice when performed by males, may reflect a traditional understanding of the potential effeminacy of being a male *seiðr*-performer, rather than being merely his surmise constructed on his reading of this very passage of *Lokasenna*. To be accused of being a (male) *vitki* was thus enough in itself to imply effeminacy.
- ❖ The reading “*draptu á*” is not in doubt, but its meaning raises some questions. Although it is most reasonable to render *drepa* as “beat”, the meaning may be wider – it is used for knocking on a door, and *drepa á*

¹¹ Bugge notes that in the tale of Óðinn’s seduction of Rindr, in which he used *seiðr*, he disguised himself, according to Saxo (*Gesta Danorum* III.iv.5), as a woman, Wecha, which may be read as *vitka*, “witch”.

¹² I leave aside any consideration of whether *Heiðr* in fact was Óðinn, which, as Frog points out to me, is not wholly impossible, at least as an insulting interpretation of history on Loki’s part.

can mean “touch upon” something, with the implication of an underlying sense of something less forceful than beating, such as “tap” (see entries *s.v.* in Cleasby and Vigfusson 1957, *DONP* and Blöndal 1920–4). As discussed in von See *et al.* (1997, comm. to *Lokasenna*, st. 24), *drepa á* may even have had the sense of the analogous *slá á* (lit. “strike on”), “make use of”. We might then readily see *vétt* as a variant of *vitt*, and the sense would simply be “you made use of charms”. Such readings are, nonetheless, rather unlikely in view of the lack of attestation of the sense required (there is no direct evidence for a sense of “make use of”, for example): it is most natural here to infer a concrete sense of beating, and that the *vétt* was, to this extent, a drum-like object.

- ❖ *Vétt* may potentially be a word distinct from *vétt* as a curved lid, but there is no initial reason to doubt the normal sense here. However, it is more likely that “lid” designated something *resembling* a heavy chest lid than actually being one. Strömbäck (1935: 24) notes that the perception of the magical drum or drum-like apparatus as a “lid” can be paralleled among the Sámi. The usual southern Sámi drum consists of a hooped frame with a skin stretched over it; it is open at the back, and hence resembles a lid to a certain extent (and is similar to the Scottish *wecht*, described below); the northern variety is even more like a lid (of the handled, curved sort that *vétt* is likely to have denoted), being a curved structure with, as a handle, a hole with cross-piece (see, for example, Lundmark 1991 for a presentation of such a drum).¹³ With regard to this northern area, Strömbäck also cites Graan as noting that in Pite Lappmark the Sámi sometimes used a bucket lid instead of a real drum; the same practice is recorded also by Forbus and Leem, and Olsen (1960: 19) notes also that in Finnmark the *bøttelokk* (“bucket top”) is recorded as a (male) magician’s tool. Such evidence indicates that in this area, a magical drum was readily conceptualized, at least by outside observers, as a sort of “lid”.¹⁴

There are two aspects to Loki’s accusation: what he wishes to imply about Óðinn’s manliness, and what mythological event actually underlies the allusions, which Loki is deliberately presenting in an unfavourable light.

Óðinn first accuses Loki of gross effeminacy – to the extent of his actually *becoming* a woman and bearing children. Loki’s retort to this is a show of oneupmanship: what Óðinn did was still more effeminate, and this was to engage

¹³ I thank Rune Rasmussen for emphasizing to me the importance of the structural differences between southern and northern Sámi drums.

¹⁴ It is possible that the accounts are correct, and the Sámi made use of mundane lids as drums, but, as Rune Rasmussen points out, it is also possible that the original information was that the drums were *like* a bucket lid (or other such objects), in reference to the lid-like appearance of the northern Sámi drums, and this has been simplified in the telling.

in *seiðr*, a type of magic associated primarily with women (magic in itself did not imply effeminacy, but this particular form did), as is confirmed in Óðinn's practice of it in *Ynglinga saga*, ch. 7 (though this account could itself be based on *Lokasenna*; yet even so it must represent an understanding of what the poem implies). The point of Loki's attack is not to focus on magic *per se*, but on its feminizing power: Óðinn is just as effeminate, *argr*, as Loki – or still more so.

The beating on a *vétt* is hence surely cited as a further exemplification of Óðinn's effeminate ways, an action performed within the context of female-dominated magic practices; this is indicated by the mention of *vǫlur*, a type of female magician without any male counterpart.¹⁵ We may infer that, at least in the understanding of this author and his audience, beating on a *vétt* was a distinctive feature of the female magical practices of *vǫlur*. Yet Loki's function in the poem is to warp the deeds of all the gods to make them look as disreputable as possible, not to give accurate information about the workings of *vǫlur*. It is possible that inferences about *vǫlur* are based on deliberate obfuscation on Loki's part, for example in mixing unrelated traditions or activities and implying a connection between them which did not exist in tradition outside the poem.

Many questions arise about the *vétt*. There is nothing to indicate whether the *vétt*: *a.* was used by anyone other than *vǫlur*; *b.* had any other uses, such as mundane ones on a farm; *c.* was a regular instrument of *vǫlur*, or used only occasionally by some *vǫlur*. The purpose of beating on a *vétt* is also not made clear. The main function performed by *vǫlur* in other texts, probably the earliest and fullest of which is *Vǫluspá*, is divination, and this appears to have been achieved at least in part through contact with, or command of, "spirits of prophecy", *spágandar* (*Vǫluspá*, st. 29). It would thus be strange if *Lokasenna* did not intend the instrument to be in some way connected to the main, divinatory, function of *vǫlur*, involving contact with the spirit world. The drum is found widely in Siberian shamanism (and elsewhere in magical practices), where it serves various purposes, as a means to induce trance by being beaten, and as a vehicle for the shaman to travel to the spirit worlds once trance is achieved (Hultkrantz 1991); other uses in relation to spirits could easily be envisaged, such as attracting or repelling such beings, but in all instances the instrument functions as a means to effect some form of contact with the spirit realm. We cannot determine if the *vǫlva* was thought to enter trance, whether she travelled

¹⁵ How far the characterization of certain forms of magic as effeminate is a reflection of filtering through the lens of Christianity is difficult to determine; even if we accepted the lines in question as composed in something like their extant form in a pre-Christian era (which they may well not have been), their preservation, as against many other mentions of magic that must have been lost, is obviously a selective process. Unfortunately, however, arguments cannot be built upon evidence that does not survive. The image of Óðinn and his indulgence in effeminate practices derives from the extant texts, and would seem to reflect an element of subversiveness which is deep-rooted in his overall depiction, and is hence likely to be of long standing, although the particular emphasis we encounter may reflect processes of Christian demonization as well.

to the spirit realm herself or merely attracted spirits to her, or any other such details, but I suggest that to propose any other use for the *vétt* than to achieve contact with the spirit world on behalf of her clients would be incompatible with what we know the role of the *vǫlva* to have been (if we put any trust in our sources, which, to generalize, I would regard as preserving at least echoes of pre-Christian spiritual understanding, even allowing for post-pagan distortions).

This, of course, is to assume that *Lokasenna* refers to something that did in fact exist in the Norse tradition of magic, rather than being a poetic fabrication. Suspicions about its reality are aroused by the fact that the many instances of *vǫlur* elsewhere never mention anything like a *vétt* – which may suggest that in fact the *vétt* did not characterize the activities of the *vǫlva* in tradition outside *Lokasenna* at all.¹⁶

It is worth pursuing the note of scepticism that has been sounded about the reliability of *Lokasenna* by considering the second aspect: the underlying mythological event Loki alludes to. The myth is otherwise unrecorded (though Óðinn’s wandering around as a wizard recalls his appearance in this guise in the prose framework of *Grímnismál*, where he appears in disguise to test the character and loyalty of his protégés), and hence cannot be illuminated directly from other sources. Óðinn’s other encounters with *vǫlur* – in *Vǫluspá* and *Baldrs draumar* – reflect his unquenchable search for information, and hence appeal to the divinatory role of seeresses; the same motive is probable in his own undertaking of the practice. Yet *seiðr* also had efficatory purposes; this is apparent, indeed, in Kormakr’s mention that Óðinn “seið til Rindar” (*Sigurðardrápa* 3 (*Skj* B1 69), composed around 960), which indicates he used *seiðr* to secure the services of Rindr, who bore him a son to avenge Baldr. Hence *Lokasenna* could be intending us to infer either divinatory or efficatory purposes in Óðinn’s actions, but either way it is making an appeal to tradition: what Óðinn is accused of is made credible because he always does this sort of thing as he “wanders the world”, so the audience understands.

The setting on Sámsey is now opaque. There is nothing to suggest any special connection between magic and islands in Norse tradition, but an island setting functions as a stereotypical site for a duel – a *holmgangr* (“island visit”) in Norse. Sámsey occurs in one other significant legendary context, in *Qrvar-Odds saga*, ch. 26–30, where indeed a mighty duel, extended almost to the level of a battle, takes place between Oddr and Hjalmar on one side, and a party of

¹⁶ I have previously suggested (Tolley 2009a: 535) that the *vétt* may reappear in the trial of a wise woman, Karen Erichsdaatter, from Fosnes in Namdalen in 1660; she mentions that “min word er i wetten”, “my free soul is in the *wett*”. However, it now seems highly unlikely to me that the *vétt* is meant here; it would be the only known mention in Norwegian folk materials, and other explanations are more likely (such as “wits” or possibly “glove”). While there are many apparently archaic features in what Karen says, and the account warrants a deeper investigation, it should be left out of the discussion of the *vétt*.

berserks on the other. A magically empowered weapon and cloak play some part in the encounter. It is, on the basis of this Sámsey analogue, arguable that Óðinn was in fact engaged in some military conflict, aided through his use of magic, but Loki has chosen to downplay the heroic aspect of it and focus on the effeminate magic. Let us assume that the magic was indeed part of a military setting: what could be the context of beating on something, in a way clearly associated with women and which seems to have been viewed as magically efficatory (for victory, presumably)? The nearest analogue I know within the Germanic field is the case of the women who, according to Strabo, beat upon the wagon coverings as battle progressed among the Cimbri (*Geography*, vii.2.3); these women also had mantic powers. Also worth note is Aḥmad ibn Faḍlān’s account of the Rus, whose warriors beat upon shields as a slave girl, who had glimpsed into the afterlife, was sacrificed.

Could the beating on the *véttr* therefore be a beating on shields (the Rus, as a group of Vikings, are closer to medieval Scandinavia than the rather more ancient Cimbri), associated with some efficatory magic, *seiðr*, which was traditionally associated with women but which Óðinn also engaged in? The line of argument is necessarily somewhat tenuous, but so too is the supposition that *vǫlur* customarily engaged in magical drumming (much like a Sámi shaman), which is based solely on interpretation of this same passage; nowhere else are these female practitioners said to drum, and it seems quite possible that Loki is engaging in deliberate obfuscation, accusing Óðinn of effeminacy for practising *seiðr* and lumping the magically empowered beating of a shield in with this general predilection for effeminate magic.

If a shield is meant, why call it a *véttr*? The strong word in the line, where the semantic emphasis falls, is *vǫlva*, which focuses attention on Óðinn’s effeminacy; *véttr* could well be selected for alliterative purposes. Nonetheless, it has to mean something, and was probably intended to strike a chord of allusion: allusion which surely points to Þjóðólfr’s use of the word in the sense of shield in the kenning “Hildir’s *véttr*” (or “battle lid”) – and here I am inverting the suggestion proffered above that Þjóðólfr could be alluding to a tradition of seeresses using a *véttr*; I suggest instead that this “tradition” may be the creation of *Lokasenna*, based on Þjóðólfr’s usage. *Lokasenna* appears to imply that the *véttr* belonged to the *vǫlva* in the way it also belonged to Hildir: and this implies a reading of Hildir as a sort of *vǫlva*. As noted, a valkyrie is a determiner of fate, like a seeress, and a connection between *vǫlva* and valkyrie is implicit in the valkyrie name Gǫndul (*Vǫluspá*, st. 30), connected with *gandr*, the spirit of divination the *vǫlva* controls in *Vǫluspá*. Beating on the drum would thus be to determine the outcome of battle, a role which is realized under a different image in the form of the female valkyries (notably Battle) choosing the slain; the drum and the valkyrie meet in Hildir, “Battle”, with her shield, *véttr*, in *Haustlǫng*, but in *Lokasenna* it is the master of battle, and master of the valkyries, Óðinn,

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who beats on the “lid of battle”, and is accused of effeminacy for undertaking something usually associated with prophetic females.

The *vétt* would thus disappear as a traditional part of the equipment of the *vǫlva*, and become instead a clever poetic allusion to traditions about battle and its (female) personification, with perhaps a faint echo of memories of mantic seeresses beating out the warriors’ fates, as among the ancient Cimbri.

The occurrence of *vétt* as a magical accoutrement in one sole text is certainly suspicious. We thus have at least the following possibilities:

- ❖ *Vétt* stands for *vitt*, and *drepa á vitt* means “resort to charms”, a fairly platitudinous statement but contextually suitable.
- ❖ *Vétt* is a reflection of a poetic allusion to the “lid of war”, or shield.
- ❖ *Vétt* existed as part of a recognized tradition of magic performed by females, and Loki alludes to this tradition, ascribing the practice to Óðinn as part of his penchant for indulging in female magic.

If we pursue the last possibility, then we are confronted with how to explain the lack of occurrences of the word, or the practice indicated, anywhere else. There are two possibilities:

- ❖ *Lokasenna* presents us with an ancient piece of lore about the practices of the pagan *vǫlva* in Norse tradition. This is problematic given the entire absence of evidence from elsewhere, but is not impossible, given the general lack of information about the details of pagan practice. While the details of how *Lokasenna* acquired its extant form are open to debate, the poem certainly contains elements derived from ancient mythological tradition which are not found elsewhere (see in particular Dronke 1989: 97–108).
- ❖ The poet is ascribing an actual traditional activity to Óðinn, but he spices up his picture of the *vǫlva* by borrowing a feature from some other tradition and pretending it constitutes a traditional feature – thus the picture is an *ad hoc* fabrication by the poet, even if it derives from a manipulation of genuine tradition. Given the audience’s probable lack of familiarity with the details of magical practice, and a general expectation of magicians’ outlandishness, such an ascription could easily pass muster (note the description of the *vǫlva* in *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 4, which, although unlikely to be at all accurate as a depiction of a seeress from the pagan period, shows that the audience expected such figures to be exotic and were willing to believe any well-crafted description).

The most obvious place to look for outlandish magic practices would be among the nearby Sámi. The Norwegian laws, some excerpts from which were given above, show that people resorted in particular to the Sámi for their magical needs, and the poet could easily have mixed in features of Sámi magic to give

some additional power to his allusion to the workings of the *vǫlva*. However, one difficulty is that the Sámi drum was an accoutrement that characterized the male shaman, whereas the whole point of the diatribe against Óðinn is that he is indulging in female magical activities.¹⁷ If he was indeed relying on foreign models, the poet may have had more than just the Sámi in mind in his depiction of the use of the *vétt*.

THE SCOTS *WECHT*

In 1591, the Synod of Lothian and Tweeddale, examining the presbytery of Haddington, near Edinburgh, condemned the “playing on timbrellis and wechtis on the Saboth day” (Kirk 1977: 27).¹⁸ Far from being any instrument specific to music, the *wecht* was in fact a winnowing drum, here put to something outside its primary use. It is mentioned as being put to such use elsewhere: John Jamieson, in his *Etymological Dictionary* from 1808, quotes a ballad (s.v. “wecht”):

– Ay wi’ his lang tail he whiskit,
And drumm’d on an ald corn weight.

Jamieson defines the *wecht* as “An instrument for winnowing corn, made of sheep’s skin, in the form of a sieve, but without holes”.

The *English Dialect Dictionary* (Wright 1898, s.v. “weight, sb2”) notes that the word is Scots, with a few occurrences in the far north of England, where it occurs in Middle English from 1183 (*wehit*) onwards.¹⁹ The dictionary defines it as follows:

It consisted of a shallow hoop 15 to 18 inches in diameter, on which a sheep or calf’s skin was stretched. Over the edge of this the unwinnowed grain was gently shaken in a draught

¹⁷ The question of female shamanism among the Sámi is in reality complex. Female shamans, of sorts, are mentioned from the earliest sources on, and some clearly wielded drums. It appears they could not conduct sacrifices, or visit sacrificial areas, however. It may be stated as almost certain that Sámi communities had a role for various different types of magician, some of them specifically female (concerned, among other things, with female aspects of life such as midwifery). We suffer from the extreme bias of all early sources, which are probably exclusively male, and issued by authority figures such as missionaries or court clerks. The role of female shamanism is certainly downplayed in these. Yet the perceptions derived in later Scandinavian sources from the male outsiders who encountered the Sámi and their magicians are likely to have been similar to those of earlier Norsemen who had dealings with the Sámi: even if female shamanism existed, it would not have been so apparent to outsiders as the social performances of male shamans. In any case, even allowing for female shamans, it is clear they did not have the *auctoritas* that male shamans did. Hence, the contrast that it is argued must have been perceived between the female-dominated Norse *seiðr* and the Sámi male-dominated shamanism remains valid. (On Sámi female shamans, see Lundmark 1987.)

¹⁸ I thank Christopher Langley for providing me with a copy of this, and for searching for any other occurrences of *wecht* in the Synod’s proceedings (there do not appear to be any).

¹⁹ This is noted in *A Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue*. The *Michigan Middle English Dictionary* only gives examples from the fourteenth century on.



A *wecht* from the parish of Fetlar, Shetland.

Reproduced by kind permission of Shetland Museum & Archives, Lerwick.

between two opposite doors in a barn. The draught or current of air separated the good grain; the tails, the strumps, and the caff. (Caithness)

Similarly, the *Scottish National Dictionary* defines *wecht* as “a wooden hoop, usually about two to three feet in diameter, with skin or canvas stretched over it so as to form a kind of tray, and originally used for winnowing corn, or now generally for carrying grain or potatoes”.²⁰ The citations given here are from various areas of Scotland, including Orkney and Shetland. The dictionary also notes, in a citation from 1808, that there were in fact two sorts of *wecht*:

The one is denominated a *windin wecht*, immediately used for *winnowing*, as its name intimates. This is formed of a single hoop covered with parchment. The other is called a *maund-wecht*, having more resemblance of a basket, its rim being deeper than that of the other. Its proper use is for lifting the grain, that it may be emptied into the *windin wecht*.

²⁰ http://www.dsl.ac.uk/entry/snd/wecht_n2_v2.

Shetland Museum and Archives, in a note accompanying pictures of sieves and *wechts*, notes that after meal had been ground it was sifted through two sieves (one rough and the other fine) onto a *wecht*. *Wechts* were also used for winnowing corn, and as dough-kneading trays.²¹ A common Gaelic term for a *wecht* was *criathar*. Fiona Marwick (West Highland Museum) notes that “It would appear that there were two types of *criathar*, one made of a rod bent into a circle covered with calfskin used for winnowing the chaff from the grain by tossing it into the air; the other, deeper and more carefully made, had holes pierced through the calfskin and was used for separating the sids [inner husks] from the oatmeal after grinding.”²²

The various mentions of the *wecht* (and its Gaelic counterpart) state that both perforated and unperforated (blind) examples existed (the perforated ones act additionally as sieves for waste material finer than chaff), and that its form could be adapted either to winnowing or, with deeper sides, to lifting produce. Clearly, an unperforated *wecht* would easily function additionally as a drum. The distribution is not clear, but would seem to include many of the Celtic lands; an example of an unperforated skin winnowing drum is to be found in the Ceredigion Museum.²³ In Ireland, a variety of sieves could be encountered for different grains, as well as the *dallán*, an unperforated wickerwork version with similar uses to the *wecht*, and the *bodhrán*, an unperforated skin winnowing drum, which, like the *wecht*, served also as a playing instrument (in which sense it is now widely familiar).²⁴

WINNOWING DRUMS: THE WIDER CONTEXT

The *wecht* was clearly an implement that could be put to various uses, including as a general container for foodstuffs, as well as being involved in the winnowing process. Some of the descriptions of its use may in their particulars reflect surmise rather than constituting first-hand information. The process of winnowing, following the threshing of the corn, is invariably a somewhat complex process involving several stages. In many areas, the initial removal of

²¹ See http://photos.shetland-museum.org.uk/index.php?a=ViewItem&i=121397&WI_NID=1463130860560. I thank Ian Tait of the Shetland Museum and Archives for providing information and photographs of *wechts*.

²² Personal communication.

²³ Ceredigion Museum, <http://pilgrim.ceredigion.gov.uk/index.cfm?articleid=1536>, exhibition number: Agriculture 8.1. The web page notes: “This is a shallow round tray sometimes with wooden sides and a skin bottom. The mixture of corn, chaff and straw which comes from the threshing is placed in the tray when the wind is blowing. The mixture is thrown up into the air by a quick motion of the hands; the wind blows away the light chaff and straw and the corn falls back into the tray or on the floor nearby. The last step is to clean the corn by means of a cane sieve which lets the dirt through but retains the corn.”

²⁴ The different Irish varieties mentioned here are listed, illustrated and discussed by Lucas 1951.

large chaff is achieved by shovelling the grain into the wind. This is followed by sieving to remove smaller particles – though it is not always clear if the grain is retained in the sieve while the chaff falls through or is blown away, or if the grain passes through, falling onto a receptacle for further treatment (as is indicated in the case of Shetland). The use of a blind sieve or winnowing drum, such as is found in Scotland and Ireland, is somewhat unusual. Again, the specific methods employed are not necessarily clear, and may have varied over time and place: was the grain retained in the drum, or gently cast out of it to be purified in a breeze, before falling to the ground? Again, there are variants in structure and manufacture of the blind sieve: it may either be wickerwork, or made from a skin stretched over a frame; and it may have a rim all round, or, in the case of the wickerwork structure, have a flat, broad lip away from the winnower (which is easier to use, but more difficult to make). Within the area relevant to the present study, I have only encountered the winnowing drum, a blind sieve made with a rim all round and with a skin stretched over – something that readily serves as a drum – in Celtic areas of Britain and Ireland. As far as I can determine, examples are not found in Norway.²⁵ Yet the blind sieve for winnowing, the *pohdin*, is found in Finland (sometimes with a rim all round),²⁶ and practices change over time: Harrison (1903: 299–301; 1904: 252) showed how the ancient Greek *liknon*, so central to the cult of Dionysus, was a blind, wickerwork sieve, which disappeared during the classical period to be replaced with the sieve (though blind sieves precisely similar to the *liknon* survived in France until the nineteenth century). Sieves in Norwegian museums are made both of wickerwork and skin; a blind sieve is an antecedent stage to the skin sieve, as holes have to be pierced in it, so a *wecht*-like implement did exist, if only temporarily in the process of manufacture. It is a small step to suppose that at some stage, non-pierced, blind sieves were put to some use. This need not, it is true, have been specifically winnowing, as the varied uses of the *wecht* demonstrate, but it is likely to have been at least related to food production.

In modern Norwegian, the term for a winnowing basket is *såld* or *sold*; the Icelandic word is *sáld*.²⁷ This is a word, with a basic meaning of “sieve”, that occurs in medieval sources, its use in winnowing being implied in the term *mjòlsáld*, “meal sieve”, in *Sturlunga saga* (see Cleasby and Vigfusson 1957, s.v.). De Vries (1977, s.v.) suggests a derivation from a root meaning “bind”, and on this basis supposes the original sense to have been “basket” (even if

²⁵ See, for example, <http://digitaltmuseum.no/>, s.v. “sold” (the normal means of lifting the grain in the first stage of winnowing was with a shovel; see examples s.v. “kasteskovl”). My researches are, however, preliminary, given that I am not in a position to visit Norwegian museums; moreover, not a single Norwegian museum I have attempted to elicit information from has responded to any queries.

²⁶ See examples at <http://www.museot.finna.fi/>, s.vv. “pohtimet”, “viljapohdin”. I thank Kati Kallio for helping me trace these examples.

²⁷ I thank Sif Rikharðsdóttir for checking this for me.

conceived as primarily a woven vessel, a less common skin-covered version could doubtless have appropriated the same term). The fact that the word also refers to a measure of corn and other materials suggests this is likely (a “basketful” is more likely to give this sense than a “sieveful”). The commonly employed implement in winnowing is indeed a basket (the use of a skin seems to be relatively uncommon), and the process may involve sieving as well as winnowing in the strict sense (separation by casting into the wind). However, the Scottish *wecht*,²⁸ particularly the unperforated variety, is much more reminiscent of a shallow, open drum than winnowing baskets in general (which tend, for example, to have an open side).

MAGICAL USES OF THE WINNOWING DRUM

As is already clear from the Synod of Lothian, the mundane *wecht* had more than merely crop-related uses. Robert Burns (1759–96), in his poem “Halloween” (1786), which portrays the partying and antics of young folk on that day and aims to relay folk customs to a wider readership, includes the lines:

Meg fain wad to the barn gaen
To winn three wechts o’ naething²⁹

To this he adds an explanation, which shows how the girl uses the winnowing drum to gain a vision of her future husband and his station in life:³⁰

This charm must likewise be performed unperceived, and alone. You go to the *barn*, and open both doors, taking them off the hinges, if possible; for there is danger, that the *being*, about to appear, may shut the doors, and do you some mischief. Then take that instrument used for winnowing the corn, which, in our country dialect, we call a *wecht*; and go through

²⁸ The *Scottish National Dictionary* gives separate entries to the two homophonous words, *wecht*, but nonetheless suggests that the “winnowing drum” has developed out of a specialized use of the more common *wecht* (meaning “weight”) in the sense of “a container made to hold a certain weight of grain”. Whilst a development of meaning from “container, basket” to “weight of materials held in the container” seems plausible – as took place with Icelandic *sáld* (see below) – it seems to me to stretch credulity to postulate the development as taking place in the opposite direction; an explanation which keeps the words apart seems preferable. A broadly comparable situation arises in Old Norse, where *vétt* additionally means “weight”, but this is always regarded as a separate word.

²⁹ “Meg would like to go to the barn to winnow three *wechts* of nothing.”

³⁰ Burns also annotates another custom mentioned in the poem (a great many divinatory customs are associated with Halloween), which provides an example of a folk-magic use of roots, suggesting the sort of thing that may have lain behind the Norwegian laws condemning the keeping of a root in the house: “The first ceremony of Halloween is pulling each a ‘stock’, or plant of kail. They must go out, hand in hand, with eyes shut, and pull the first they meet with: its being big or little, straight or crooked, is prophetic of the size and shape of the grand object of all their spells – the husband or wife. If any ‘yird’, or earth, stick to the root, that is ‘tocher’, or fortune; and the taste of the ‘custock’, that is, the heart of the stem, is indicative of the natural temper and disposition. Lastly, the stems, or, to give them their ordinary appellation, the ‘runts’, are placed somewhere above the head of the door; and the Christian names of the people whom chance brings into the house are, according to the priority of placing the ‘runts’, the names in question.”

The hunting of the vétt

all the attitudes of letting down corn against the wind. Repeat it three times; and the third time an apparition will pass through the barn, in at the windy door, and out at the other, having both the figure in question, and the appearance or retinue, marking the employment or station in life.

The terminology and custom is also documented in a quite different area of Scotland by Walter Gregor (1881: 85):

Winnowing Corn. – Go to the barn secretly; open both doors, as if preparing to winnow corn. Take a sieve or a *waicht*, and three times go through the form of winnowing corn. The apparition of the future husband entered by the one door to the windward, passed through the barn, and made his exit by the other door.

It would seem that similar notions may have existed in the Gaelic areas; the following verse is recorded as part of a rhyme about different methods of divination, published in the Gaelic-language magazine *An Gaidheal* in 1876:³¹

’Us tha e de chleachdadh aig cuid, aig cuid,
Dol do’n t-sabhul a dh-fhasgnadh le guit, le guit;
’S chì iad samhlahd no tannasg ’dol seachad na’ dheannaibh
’S a’ dol as an t-sealladh na’ ruith, na’ ruith.

And it is a custom of some, of some,
To go to the barn to winnow with a *guit*, with a *guit*,
And they saw a likeness or spirit come hurrying past,
and go rushing, rushing out of sight.

Guit is defined by Alexander MacBain (1911, *s.v.*) as a “corn-fan, unperforated sieve”,³² clearly in reference to an object identical with or similar to a *wecht*. Indeed, it is defined as a “winnowing fan of skin stretched over a wooden hoop, *wecht*” (the source being Jonathan MacDonald, Kilmuir, 3 May 2011) in *Briathrachas Cultar Dùthchasach*.³³ The word appears to be confined to Scottish Gaelic (no uses from Ireland are noted). Although the authenticity of the traditions mentioned in the poem from *An Gaidheal* might be questioned, as it appears to reflect rather closely what Burns says in “Halloween”, there are other indications of comparable traditions in Gaelic areas. For example, Alexander Carmichael recorded the following:³⁴

Càthadh an Fhras Lin. The lint seed was winnowed in the, “comh-ràth”, [at] dusk. Th[is] was done at Draoineach[.] Skye[.] by a servant girl in the house. The wife of Draoineach asked the girl whom did she see and the girl answered that she had no luck[.] that [s]he

³¹ “Oran na Samhna” (“Halloween Song”), *An Gaidheal* 5 (1876), 293–4. The text was identified using *Digital Archive of Scottish Gaelic* (DASG), University of Glasgow, <http://dasg.ac.uk>, searching under “guit”, file 102005. The translation is mine, with assistance from Caoimhin O Donaile (University of the Highlands and Islands).

³² Other words for winnowing instruments exist in Gaelic, such as *dallan*.

³³ <http://www.smo.uhi.ac.uk/~sm00hc/briathrachas.html>.

³⁴ The Carmichael Watson Project (notebooks of Alexander Carmichael), <http://www.carmichaelwatson.lib.ed.ac.uk/cwatson/en>, CW7/32 folio 32v, line 19 to folio 33r, line 4.

only saw her master. [“]Well[,] you shall have him yet[,]” said her mistress. The mistress died soon after and before the year was out Fear na Draoinich [the master of Draoineach] married this young girl!

The divination might sometimes involve the winnowing of objects such as silver coins, and the purpose was not always to glimpse a future husband – in 1709, a woman was arraigned in Arran for divining the identity of a thief by the use of the *wecht*.³⁵ Most, though not all, recorded uses of the *wecht* for divinatory purposes were by women; hence it appears to have been a largely female activity.

The assignment of a spiritual dimension to the winnowing basket is not confined to Scotland. In ancient Greece the *liknon*, the open, blind wickerwork winnowing sieve, played a central role in the mysteries of Dionysus (Harrison 1903, 1904). The spiritual meanings clearly stemmed from the mundane uses to which the basket was put: as well as being used as a container for grain for winnowing, it served as a cradle for babies, and also as a receptacle for the first-fruits of the harvest, carried as offerings to the gods. An interactive symbolism easily developed, with the baby representing both the fecundity of the crops to be reborn next year, and the outcome of that fecundity (Harrison 1903: 314). Dionysus, as the baby in the *liknon*, embodies the power, and fruits, of the grain; it seems he was, in some areas, a god of beer (in classical texts he is more firmly a god of wine) (Harrison 1903: 323), which is the processed form of grain. The carrying of a *liknon* of fruits formed part of the wedding ceremony (Harrison 1903: 315), the *liknon* clearly a metaphor for the bride’s fruitful womb, which would produce the baby, a metonym of the fruits as he lay in the basket. It is interesting to note that the process of winnowing involved both men and women at different stages. Essentially the first, rougher work of shovelling the grain was undertaken by men, but women took charge of the lighter work of sifting; as so often, it is women who are responsible for the final stages of domestication of the outside world, processing the products of men’s labour to become part of the economy of the home. The place of the *liknon* within the female domain thus characterizes the baby Dionysus as also being within that realm: this is realized in his effeminate character (for example, according to Euripides’ *Bacchae*, line 353, he is “the girlish stranger”), and his following of maenads (“raving women”) – but also in his ineluctable power, of a type that men’s force held no sway over (as Euripides illustrates in his *Bacchae*).

The uses of the basket or drum in Scotland and Scandinavia would not have coincided with those in ancient Greece, and hence the spiritual significance would have differed, but the Greek cult exemplifies how the mundane uses of the winnowing sieve might determine such spiritual symbolism; the appropriation

³⁵ See the blog of the Carmichael Watson Project, <http://carmichaelwatson.blogspot.co.uk/2013/01/objects-in-focus-winnowing-riddle.html>; the divining of the thief is taken from I. F. Grant, *Highland Folk Ways* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 1961).

by a male divinity of female power, through his association with a female-controlled object and its accompanying symbolism, is, moreover, paralleled by Óðinn's appropriation of the powers of the female-dominated magic practice of *seiðr* and female practitioners, *vǫlur*, one of whose accoutrements, the *vétt*, bears comparison with the *liknon*.

Magical uses of the sieve are, in fact, widespread: in particular, the practice of coscinomancy, divination with a sieve, was commonplace, including within Scandinavia. For example, Hyltén-Cavallius (1864, I §103), presenting the activities of the wise woman, notes (pp. 410–11) how a thief might be detected using a sieve held by two women, with various objects suspended from it, in particular a pair of scissors by which the sieve is held up in the air; they utter names as they turn the sieve, and when the name of the thief is spoken, the sieve will stop or start turning counter-clockwise.³⁶ From the wider Baltic area, an example of the magic power of the sieve from Poland may be cited. The *Chronicon Montis Sereni*, s.a. 1209, mentions how, when Prince Władysław of Lubusz (on the Oder) was attacked, a witch or diviner (*pythonissa*) filled a sieve with water without it dripping through, and carried this before his army as a sign of (supposedly) impending victory.³⁷ In Finnic areas (Finland, Karelia, Ingria), the sieve (*seula* and variants) was an important apparatus for divination, and other magical uses.³⁸ Divination might be carried out, for example, by placing items such as coins, bread or coals in a sieve, and dangling a piece of yarn from it (e.g. *SKVR* I.4.541, VI.2.6335). The use of the sieve, as was the case in Greece with the *liknon*, also reflected concerns about fecundity and its preservation; thus, in Ingria, when the cows were let out in the spring, they were circled three times by a herdsman with an icon and a sieve holding an egg; the egg was thrown and broken, upon which women sang to St George to protect the herd (the Izhorian Jekaterina Aleksandrova recounted this in 1961). At weddings, the sieve was ritually blessed, and guests drank toasts to the bride and covered it with money as a blessing (see e.g. *SKVR* IV.2.2422). Finland was part of a wide circumpolar region – which does not, however, include Scandinavia – in which the Pleiades were conceived as a sieve (*seulaset*) (Berezkin 2010); the magical uses of the object may thus have had a cosmic and hence mythic dimension. This would not, however, appear to be relevant to a consideration of Scottish and Norwegian winnowing drums, in the present state of our knowledge.³⁹

³⁶ I thank Jan Freya Didur for pointing out this example, among several others.

³⁷ I thank Leszek Gardela for pointing out this example.

³⁸ I thank Kati Kallio for highlighting these Finnic examples.

³⁹ This negative inference needs nonetheless to remain tentative. It is possible to envisage overlapping cultural influences or affiliations in Scandinavia which might make the potential cosmic symbolism of the sieve relevant: the Sámi drum (which was not an agricultural sieve-like instrument) certainly carried cosmic symbolism, and could conceivably have lent such symbolism to the *vétt*, while at the same time if the *vétt* were some sort of sieve, it might attract the cosmic symbolism associated with that instrument in Finland (where Scandinavian contact has been a more or less constant feature)

There is, then, a widespread employment of the sieve for magical or spiritual (fertility) purposes, which makes both the Scottish uses unexceptional in a general sense, and renders it likely that any ancient Norwegian counterpart would have had similar uses.

THE *WECHT* AND THE *VÉTT*

A general background of magical (and fecundity-related) uses of the sieve may be clear, but the particularities of the cases under investigation nonetheless need to be borne in mind: what is of specific interest here is the divinatory use, primarily by women, of a particular sort of “sieve” that could double as a drum, which bore a name, *wecht*, that is potentially formally identifiable as cognate with the Old Norse *véttr* (on the etymology, see the appendix below). If there is a connection between the *wecht* and the *véttr*, what are the possibilities?

- ❖ *Lokasenna* has borrowed the word *véttr* from Scots in order to allude to the female divinatory practice associated with the *wecht*, which he ascribes to the Norse *vǫlva* (without this being an actual part of the pagan *vǫlva*'s practice), creating a picture that conflates the Scottish traditions with the Sámi to produce a sort of *female* shaman, credible to the audience as a depiction of the pagan *vǫlva*; this would be assisted by the fact the *wecht* also served as a drum, even if not directly in its divinatory role. To say “borrowed” would, however, be a slight misrepresentation: the word already existed in the sense of “curved lid”, and a perception that *wecht* was ostensibly the same word (whether or not it actually was), but applied to an object with divinatory uses, would allow the poet as it were to expand its meaning to include what it covered in Scotland. It is possible the *wecht* had got its name in the first place as a result of borrowing from the Norse *véttr*, “lid”, but its precise origin is not pertinent to this argument, only its ostensible identity with the Norse word.
- ❖ The *véttr* was part of Norse culture, and *Lokasenna* is the only text to preserve a reference to it. The word was borrowed into Scots during the long period of Viking settlement, and it must therefore have been an object resembling the *wecht*, some form of blind skin sieve. Given the ubiquity of coscinomancy, both the Norse and Scottish versions would have been associated with some form of divination, and this, apart from the commonality of its mundane uses, would have assisted in the word being applied by Vikings to what they found in Scotland.

and elsewhere, the cosmic symbolisms absorbed from different directions reinforcing each other. This is, of course, supposition – but is perhaps not implausible, a reflection of the complex way in which cultural currents might be expected to interact.

Of these alternatives, the latter is severely compromised by the total lack of evidence for the *vétt* as a magical drum-like object outside *Lokasenna*, whereas it presents few problems to credit the poet with the sort of inventiveness envisaged here. I would be inclined therefore to favour the former scenario; nonetheless, it is worth pursuing the implications of the latter. Even if the *vétt* is actually a product of the imaginative acculturation of foreign elements by the Norse poet, we will gain a deeper insight into the cultural milieu and the associated imagery which led the poet to produce this creative depiction.

*

The area where the *wecht* and its divinatory uses are found is one that encompassed regions of the heaviest and most persistent Norse influence within the British Isles. The Scottish practices may have preserved something, even if watered down, of magical ways once familiar in Scandinavia too. In the Viking age and subsequent medieval period, Scotland and western Scandinavia in many respects formed a cultural area with close contacts and no doubt with shared customs; it would thus be difficult to elucidate where particular practices originated – Scotland may have preserved customs that eventually died out in Scandinavia, without necessarily having given rise to them. Conversely, even if the word originated in Scandinavia, it is not inconceivable that the notion of the *vétt* as a magical accoutrement originated in Scotland; I have suggested elsewhere (Tolley 2009a: 497–8) that the depiction of the *vǫlva* in *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 4, may owe something to an awareness of magical practices in Scotland, and noted that Scotland could be viewed as a likely source for magical activities, as is clear from the placing of the horrid Kotkell and his family in the Hebrides in *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 35–7. A link with Scotland in the tale related in the Eddic poem *Grottasǫngr* is also inferred by one medieval writer in the localization of the magic mill Grotti to the Pentland Firth south of Orkney, where tales of the giantesses Fenja and Menja, who turn the mill in the poem, survived until relatively recently (Tolley 2008: 32). Recent research, in particular by Emma Wilby (2006, 2010), has shown how in later centuries Scotland had a rich tradition of magical practice, which has a number of features in common with shamanism as found in circumpolar regions. If Norsemen wished to turn to an exotic, but not too distant, culture to provide examples of magic, Scotland could have served just as well as the lands of the Sámi.

The Scottish evidence clearly involves the evocation of a vision of a being, which acts as a premonition of something to come; it is essentially divinatory, though the warning about making sure the apparition could not shut the door and do harm suggests it may have had an independent existence, like a spirit. The Scottish practice appears, as far as the records go, to have been a “low-level” magical activity, mainly for girls to find out what their husbands would be like. Yet in *Lokasenna*, it seems that divination (or some other magical practice) with a *vétt* was something undertaken by a specialist magical practitioner, a *vǫlva*;

it is reasonable to expect, therefore, that the magic was of a somewhat higher and more varied order, of a type that untrained farm maids would not be able to master. It would seem likely that the *vǫlva* interacted with the spirit world, as in Scotland, but whether the interaction was more involved is impossible to tell – though the summoning of spirits by (the male) Þrándr in *Færeyinga saga*, ch. 41, corresponds to the silent visions of the *wecht* summoning, and it may be that (perhaps among other activities) the *vǫlva* called up apparitions, from whose appearance or other features she was able to discern what she needed to know.

In the case of the *wecht*, the sources indicate that the summoning of the apparition was linked to winnowing – although the *wecht* could serve as a drum, we do not have any indication that drumming played a part in the instrument’s divinatory uses; rather, the girls had to winnow nothing, or rather, they were winnowing spirits to them.⁴⁰ We do not have direct evidence to associate the *vétt* specifically with winnowing, but a few observations may be in order. Winnowing is a process of separation between good and bad; to separate in Norse is *skilja*,⁴¹ but this also means (metaphorically, as it were) to discern, to understand. Divination involved the discarding of the chaff, the irrelevant, to reveal clearly what remained, what was actually wanted in terms of knowing the future. Winnowing was also (usually) a matter of letting the wind do the separation; and a wind was understood to be a magician’s mind (*hugr*, conceived as an almost tangible entity), a carrier of supernatural power and knowledge, for example in kennings in Old Norse poetry (Snorri says, *Skáldskaparmál*, ch. 70: “*huginn skal svá kenna, at kalla vind trollkvenna*”, “a kenning is to be made for mind (*hugr*) by calling it ‘a wind of witches’”; see Tolley 2009a: 188–9).⁴² The symbolism of winnowing would thus be eminently suited to the divinatory *vétt*, even if it cannot be demonstrated directly that such an association did exist.

A further notable feature about winnowing is that it is an inbetween activity, one that could easily take on a liminal character. Unlike most farm work, it appears, as an overall process, to have been shared between men and women (a glance at Old Norse and Old English references to winnowing indicates a fairly even split between men and women). It was also a half-inside, half-outside job, where the activity took place in a barn, but one with gaping doors to allow the wind in from outside; a barn also lies ambiguously on the boundary between *innan* and *útan stokks*, between the world of women and men respectively inside and outside the house area. Winnowing might also be said to be liminal in a

⁴⁰ It is interesting to note a possible underlying linguistic pun: in medieval (Irish) Gaelic, “winnowing” is *foscnað* (and from the same root is derived *scannán*, “membrane”), and a “shade” or “spirit” is *foscad* (Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language, s.vv.: <http://www.dil.ie/>).

⁴¹ Indeed, in the Icelandic Bible, *skilja* is used to render what appears in English as “winnow” at Proverbs 20: 8. 26.

⁴² Cf. the Breton wizards, “who travel on the wind as light as a feather” (F. M. Luzel, *Sainte Tryphine et le roi Arthur*, Quimperlé, 1863: 50, cited in Giraudon 2007: 6).

seasonal sense, as an activity that, as the culmination of harvest, marked the passing of summer into winter (even if, as Olaus Magnus indicates in *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus*, bk 13 ch. 7, the process itself might be delayed somewhat after harvest).⁴³

I suggest – still on the assumption that it was more than a poetic fiction created by *Lokasenna* – that the *vétt* was more probably an instrument that built upon women’s actual experience, exploiting what they already had control over in order to exercise still greater power in their magical practice, than something *sui generis*, removed from their lived experience. We may observe this in the other main object associated with the *vǫlva*, the staff (see Tolley 2009a: 536–44; on possible Norse magical staffs, see also Gardela 2008). This is ambivalent in a similar way to a *wecht*. A staff may act as a symbol of power, but for women, the most obvious staff is a distaff, which might be seen as a symbol of her authority *innan stokks*. Through its ambiguous gender assignment, however, the staff, when used in magic, may be viewed as appropriating a power exceeding that normally wielded by women; the same gender ambiguity adheres to the *wecht*. Each piece of apparatus, moreover, relates directly to a woman’s main roles, as producer of clothing and provider of food; the distaff is the first instrument used in the acculturation of the wild wool into clothing,⁴⁴ as the *wecht* is among the first instruments whereby the raw crops are processed, to then be cooked into food (which, indeed, might then be placed on the *wecht*, acting as a sort of baked-food tray).

The Scots evidence comes from a time when folk customs and farming practices were better recorded than in the medieval period, and hence references to winnowing and its divinatory uses are relatively common – a situation distinctly different from that of Old Norse sources, which scarcely mention winnowing at all. The much higher incidence of the Scots word than the Norse cannot therefore in itself be used to infer any probability of Scotland being the source of the word or practice.

We do not have direct evidence for the blind sieve being put to divinatory use in medieval Norway, other than that of *Lokasenna* (which of course cannot be adduced here if we avoid a circular argument); however, the widespread occurrence of coscinomancy, characteristic of agricultural cultures in many parts of the world, renders something of this sort likely. If it did exist, it would seem unlikely that such divination was directly borrowed between Norway and

⁴³ The magical power implicit in liminal activities within the Scandinavian area is clear from other sources, such as the early-thirteenth-century *Västgötalagen* (Wessén 1954: 29): “Þættæ æru ukvæþinsorþ kono. ‘Iak sa, at þu ret a quigrindu lösharæþ ok i trols ham, þa alt var iamrift nat ok dagher’” (“These are the terms of abuse against a woman. ‘I saw you ride on a *kvigrind* with hair dishevelled, in the shape of a troll, when night and day were equal’”).

⁴⁴ Heide considers the links between female magic and making cloth in the latter part of his work (2006).

Scotland, though the shared Norse culture could have resulted in some conflation of traditions. It is most likely that the agricultural and divinatory traditions of Scotland and Norway would have arisen independently, but would have been sufficiently similar for a Norse word to pass over to Scotland for a winnowing implement. The notions of winnowing and separating as symbols of divining the truth are well rooted in both cultures, and do not imply any wholesale borrowing. In contrast, the Sámi did not have an agricultural society; their drum was also rooted in their culture, but in a quite different way, relating to beliefs about the wild reindeer which do not have parallels outside the circumpolar hunting cultures (see, for example, Kjellström 1991). It is more difficult to envisage any close connection between these beliefs and those relating to agricultural implements such as are likely to have been employed in female magical practices in both Scotland and Norway (it has been argued that the implements used by magical practitioners were more likely to have been mundane objects put to special uses than specifically magical tools – this is a widespread phenomenon, seen for example in the later witch’s broomstick).

If this scenario is correct, we have a situation wherein the designation of the word, and the magical practices associated with it, have survived better in the place of loan, Scotland, rather than of origin, Scandinavia. This need not be specially surprising. In Norse sources, the *völva* – or more generally the female magician – becomes a stereotype image of backward paganism, often situated in a backwoods area, a foil to the young male hero (often additionally characterized as Christian) who is a central pillar of the new society. We see this, for example, in the pagan rites performed by the housewife in a remote farmhouse in *Völsa þáttr*, opposed by the new Christian king, Óláfr (see Tolley 2009b); or in the *völva* of *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 4, a foil to the young woman who is ancestor to a series of Icelandic churchmen; or Steinvǫr (mother of the poet Refr), who rails against the missionary Þangbrandr in *Njáls saga*, ch. 102, claiming Þórr had wrecked his ship; or Friðgerðr against Þorvaldr in *Kristni saga*, ch. 2, of whom it is said, in verse, “in aldna rýgr gall um heiðnum stalla” (“the old crone chanted round the heathen altar”). Stereotyped as it is, there may be a perception of the way Christianity was acculturated in Scandinavia: pagan ways would almost certainly have been preserved longest in remote areas, in the hands of women, who, unlike men, had no stake in the new power structures; indeed, the role of soothsayer or magical practitioner represented a position of power for women in the pagan world which had no counterpart in Christianity, and would hence have been a focus of ire for missionaries, both as preserving pagan belief and as affording unacceptable levels of control to females. Unlike the antiquarians of much later Scotland, the Christian writers of medieval Scandinavia were not interested in recording old folk customs as such, and hence only incidental details are preserved, without giving much indication of how widespread such practices may have been.

The situation in Scotland became very different, even if it began from a similar base. One difference from the start, however, was that the country was Christian. Any supposedly pagan customs would therefore not extend beyond folk customs, practised by the “ignorant” peasantry and tolerated as such. The farm maids with their winnowing divinations were never aggrandized into icons of paganism to be destroyed by iconoclast missionaries; they could continue until antiquarians recorded their ways. Yet the situation may in fact have been more favourable in Scotland for political reasons too. Particularly under King Hákon IV (reigned 1217–63), Norway turned increasingly towards Europe, rejecting its native traditions in favour of the higher culture of the mainland.⁴⁵ Similarly, from the eleventh century onwards, the Scottish crown turned to its nearest main-stream culture, that of England, and underwent a process of anglicization that increased over the centuries.⁴⁶ This led, early on, to a backlash in Gaelic areas, and resulted notably in the creation of an almost independent kingdom, the Lordship of the Isles, established by the half-Norse Sumarliði (Sommerled), which maintained its quasi-independence for a number of centuries, and along with it a culture based on traditional native models. The Gaelic areas were also those with the strongest Norse cultural input, and the culture that was maintained and fostered there certainly drew on both Gaelic and Norse traditions. We may note, for example, how complex court poetry, comparable in many ways with Norse skaldic verse, continued up until about the seventeenth century (indeed, it was not wholly lost until the pillage of the land by the English following the Jacobite defeat in the eighteenth century), many centuries after its equivalent had disappeared in Scandinavia. Although we cannot draw specific conclusions from this, the political and cultural milieu of much of Scotland was such as to facilitate the survival of old traditions. Even if the *vétt* existed merely as a poetic fiction, the perceived depth of tradition preserved in Scotland would have provided a fitting context from which to borrow a feature deemed characteristic of an ancient magical practitioner.

Although the traditions are better recorded in Scotland, they are also fairly limited in scope (largely divination of husbands by farm maids), whereas the context of *Lokasenna* implies a rather “deeper” use of the *vétt* in Scandinavia, linked with an array of magical practices that are ascribed to female magicians in Norse tradition; thus, the Scottish tradition could be interpreted as an attenuated version of that hinted at in *Lokasenna*. We might, then, look at Scandinavia as the centre of the cult of the *vétt*, with “officials”, *vǫlur*, in charge, while Scotland merely preserved a watered-down equivalent in the hands of farm maids. This is, however, probably a misrepresentation. What is preserved in Scotland is

⁴⁵ I discuss this topic, in relation to the creation in Iceland of the corpus of Eddic poetry, the Codex Regius, in Tolley 2013.

⁴⁶ The following brief notes on Scottish developments are based on MacInnes 1978.

folk tradition, and it is out of folk tradition that the more elevated activities of specialists like *vǫlur* would certainly have grown. The *vǫlva* was a figure of female authority – as far as we may use such a term – who would find it appropriate to manipulate powers exercised specifically by women on farms, using an implement which was part of the maintenance of the well-being of the establishment, in terms of affording its food supply.⁴⁷ If the *véttr* was indeed a winnowing drum, this confirms the rootedness of the *vǫlva* in the life and customs of her agricultural society, one similar to that found in Scotland, but differing rather markedly from the distinctly “other” society of the Sámi – from which, nonetheless, *vǫlur* could have adopted practices to add an exotic, and hence powerful, element to their own procedures. Both Scottish and Sámi traditions thus provide material that either fed into the practices of the *vǫlur*, or were manipulated by poets to create a fictional image of such sorceresses, or a mixture of both.

IMPLICATIONS OF A CONNECTION BETWEEN *WECHT* AND *VÉTT*

If borrowing did indeed take place, assuming *véttr* in the drum sense to have had an existence beyond the confines of *Lokasenna*, the arguments for Old Norse as the lending language are stronger than for Scots (see the appendix): *wecht* would be borrowed from an antecedent form of *véttr*. For it to be borrowed into Scots in the sense of “winnowing drum”, if this is indeed what happened, *véttr* must have referred to something more or less like a *wecht*, but this could equally be “curved lid” (but probably in a specialized sense) or “winnowing drum/sieve”, or possibly, allowing for divergence of gender, “weight (applied to vessel that holds the weight)”. If the *véttr* was additionally associated with divinatory usages, this would lend weight to the probability of a loan taking place. However, the borrowing of a word does not necessarily equate in a simple way to the borrowing of a practice or its associated concepts. Various possibilities seem feasible:

- ❖ *VÉTT* IS BORROWED FROM NORSE; THE PRACTICE IS COMMON TO NORWAY AND SCOTLAND. *Véttr* denoted a sieve or something similar, drum-like in form (and possibly lid-like, depending on the etymology), probably with mundane uses but in any case employed for magical practices. When the Norsemen encountered a winnowing drum being used in Scotland for divination, comparable in form to their *véttr*, they used the same term for it, whence it spread to Scots. If *véttr* is etymologically connected with winnowing, then the motivation for the borrowing would be more precise and forceful. The *vǫlva* would then have been using something from the

⁴⁷ It should be reiterated, however, that we cannot determine just how central the use of the *véttr* was to the *vǫlva*, or whether other people also used the instrument.

The hunting of the vétt

rural environment in which she moved, as was the case with the farm maids in Scotland.

- ❖ *VÉTT* IS BORROWED FROM NORSE, AS WELL AS THE PRACTICE. On encountering the *wecht*, the Norsemen perceived a similarity to their *vétt* and lent it the name; along with the name, the magical practices of the *vétt* were also passed on. Thus the Scottish divinatory uses of the *wecht* would derive from the earlier practices of the Norse *vǫlva*, of which they are a watered-down version, practised primarily by farm maids in later times. Given the widespread occurrence of coscinomancy, and the well-recorded traditions of magic of many sorts in Scotland, this scenario seems unlikely.
- ❖ *VÉTT* IS BORROWED FROM NORSE; THE PRACTICE IS BORROWED FROM SCOTLAND TO NORWAY. While the word was borrowed from Norse, a reflection of the large-scale Norse colonization, the divinatory practice of winnowing was endemic to Scotland. The use of a *vétt* by a *vǫlva* reflects a borrowing of this magical tradition, an appropriation of an outsider method within a practice already characterized as “other”; the sparseness of reference to the *vétt* would be consistent with its being a peripheral (thus perhaps borrowed) activity in Scandinavia, in contrast to its rather more frequent occurrence in Scotland. This scenario seems rather unconvincing, in supposing cultural influence to have gone in the opposite direction to linguistic influence.
- ❖ *VÉTT* IS BORROWED FROM NORSE; THE SCOTTISH PRACTICE IS FICTIONALLY ASCRIBED TO NORSE PRACTITIONERS. A variant of the previous interpretation would be that the mention of the *vétt* in *Lokasenna* (and possibly *Haustrǫng*, more allusively) was intended to link the *vǫlva* with the magical practices of Scotland for which the area was renowned, judging by some Icelandic sources (not to mention later, British sources, reaching a zenith in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*), even if it did not represent a real practice undertaken by *vǫlur*: thus, Óðinn is characterized as “other” by linking him not so much with the Finnar as with the outlandish female magicians of Scotland, whose practices are ascribed here to native *vǫlur*. This scenario, which was favoured above, is credible, but supposes *vétt* to have had a sufficiently wide mundane use to have been loaned to Scots, and then as it were borrowed back again charged with a magical potency it lacked before; we do not have any direct evidence for the word in senses wider than “chest lid” (neuter) or “weight” (feminine), but it is feasible that the *wecht* could have been designated a “lid” by Norse settlers in view of its general shape.
- ❖ *VÉTT* IS BORROWED FROM SCOTS; THE SCOTTISH PRACTICE IS FICTIONALLY ASCRIBED TO NORSE PRACTITIONERS. This is the same scenario as the previous, but *wecht* is simply an independent word of undetermined origin, which is borrowed as *vétt* in *Lokasenna*; this obviates the need to posit the

complexity of a lexical borrowing into Scots preceding a semantic and lexical borrowing by a Norse poet, but it implies an audience familiar with the Scots term, which would suggest a loosely British background to this part of the poem.

- ❖ *VÉTT* DENOTES PRIMARILY THE SÁMI DRUM, AND IS APPLIED BY NORSEMEN TO THE SCOTTISH DRUM. This theory takes the word *vétt* to denote primarily a curved lid, probably with a handle in the middle to move it by. On encountering the Sámi drum of the northern type, Norwegians applied the term to it in view of its distinct similarity to such lids. At some point the meaning was perceived to be, in this context, “drum used for magical purposes”, which allowed the term to be applied to such drums even when they did not closely resemble the lids that originally inspired the spread of the term – such as (perhaps) south Sámi drums, or the Scottish *wecht*, regarded as a divinatory instrument of this form. It might then be envisaged that the *vǫlva*’s drum was regarded as subsidiary to the more striking Sámi drum, and borrowed its designation from it. More likely would be that the Norse did not really have magical drums at all, and their ascription to *vǫlur* (in *Lokasenna* and by implication in *Haustlǫng*) was part of a characterization of such magicians as “other”, endowed with accoutrements that properly belonged to a foreign culture renowned for its magical skills; the reality of Norse magicians was perhaps only dimly familiar to the audience, so this subterfuge might work. *Lokasenna* has already been discussed in this respect; I have suggested elsewhere (Tolley 2015) that Þjóðólfr’s *Haustlǫng*, which uses the *vétt* in a kenning, may owe something to familiarity with Sámi pictorial drums, and it would be consistent if *vétt* here were also intended to allude to Sámi practices. Under this scenario, it would still be possible for the Norsemen to have given the term *vétt* to the *wecht* in Scotland on the basis of its similarity, not to any supposed Norse magical drum, but to the Sámi drums they were familiar with that they termed (on this supposition) *vétt*. Such a perception of similarity between Scottish witches and Sámi shamans would not be unprecedented: King James VI of Scotland, who no doubt became familiar with tales of Sámi shamans at the Danish court where he resided for some time, made this very comparison in 1597 in his *Daemonologie* (Tolley 2009a: 497–8). However, the motivation for lending a term for a specific piece of (foreign) magical equipment to a mundane farm implement, which happened to have magical uses, is somewhat difficult to recognize, though it is possible.

An obvious choice between these possibilities does not stand out, but on balance the first seems preferable, if we regard the *vétt* of *Lokasenna* as more than a fiction: that the *vétt* was a mundane piece of equipment such as a winnowing

drum (as well as being a term for certain types of lid), which was also put to divinatory or magical uses; it resembled the Scottish *wecht* sufficiently to lend it its name. Alternatively, and perhaps preferably, the fourth or fifth options seem the most viable if we seek the origin of *Lokasenna*'s *vétt* in the workings of the poet (and in this case, there is no necessity to see *wecht* as borrowed from Norse at all); this is not, however, to exclude the possibility that the Sámi drum was called a *vétt*, a translation of their own term for it, which the poet was also alluding to.

THE SÁMI DRUM

Although the *wecht* could serve as a drum, we do not find drumming as such associated with the implement's divinatory uses. As a divinatory instrument that is explicitly *drummed*, the *vétt* naturally suggests a connection with the practices of the Norsemen's neighbours, the Sámi, whose shamanic drums certainly served divinatory purposes within a wider context of their use as a shamanic instrument, and they were known to the Norsemen from at least the twelfth century, when they are described in the *Historia Norwegie*, and most probably much further back. A slight word of caution is appropriate, however. Leaving aside the arguments for a connection with winnowing drums, the only indication in *Lokasenna* that the *vétt* was a form of drum is the fact it was struck upon, or tapped – but of course many different objects might be struck in a magical ritual, and *drepa á* might be considered descriptive of what takes place in winnowing, for example.

Nonetheless, the most obvious interpretation is that the *vétt* was a drum-like instrument used in contacting the spirit world, and thus parallels the shamanic drum. An interpretation of *vétt* as a curved lid would strengthen the likelihood of a connection, as this closely parallels the appearance and description of some Sámi drums, but it does not *necessitate* any connection ("lid" could be applied independently to lid-like objects). If we look to either side of the Norwegian area, to regions within the Norsemen's wider ambit, we find skin drums, used in Scotland for divination and the summoning of apparitions (spirits, as it were), and among the Sámi for divination, and for summoning spirits in shamanic rituals. Indeed, there are even similarities in methods: among the Sámi, the drum was used for divination by placing a ring on it and seeing which depictions the ring ended up on when the drum was gently struck (e.g. Schefferus 1673: 136, citing Samuel Rheen); in Scotland, coins might be used in divination with the *wecht*.

Whilst it is not actually recorded in our meagre records, Bäckman and Hultkrantz (1978: 51) consider it likely that the Sámi drum was used to collect spirits in, as was the case in Siberia. When the *völva* beat the *vétt*, she may

have been summoning the spirits (residing in the *vétt*?) and gaining divinatory knowledge from them or sending them on their mission (Tolley 2009a: 249).

There are, of course, differences: shamanic rituals among the Sámi were the preserve of men, whereas in Scotland and Norway, females predominated in the activities under consideration. The Sámi shaman made use of trance, but the existence of ritual trance in Norway and Scotland is far less clear. The Sámi drummed on the instrument to achieve trance, whereas the *wecht* does not appear to have been used for this purpose, though it was certainly used for mundane drumming; trance could, however, in general terms be described as a summoning of spirits (which might mean calling independent spirits to the shaman, or sending his own free soul out to gain information or perform tasks in the spirit realm), and hence parallel to what took place with the *wecht*.

Norway appears to lie at the intersection of various cultural contiguities, and it would be odd if it did not share features with cultures to either side, but precisely where it coincided with one rather than the other is unclear.

BALANCING THE SÁMI AND SCOTTISH LINKS

It may be helpful to tabulate the occurrence of the most salient features of the *vétt* and its parallels in the three cultures considered.

	NORSE	SCOTS	SÁMI
Agrarian culture	●	●	
Skin “drum” ⁴⁸	(●)	●	●
“Drum” has mundane uses	?	●	
Drumming	●	●	●
Divination	●	●	●
Divinatory drumming	●		●
Female divination with drum as norm	●	●	
Trance contact with spirits ⁴⁹	?		●
“Lid” (possible etymology)	●		●
“Weight” (possible etymology)	●	●	
Terms may be related etymologically	●	●	
Terms may be related semantically	●		●
High occurrence of instances		●	●

How far we see a connection with Sámi and Scottish practices depends on what

⁴⁸ Although I have not so far found a blind skin sieve in Norway, the existence of such an object is implicit in the construction of extant non-blind skin sieves.

⁴⁹ There are hints that some form of trance or possession was believed to occur in Norse, as the *vølv* is described as *leikin*, “played with”, in *Vølvspá*, st. 20 (see Tolley 2009: 477–8); we cannot tell whether this was accompanied by anything like drumming.

we believe the stronger cultural affiliations of Norwegian society to have been. The geographical proximity of the Norsemen to the Sámi often prompts the suggestion of close links between them; however, such links are more often assumed than proven, and even when demonstrated do not necessarily indicate connections were strong and pervasive. There is reason to seek out connections between Norse and Sámi cultures, but there is also reason to sound a note of caution. The characterization of the *vǫlva* as drumming while practising magic may well have been influenced by Sámi practices – but if so, a gender reversal has taken place, and the depiction may equally rely on a poet, or wider tradition, conflating information about the use of the Scottish *wecht* with what he knew of Sámi practices.

In contrast, Norse settlement of Scotland was protracted, and borrowing of Norse terms into Scots is an incontrovertible feature of the consequent cultural contact. In the case of the *wecht*, we have an instrument used by females for divination, which moreover corresponds to the Norse *vétt* not only in these respects, but also formally in a lexical sense. We may make suggestions, but do not in fact know if Norsemen used the term *vétt* for Sámi drums, whereas the ostensible etymological connection between *vétt* and *wecht* suggests that they did apply the term to Scottish winnowing drums. However we explain the link in detail, the initial weight of argument suggests a stronger Scottish–Norse cultural continuity than a Norse–Sámi one. Such continuity, and the likelihood of shared features, are all the more plausible given the similarly agrarian basis of the societies concerned, in contrast to the very different Sámi culture. While elements could certainly be derived from such an alien culture, they are more likely to have remained as exotic and peripheral rather than as central features of a pagan ritual practice. On the other hand, we cannot tell just how central the *vétt* was to such practice anyway, or indeed if it was largely a product of poetic inventiveness; the ostensible links with Scottish traditions, however, tend to suggest that even if it was a poetic figment it had some basis in (foreign) tradition. The word is more likely to be derived from Norse and borrowed into Scots, to allow for the early occurrence in *Haustlǫng*, and in recognition of the widescale level of borrowing from Norse into Scots, particularly in agricultural terms.⁵⁰ Its derivation could in principle be any of those suggested; the etymology does not greatly impact on the argument.

Yet the Sámi cannot be entirely neglected. Whilst the *vǫlva* must, like her lesser female counterparts on Scottish farms, have served the rural, agricultural community she lived among, we may imagine that the use of what amounts to a drum for magical purposes in Scandinavia might have been part of a play of

⁵⁰ See <http://www.dsl.ac.uk/about-scots/history-of-scots/origins/> and [/vocabulary/](http://www.dsl.ac.uk/about-scots/vocabulary/). Norse words are found even for commonplace items, such as *stot* (“bullock”). The falling together phonemically of a Norse-derived *wecht* with the word for “weight” would, in Scots, therefore be coincidental.

realpolitik, acting as an assertion of authority in the area of magical power in the face of that exercised by the Sámi, to whom the Norwegian laws make it clear people were prone to resort (for divinatory or efficatory magical purposes). It seems on the whole more likely that the primary cultural affinities of the *vétt* lay in Scotland rather than Lapland, but this in no way would have prevented this magical implement being pseudo-Sámicized (perceived as being connected with the Sámi), if the politics demanded. Þjóðólfr may have wished to intimate that the prince whose praises he sings in *Haustlǫng* had appropriated the powers of the Sámi by describing his shield in terms that might recall the Sámi drum, as well as making a similar connection in depicting Hildr wielding a *vétt* and thereby achieving victory. *Lokasenna*, most probably a later composition that is rooted in ancient mythological traditions, may similarly be hinting at the Norse appropriation of the power of Sámi, and Scottish, magic in ascribing the use of the *wecht*-like and shamanic-drum-like *vétt* to the chief god, Óðinn, while at the same time ridiculing him for it, an attitude that may arguably reflect later, perhaps Christian, concerns. Although *Lokasenna* may be seen as balancing the connections with Scotland and Lapland, in a way appropriate to the geopolitical setting of the Viking age and immediately subsequent period, it is likely that Snorri was inspired by the passage, with its shaman-like drumming, to depict Óðinn as closely similar to Sámi shamans in *Ynglinga saga*, ch. 7 (see Tolley 2009a: 507–13).

CONCLUSIONS

Armed with the panoply of uncertainties outlined above, can any conclusions be drawn? Different ways might be found through the maze, but they lie on a spectrum between two polarized positions, which I will set out under two main headings, with a further position lying between, rather than considering the myriad other possibilities. The first position is that the *vétt* is wholly a figment, with no relationship to folk tradition; the second is that it is an integral part of Norse magic tradition; the position between these is that it is a part of folk tradition, but not Norse, and has been manoeuvred into a poetic reworking of the depiction of the Norse seeress. The tabulation of features that follows cannot take account of all the subtleties which have been outlined in the arguments above, but may be useful as giving a general overview.

The Cheshire Cat argument

The Cheshire Cat in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was given to perplexing discussions, before vanishing into thin air, to leave only its grin behind. This would seem an apt metaphor for at least one of the ways of looking at the question of the *vétt*, in which the word remains, staring at us

from the text of *Lokasenna*, but a concrete traditional signification of a magical accoutrement vanishes. There are several variants:

CC 1. The phrase *drepa á vétt* stands for *drepa á vitt* and means simply “resort to charms”, a bland characterization of the activities of the *vǫlva*. The word *vétt*, “curved lid”, would be separate, occurring only in non-magic contexts, including *Haustlǫng*, where the kenning *Hildar vett* of *Haustlǫng* – the “curved lid of war/Hildir” – is an apt description of a shield.

CC 2. The word *vétt* is taken to have its recorded meaning of “curved lid”. Loki (or rather the poet speaking through him) is concerned to cast contumely at Óðinn, not to relay accurate information about Norse magic – indeed, he may well be deliberately distorting tradition to his own ends here. The events on Sámsey may have been of a warrior kind more than a magical séance, and the events may have involved *a.* practising *seiðr* (for success in battle, for example), and *b.* striking on a shield; the lines of *Lokasenna* may be read as “they say that on Sámsey you practised *seiðr* like the *vǫlur*, and you struck on a shield”, with the latter statement sandwiched before the *vǫlur* to include it within their activities by implication and hence add to the insult of effeminacy. The reason for calling a shield a *vétt* is to allude to the *Hildar vétt* of *Haustlǫng*, and thereby imply a connection with a female, a fate-bestowing valkyrie (a sort of *vǫlva*, we are to infer), and thus again to add to the charge of effeminacy.

As the *vétt* would no longer have any traditional association with magic activities outside the invention of *Lokasenna*, apart from an allusion to a traditional beating on shields as an act accompanying military conflict, there would be no reason to see the Scottish *wecht* as in any way connected; the similarity of words would be merely chance, or possibly the word may still be derived from Norse, but simply in the mundane sense of something that looked like a raised lid.

The chief weakness of CC 1 is that the supposed sense of *drepa á* as “make use of, resort to” is nowhere else recorded (even if it is similar to *slá á*), and *vitt* and *vétt* appear to be kept lexically distinct in the sources.

CC 2 is open to question in the reading of *Lokasenna*’s *vétt* as an allusion to Þjóðólfr’s kenning. This nonetheless does not seem outside the bounds of possibility; it is possible, for example, that *vétt* as a lid occurred in kennings for shields more frequently than our meagre remains indicate.

Given these weaknesses, I will pass on to the arguments at the other end of the spectrum (which is not to suggest that CC1 and CC2 are fatally flawed, however).

The Humpty Dumpty argument

In Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass*, Humpty Dumpty appropriates the right to assign whatever meaning he chooses to words or phrases, to produce

what he terms a “knock-down argument”. The second approach to uncovering the significance of the *véttr* involves continual recasting and balancing of parts of the argument, and can sometimes feel it is under Humpty Dumpty’s guidance.

The starting point for this argument is to provisionally take the Norse sources to be “reliable” – which is to say we regard them as relaying something about a continuing tradition of the *véttr* rather than being primarily literary fictions.

An existing tradition of the *vǫlva*’s use of the *véttr* need not, however, preclude an intentional poetic hint at similarities with the Sámi or Scots in these practices: it is possible that the practice was not well grounded in Norse magical practice, but the audience was nonetheless willing to accept that *vǫlur* engaged in practices that were familiar from the Sámi or Scots.

HD 1. The *véttr* was integral to Norse magical practice – *Lokasenna* appeals to a real feature of the *vǫlva*’s magic (which is to say one that the audience would recognize as traditionally associated with the practice); Þjóðólfr’s *véttr* may also point in this direction, if he is alluding through his kenning to a recognizable figure of a female magician. Similar objects found elsewhere, for example among the Sámi or Scots, could be designated by the same term. We may make a further division:

HD 1A. The *véttr* was a specifically magical object (like the drum among the Sámi).

HD 1B. The *véttr* was a mundane object put to magical uses (like the *wecht* among the Scots).

If the *véttr* was a mundane object, any of the etymologies proposed might work (and Þjóðólfr’s *véttr* could be either “lid” or “winnowing drum”, as either would suit the kenning equally well); “lid” remains the most plausible, however.⁵¹ If “winnowing drum” were etymologically correct, it would mean separating off the word in *Lokasenna* from *véttr* as a chest lid, though this need not be a strong argument against it. Whilst the curved lid has been viewed as a strong indication of a connection with especially the northern Sámi drum, this argument is inclined to be inherently circular; in fact, “winnowing drum”, of a type comparable to the *wecht*, would be an equally apt term for a Sámi drum, but more particularly the southern variety. Nonetheless, a derivation from “lid” would also be perfectly apt for a type of winnowing drum or similar implement – the identification of the mundane purposes of the *véttr* does not depend on the etymology.

If the *véttr* was a mundane blind sieve, used occasionally for divination like

⁵¹ The suggestion that *véttr* is “weight”, however, means that the word in *Lokasenna* is distinct from that in *Haustlǫng* (where it cannot be feminine); to find two homophones apparently relating to similar objects, each of them with just one occurrence in this sense, is unlikely. In fact, if *véttr* were borrowed by Scots, it would naturally fall together with the word for “weight”, and there is no need to read this situation back into Old Norse; it does not weaken the arguments for *wecht* as a winnowing drum deriving from *véttr*.

the *wecht*, then *Lokasenna* would be relating an actual tradition, rather than fabricating it. There could still be allusion to Sámi practices; it is possible, for example, that some basic form of divination with a sieve or the like was traditional within Norse culture, but that contact with the Sámi heightened this practice into something more significant (more robust contact with the spirit world, for example), and aligned its methods, for example to include striking on the drum-like object in the way of a Sámi shaman. In this case, *Lokasenna*'s contumely of ethnically determined otherness would be lessened, in that the object would not be so clearly foreign, but this does not radically undermine the argument.

A major point supporting HD is that if the *vétt* were not already associated with the *volva*, and if *Lokasenna* were relying on poetic rather than folk tradition for the use of the *vétt* (the Cheshire Cat argument), then Loki's attack might have seemed puzzling to unravel – an allusion works more convincingly if it alludes to something familiar rather than creates it. The weaknesses in this argument are that we do not have any mundane uses for the *vétt* recorded (other than in the sense of “chest lid”), and the evidence for the blind skin sieve is rather limited. The borrowing into Scots, however, is far more likely to have taken place if *vétt* did have a mundane use of a type suitable for applying to a winnowing drum; it might be questioned whether “curved lid” would seem specially applicable, unless it had already acquired a sense of something like a blind sieve. Moreover, skin sieves existed in Norway (in recent centuries, and no doubt earlier), and coscinomancy appears to be ubiquitous, so the supposition of some form of divination roughly similar to that in Scotland is not so far-fetched.

HD 2. The magical use of the *vétt* was characteristic of non-Norse cultures, such as the Sámi or Scots (and the term could be applied to such objects in any culture encountered); Norse *volur* or wise women might adopt such practices. Again, we may divide the category into two:

HD 2A. The magical *vétt* had no existence in Norse culture, other than as a borrowed feature. The *vétt* was a term for a chest lid, which was applied in a specialized sense to something foreign, used for magical purposes, that did not (originally) exist in Norway.

HD 2B. The *vétt* was something like a winnowing drum, with a solely mundane use in Norse culture, but served as a convenient term to describe similar objects used elsewhere in a magical capacity. This alternative would seem unlikely, given the more or less ubiquitous nature of coscinomancy, particularly, to mention but the examples mentioned above, among the Sámi (drum divination), Scots (the *wecht*) and later Swedes (with a sieve).

Favouring alternative HD 2A is the absence of evidence outside *Lokasenna* for the use of the *vétt* by Norse *volur*. The term “lid” could be a translation of the Sámi term for their drum, or it could derive simply from observing that such

drums were like curved lids; once established in this sense, the term could be applied to other similar objects, including the *wecht*, which resembled the Sámi drum (the southern, hoop variety in particular), and occasionally served a similar divinatory purpose. This is to a degree a weak point, in that the Norwegian farmers who lent most of the Norse-derived Scots lexeme are rather more likely to have been concerned with mundane objects than peripheral magical usages of these objects.

The Dormouse argument

In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* the sleepy Dormouse sat between the Hatter and the March Hare, both of them mad, and was maltreated by his neighbours. The Dormouse is a fitting image for the argument that the *vétt* was essentially a poetic amalgam of traditions relating to the outlandish habits of the Norsemen's neighbours, the Sámi and the Scots. There are varying possibilities within this scenario:

D 1. The *vétt* as a feature of Norse magic was entirely the creation of the *Lokasenna* poet, on the basis of traditions of magic practice among the Sámi and Scots.

D 2. The *vétt* was an object used in Norse magic, but the poet's depiction of its use is heavily informed by Sámi and Scottish practices; disentangling fact from fiction here is of course tricky. (This is the same approach as that given under the HD 1 argument, except that the foreign features are here regarded as poetic figments rather than relating to actual Norse folk practice.)

The lack of evidence for the *vétt* as a magic accoutrement outside *Lokasenna* is perhaps most readily explained by seeing the object as largely a poetic fiction. *Lokasenna's* attack on Óðinn is based on his acculturation of "otherness"; this is realized implicitly in several ways: primarily *a.* as gender otherness: Óðinn is accused of acting like a woman; *b.* as sorcerer otherness: the accusation of effeminacy is all the more potent for being associated with particular magic practices (magic being another realization of "otherness"); *c.* as ethnic otherness: ascribing the use of a drum to magicians may represent an ethnically determined accusation of "otherness", if we assume a familiarity with the practices of either the Sámi or the Scots; the implication is that Óðinn is also acting like a (disreputable and despicable) Finn or Scots diviner.⁵² The inference would be that Loki is engaging in deliberate obfuscation, mixing up what female Norse magicians did with what male Sámi shamans did, or conflating the (male) striking on the Sámi drum with the (female) winnowing divination of the *wecht*,

⁵² The site of Óðinn's magical activities, Sámsey, is an ordinary Danish island, but in the present context Sámsey might be taken as "Sámi isle" (though the Sámi are otherwise recorded under their own name only as *sem(sveinar)* in *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 12).

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in order to emphasize the scope of Óðinn's self-degradation.⁵³ The application of poetic imagination to the depiction of the *vǫlva* could, moreover, be part of a tradition, as a comparable process might also be seen as implicit in Þjóðólfr's characterization of Hildir with her *vétt*.

*

I have rather playfully used some of Lewis Carroll's characters to symbolize the different sets of conclusions that might be drawn about the *vétt*, which our meagre sources prevent us recovering much more than a hazy picture of. Chasing down the *vétt* in fact recalls another of Carroll's stories, *The Hunting of the Snark (An Agony in Eight Fits)* – a perpetual quest, using the Bellman's blank chart for guidance, to track down the Snark, which, if successfully completed, merely leads the successful hunter to “softly and suddenly vanish away”. To avoid this eventuality, I will refrain from identifying which of the several theories proposed actually leads to the Snark, observing merely that just as *The Hunting of the Snark* is a work whose meaning resides on a poetic level, so too is *Lokasenna*.

APPENDIX: ETYMOLOGY

Vitt

The derivations for *vitt/vítt* mooted by de Vries (1977, s.v. “vitt”) are inconclusive and unconvincing. Pipping (1930: 2–4) seeks to encompass both *vétt* and *vitt/vítt* within a shared etymology, regarding them as variants of one lexeme. He suggests an underlying root from Indo-European *weik-* (“separate, make holy”), seen for example in Latin *victima* and Old Norse *vígja* (“consecrate”). The alternating nominal forms *vétt/vítt* are explicable as developments of **wiht-* varying according to the vowel of the following syllable (Noreen 1970, §110.3: *ih* > *eh* except when the following syllable has long or short *i* or *u*), which would no doubt have been subject to levelling. The verb *vitta* Pipping sees reflected in Swedish dialect *vīta*⁵⁴ (“bewitch”).

Pipping's suggestions would neatly explain all the recorded forms of *vitt/vétt/vítt*. A *vétt/vitt* would, in origin, simply be “a consecrated object”. Old English *wih* (“idol”) and *wiglere* (“soothsayer”) may derive from this root, indicating a possibly long-standing connection with magic or divination, though Norse words clearly derived from Indo-European **weik-* (such as *vé*, roughly “sacred precinct”) relate to the field of cult worship rather than magic. Pipping's

⁵³ I have argued elsewhere (Tolley 2009a: 507–13) that the depiction of Óðinn, and his ostensible “shamanic” features, in *Ynglinga saga*, ch. 7, owes much to a familiarity with traditions of Sámi magic, which have been used in an act of artificial (i.e. largely unprecedented in tradition) character-creation. Such an appeal to external traditions need not be confined to *Ynglinga saga*, of course: the same thing may well be happening in *Lokasenna*.

⁵⁴ This is shortened from **vitta*: as preterite *motta* stands to infinitive *mota*, so preterite *vitta* levels its infinitive **vitta* to *vita*.

etymology, however, ignores some of the basic facts about the words concerned, namely that, as recorded, we have at least two words, *a. vétt/vætt*, which is used for a lid (on shrines and the like) as well as for a drum-like object used by the *vǫlva*, and *b. vitt*, which is only recorded in magical contexts, with a meaning that cannot be specified more closely than “charm”.⁵⁵ The plural qualifier in *vitta véttir* suggests, as noted, a sense of “creature of charms” more readily than “creature of (magical) drums” (even if a sense “drum” were accepted, it was presumably only aroused by one drum in each case – and there is no contextual justification for seeing drums as involved at all). The *vitt* that laws prohibit keeping in a house is also most easily interpreted as “(physical) charm”; a magical drum would be an anomalously more specialized piece of apparatus than the other items mentioned (even allowing for the staff’s magical uses).

Whilst Pipping’s suggestion of a link with *vígja* cannot be wholly dismissed, another possibility is that *vitt* is simply a back-formation from words like *vitki* (“wizard”), understood by folk etymology as “someone who works with *vitt*” (its actual etymology connects it with the lexical group denoting wisdom).

The *vétt* as “lid”

De Vries derives *vétt* as a chest lid from *vega* (“lift, move”, de Vries 1977, *s.v.* “*vætt* 2”),⁵⁶ and notes the Norwegian form *vette*, “handle in the middle of a lid”. He takes the meaning of the Old Norse word to be “das bewegliche; womit etwas bewegt wird” (“something moveable; what something is moved by”). The word exists in Icelandic (*vætt*), meaning a curved lid, or the handle which moves it, as well as Norwegian (*vette*) in a similar sense. The basic meaning in Old Norse would thus appear to be “a moveable (curved) lid (on something that is fairly immovable)”.⁵⁷ Strömbäck (1935: 24), as noted, brought to light the Sámi designation of the drum as a “lid”; one Sámi word for a shamanic drum, proto-Sámi **kōmtē* (Lehtiranta 2001, entry 473), in fact means in addition “lid”.

It is possible that *vétt* is more than one word (indeed, *vétt* certainly has a homophone, but feminine rather than neuter, in the sense of “weight”), but it is simplest to take it as one, and hence the basic sense would be “lid”, whatever connotations that may have had. Strömbäck wished to emphasize possible links with Sámi magic, but it is quite possible that “lid” could refer to some object used sporadically in Norse practices without implying a strong Sámi connection, as this general designation might easily have been applied to objects of this shape independently.

⁵⁵ The entry *vittafulnr*, supposedly relating to a bag “full of charms”, in Cleasby and Vigfusson’s dictionary, is a spurious misreading of a verse in *Kormáks saga*, which in fact reads “*urtafullan*” (“full of herbs”).

⁵⁶ *Vætt* would be a variant showing the sporadic Icelandic change of *étt* to *ætt* (Noreen 1970, §109).

⁵⁷ Cleasby and Vigfusson (1957) suggest the derivation implies something that moves on hinges; this notion may be dismissed.

The vétt as “weight”

The word *vétt* clearly referred, in some uses, to a heavy lid. Yet *vétt* (*vætt*) has a far more common sense (which indeed appears to be its sole meaning, as far as I can see, in the old Norwegian laws), namely “weight” (feminine, rather than neuter as in the “lid” sense), and in particular a specific measure of weight. This might appear inappropriate for a drum-like object (the interpretation is dismissed without discussion by von See *et al.* 1997, comm. to *Lokasenna*, st. 24, for example), but this is deceptive, as will be seen from comparable uses elsewhere: in English, for example, measurement terms such as *ton* and *bushel* referred initially to receptacles to hold grain and other materials; in Finnish, a *vakka* was a basket, but also a measure. Many other examples could easily be adduced; in particular, apart from meaning a winnowing drum, the Scots *wecht* was also the common term for “weight”.

Vétt in the sense of “receptacle for a measurement of goods” does not occur. However, the usual word for a sieve or basket, *sáld*, also has the sense of a measurement of grain and the like (Cleasby and Vigfusson 1957, s.v.; *DONP*, s.v. “*sáld*”, “*2sáld*”). If the drum-like instrument the *vólva* used was normally referred to as a *sáld*, it is possible that the term *vétt*, “weight”, was used as a synonym, with its meaning extended to include the wider senses of *sáld* – that is, “(measure of) weight” takes on the sense of “(blind) sieve” by analogy. This might be a one-off occurrence in *Lokasenna*, undertaken to achieve alliteration with *vólva*, but it could also have been in general usage.

However, Þjóðólfr’s genitive “*vez*” cannot derive from feminine *vétt/vætt* in the sense of “weight”. Þjóðólfr’s usage points to a base sense of “curved lid”, whether this had magical connotations or not, so if *Lokasenna*’s *vétt* is basically “weight”, it is distinct – though this does not wholly preclude a deliberate allusion to it on Þjóðólfr’s part through the use of the similar “lid” word.

Perceptions of what the *vétt* may have been, and the etymology of the word, are opened further by looking outside Scandinavia and turning to Scotland, where the *wecht* was a common implement on farms, bearing a designation which may well be cognate with *vétt*.

The vétt as “winnowing drum”

Given the connections that have been argued between *vétt* and *wecht*, it is worth considering whether there could be an underlying sense of “winnowing”. The word *vétt* has a passing resemblance to the verb for “winnow”, *vinza* (= *vinntsa*), and the possibility of a connection thus seems worth pursuing. The Indo-European root **h²wéh¹*- yields many derivatives in the daughter languages; the basic meaning is “blow”.⁵⁸ It forms the ultimate base for *vinza*, and it gives

⁵⁸ The etymological observations here are derived from Pokorny (1959, s.v. “*au(e)*”¹⁰, *auē(o)*-, *uē-*)

rise to various words elsewhere in Germanic, for example the Old English strong verb *wāwan* (“blow”), though this verb does not survive in extant Old Norse. Extended forms of the root are found, including those in *-d-*, such as Old High German *wāzan* (“blow”), and *-t-* as in Avestan *vātō* (“blow”); the Latin *vannus* (“winnowing basket”) is also derived from a *-t-* form (< **wat-nós*). Watkins (2000) lists the headword *wet-¹* (“blow”) under a separate entry (related to **h²wéh¹-*); this would yield Germanic **weþ-* (*/*weð-*), to which we may conceive the same formative suffix, *-þ-*, being added as is postulated in the derivation from *vega* (*-þ-* takes the form *-t-* after *g*). A form **weþþ-* would develop to **vett-* (Noreen 1970, §241).⁵⁹ Alternatively, and more simply, *vett* could be an early Norse back-formation from *vinza*, formed (clearly) after early Norse syncope had taken place, the verb being interpreted as meaning “use a *vin*”: **vint* would regularly yield *vett* (Noreen 1970, §§266/2, 110/1). The word *vett* would then be an ancient designation of an instrument for winnowing, parallel to Latin *vannus*. The general absence of references to winnowing in Old Norse sources would explain the lack of occurrences of any term relating to it; additionally, it is possible the word was largely archaic by the time of written records, surviving as a relic in poetic contexts. Even if this tentative etymology is rejected, it remains a possibility that a general sense of “moveable item” (or “item that moves, carries”) for *vétt* developed into the distinct senses of chest lid and winnowing drum.

The *vétt* and the *wecht*

The Scots *wecht* corresponds formally to the early Norse antecedent form of *vétt*, namely **wext*. Etymology may thus reinforce the likelihood of the connection implied by the similarities in the magical uses of the drum-like objects. However, the etymological links are not straightforward, and call for some discussion. The Scots and the Norse words may seem to be one and the same – but if indeed they are, which has borrowed from which? The most obvious solution, particularly in view of the frequency in Scots but paucity of reference in Norse, might initially appear to be to suppose a borrowing from Scots (late Anglian English) into Old Norse – and this suits the scenario in which *Lokasenna* is manipulating foreign traditions in its depiction of the *vǫlva* – but, if the *vétt* relates to something concrete in Norse culture, for various reasons the direction of loan is more likely to have taken place in the opposite direction:⁶⁰

⁵⁹ The formation could not be pre-Germanic, since Indo-European **wet-t-* would yield Germanic **wess-* (see Ringe 2006, §3.2.3), unless the geminate was preserved on the analogy of other occurrences of **wet-*.

⁶⁰ The Gaelic form *guit* presents difficulties itself; as Gaelic philology is scarcely my area of expertise, I will simply make a few preliminary remarks. The word does not appear to have cognates outside Scotland, and a Celtic etymology seems open to question. It could possibly be a borrowing of Scots *wecht*, though this requires a number of assumptions about the rendering of the sounds involved. A

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- ❖ Norse contact with Scotland was well established by 900 and continued for a number of centuries, so there is a broad time-span for any borrowing of loanwords to have taken place. In the ninth century, Scotland had five languages spoken within it: a diminishing Pictish in the north-east (it seems to have been reasonably close to the Cumbric spoken further south, and had probably been displaced by Gaelic by some time in the tenth century), an expanding Gaelic in the west and south-west, Cumbric (like Welsh) in Strathclyde, English in the south-east, and pockets of Norse in various areas; the further back one goes the less prominent the position of English (ancestral to Scots) was. A borrowing from Scots at this early time therefore remains somewhat unlikely.
- ❖ Early Scots shows fairly heavy borrowing from Norse (whereas the converse does not appear to be demonstrable). There were two major influxes of Norse loanwords, one directly from Scandinavia, and a later one from Anglo-Danish spoken in the Danelaw. Loanwords from Norwegian (rather than Danish) are, as far as it is possible to distinguish them, entirely rural in nature, whereas Danish words include urban items as well. If *wecht* is a Norse loan, it falls into the category of earlier, Norwegian loans.⁶¹
- ❖ If the Norse *vétt* is one word rather than two (or more), it seems to have a broader sense than the Scots *wecht*: it includes not only the divinatory tool of the female soothsayer, but also a particular sort of lid (without magical connotations). It is easier to envisage Scots borrowing a Norse word that meant generally any curved-lid-shaped object, including a specialized sense of “divinatory drum”, in reference to the lid-shaped winnowing drum used for divination (without at the same time bringing in any reference to shrine lids and the like), than to suppose that a term for a winnowing drum in Scots should first be borrowed, particularly because of its divinatory role, and then extended in Norse to include chest and shrine lids. If *vétt* is actually two words, of course, one of them meaning a curved lid and the other a winnowing drum, this point scarcely applies, but given the general direction of borrowing, it would seem less likely that the word has moved from Scots to Norse than *vice versa*.
- ❖ The Scots word goes back at least to the twelfth century. In principle, this is old enough for it to have been borrowed into Old Norse and to appear in our sources, all of which are later, in terms of their extant written forms.

further possibility is that, like *wecht*, it is borrowed directly from Old Norse. From whatever source, the initial *w-* would have been realized as *ghw-*, and then “unlenited” and vocalized to *gu-*, with the original *e* then being realized as a glide, resulting in a palatalized *t* (written as *it*). As Gaelic has pre-aspiration, the final *-t* is actually *-ht*, as in Norse.

⁶¹ For a fairly detailed account of the development of Scots, see the web page of the *Dictionary of the Scots Language*, <http://www.dsl.ac.uk/about-scots/history-of-scots/origins/>.

If we accept the *vétt* of Þjóðólfr as genuine (not a later scribal invention), and as being the same as that of *Lokasenna*, however, this would require a borrowing earlier than c. 900. It is feasible, however, that Þjóðólfr's *vétt* is "lid" while the *vétt* of *Lokasenna* is something different, only the latter being borrowed from Scots. This would seem rather unlikely.

- ❖ A derivation of *vétt* from *vega* gives an early Norse form **weχt*; although Norse *-χt-* had become *-tt-* by around 900, this is hardly a *terminus ante quem* for the time of borrowing, since either language could use the analogy of similar words to create correct correspondent forms for some time after this. In any case, given that pre-aspiration probably goes back to Common Scandinavian (Page 1997), a Norse form **we^ht* is likely to have given Scots *wecht* at dates considerably later than 900. A derivation from **web-* would give early Norse **wett*, without *χ*; but again, the likely presence of pre-aspiration would give a pronunciation as *we^ht*, which would be perceived as *wecht* in Scots. This would, however, probably imply a time of borrowing after *-χt* had become *-^ht*, when the earlier *-χt* and *-tt* had fallen together. Conversely, Scots *wecht* would easily have been interpreted as *we^ht* (giving *vétt*) by Norse speakers. In short, the forms of the words cannot determine the direction of borrowing for the relevant period.
- ❖ Tracing the form *wecht* back before about 1100 becomes problematic; an early Old English **weht* would have become **wiht* by palatal umlaut (Campbell 1959, §304), as happened with *wiht* in the sense "weight".⁶² The vowel in English *weight*, Scots *wecht* (in the same sense) was only altered in Middle English from *i* to *e* under the influence of the verb (and compare the vowel of the more common Old English substantive for "weight", *wæg*). The form **wiht* should give Old Norse **vitt*, not *vétt*,⁶³ as is required in *Haustlǫng*. We would not expect a form *vétt* in Þjóðólfr if this originated from a postulated Anglian form **wiht*. It is possible, of course, that *wecht* derives from some form in Old English such as **wæht* which would allow for an early borrowing as *vétt* in Norse,⁶⁴ but

⁶² If by some means the form **weht* had arisen, it would have been subject to various further sound changes, difficult to trace (particularly as records are sparse); for example, Northumbrian Old English tended to shift *we-* to *wæ-* or *wæ-*, and *eht* to *æht* (Campbell 1959, §§319, 327, 328), though forms like *uerc*, *cneht* (Campbell §227) show **weht* as plausible (this would be a smoothed Anglian form: Campbell §222).

⁶³ It is tempting to see the period of shift from Scots **wiht* to *wecht* as potentially being able to give rise to both Old Norse forms, *vitt* and *vétt*, but, as noted, there is little to suggest that the two words are actually connected.

⁶⁴ An Old English **wæht* might later (eleventh century) be shortened to *wecht*. Given that in Old Norse short vowels were in any case lengthened before *tt < χt* (Noreen 1970, §124/1), the Old English vowel length would make no difference; **wæht* would appear as *vétt* (*vétt*). The derivation of **wæht* would require investigation, but if feasible, this would allow for an earlier borrowing of the term into Old Norse. David Stifter (pers. com.) has suggested a link with the word for

the arguments for such an etymology are tenuous, and the likelihood of a borrowing into Norse at this early date is, as noted, low.

- ❖ A *wecht* is both a winnowing drum and a weight (of grain etc.). A semantic shift from “weight” to a specific piece of equipment in which a weight of goods could be held seems inherently implausible, though not impossible.⁶⁵ A separate origin for the drum sense seems more likely; this origin could either be an internal linguistic matter, or the word could be borrowed. An origin within English is suppositious, in contrast to the documented existence of a Norse word which corresponds to the Scots form. Whatever their origin, given the words for the drum and for weight naturally become homophonous in the course of historical phonological development, the emergence of a sense of “weight” from “a *wecht* (of grain etc.)” would seem inevitable.

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“blow”, appearing in Old English as *wāwan*, though the formation is obscure; he compares German *Wächte* (“drift”), apparently derived from *wehen* – though this is “blown material” rather than an instrument for or involved in blowing. Meid (1967, §145) notes the suffix *-ixta-*; potentially a form like **wā-ixta-* might give **wāht*, but examples given do not illustrate its use as anything but as a denominal adjectival suffix.

⁶⁵ An exhaustive study would need to be undertaken to demonstrate that the name of a vessel is primary, and gives rise to a sense of what is contained in the vessel, rather than the name of the vessel developing from the measure of goods it holds. A perusal of terms in *A Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* tends at least to support this principle: for example, the *lippie* was primarily a unit of measurement, but was occasionally used to indicate the vessel holding the given amount; its probably etymology, however, points to the sense of “basket” being primary; the *peck* was similarly primarily a measurement, but occasionally used for a vessel; its etymology is uncertain, so the earliest primary sense cannot be determined. Whilst an unusual process might have taken place such as that suggested above for Norwegian, whereby a general sense of “weight” could develop into the name for a container by analogy in the use of synonyms, there seems no evidence for supposing this in Scots; and if we turn to Gaelic, none of the several terms used for winnowing drums or sieves means simply “weight”.

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